Friends and Libraries – Working Effectively Together

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INTRODUCTION

Believe it or not, there are librarians who are adamantly opposed to having a Friends group. If they don’t have one, they don’t want one. If they have one, they are likely to hand off responsibility for working with the group to anyone at all and they are happy to have no further involvement. Based on current or past experience they simply believe that Friends are more trouble than they’re worth!

On the other hand, there are Friends groups out there who have become entirely frustrated with their library administration and/or trustees. They feel disenfranchised and as a result, often begin to develop their own agenda – even if it is one that is not in concert with the library’s goals and objectives. In fact, there are currently a couple of Friends groups that are working against their libraries! It’s true – there are some Friends groups that are actively and publicly opposing a new addition to the library, opposing a new library on a new site, or who are not happy with the overall direction of the library and its policies and are making their displeasure known to the public.

How do these rifts between the library and the Friends occur? Can they be resolved and if so, how? How can a library and its Friends group work to ensure that damaging and potentially devastating conflicts don’t arise in the future?

This toolkit will discuss ways for libraries (including both the library administration and the trustees) and Friends to work together to maximize the value of the benefits that Friends can bring to the library. This toolkit begins with a discussion of the roles each entity plays in supporting the library, ways to work through conflict resolution, and finally ways to set up a structure that will help the library and the Friends avoid conflicts in the first place or in the future.

As with so many areas of life, breakdowns between the Friends and the library often are the result of poor communication. As an important part of the library director’s “development” role, he or she should be actively involved with the Friends executive board either in person (preferable) or by the appointment of someone on the library’s administrative team to act on the director’s behalf. A member of the library’s administration should be present as liaisons at each Friends meeting. In addition, the Friends should appoint a member of its executive board to attend each meeting of the board of trustees where they should have an opportunity to give a brief report to the board about their current activities. These mutual interactions will go far to keep the library and the Friends aware of all that is going on in each others’ work.

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UNDERSTANDING ROLES

As liaisons attend meetings of the trustees and of the Friends executive board, it is important for them to understand their respective roles. Many conflicts arise because a member of the Friends executive board disagrees with policy or decisions that are made regarding library services and direction. Though Friends are welcome to make their opinions known (and serve a good feedback purpose in doing so), ultimately the policies of the board and the decisions by the librarian are not subject to Friends’ approval.

Similarly, the library director should keep the Friends informed on a regular basis about the opportunities and challenges the library is facing and share with the Friends his/her ideas about ways in which the Friends can help. Understanding the respective roles of each entity can go a long way in preventing conflicts that occur when someone “oversteps” his or her bounds.

Library Director

The library director is essentially the library’s Chief Operating Officer (CEO). It is his or her responsibility to ensure that policies are carried out and that library operations run smoothly and effectively. The director is responsible for “development” in all its connotations – staff development, collection development, programs and services development, community relations development, and funding development. It is in this last area that the director’s relationship with the Friends is typically strongest. While funding development also incorporates developing the case for city or university funding, grant writing, and working with the Foundation (if there is one), it also means working closely with the Friends to ensure they have all the support they need to maximize their effectiveness for the library. The nexus of the various “development” roles gives the library director the knowledge, authority, and the responsibility for decision making with regards to library operations.

In working with Friends, the library director (or his or her appointee) should:

- Attend all Friends’ board meetings.
- Attend as many Friends’ functions as possible.
- Keep Friends up-to-date with what is happening at the library – its needs, its challenges, and its victories.
- Provide the Friends with a long range view of where the library is heading and how it hopes to get there.
- Provide the Friends with a clear understanding of the library’s priorities for services and why these priorities have been selected.
- Provide the Friends with a wish list that the Friends might help to fulfill.
- Provide assistance to the Friends as needed for their own development, including membership and fundraising.

Library Board of Trustees

The powers and duties of library trustees are established by law and, consequently, are not subject to delegation to another body. The basic duties and responsibilities of a “governing” board include the employment of a competent and qualified library director, the formulation of library policy, and the development of both long-range and strategic planning with an
annual adjustment of goals and objectives.\footnote{1} In the case of an “Advisory” board, the librarian is directly accountable to the city or county management authority but still plays an important role in planning.

It is within the context of long-range planning that the Friends can and should be brought in. This way, Friends can provide a ready-made focus group for the development of library services and they can gain a greater understanding of the library’s priorities – both what they are and why they are priorities. The board works closely with the library director so that implementation of policy and strategic initiatives take place to advance the library’s services.

In working with the Friends, the trustees should:

- Include an opportunity for a Friends update in every meeting agenda.
- Include the Friends executive board in the library’s planning process.
- Keep the Friends up-to-date on major policy changes – both the “what” and the “why.”
- Work with the Friends in their fundraising initiatives as needed and as possible.
- Attend as many Friends functions as possible.
- Become personal members of the Friends at the highest level they can.

**Friends of the Library Executive Board**

As a condition of their 501c3 non-profit status, the mission of Friends of Library groups is to support the library. This is typically reflected in the Friends’ mission statement. Because Friends are volunteers, it’s usually the case that they only want what’s best for the library and again, typically, they rely on the director and the trustees to keep them informed of what that is. Then, through volunteer work, fundraising, membership drives, and other activities, the Friends support the library financially for items or programs not normally included in the operating budget, for promotion of the library through public relations and programs, and through advocacy when the library needs additional funding, when a capital campaign is needed, or when a library’s budget is threatened.

In working with the library (administration and trustees), the Friends executive board should:

- Appoint a member of its board as a liaison to the trustees to:
  - Attend their meetings
  - Update the trustees on Friends initiatives and goals
  - Report back to the Friends board.
- Work to support the library’s goals financially (as is reasonable and possible), and publicly through programs and public relations.
- Attend library planning meetings to give feedback and to gain a clearer understanding of the goals and direction for the library.
- Provide volunteer assistance to the library as needed in the realization of its goals.

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\footnote{1 From *Friends of the Library Sourcebook* by Sandy Dolnick (ALA, 1996).}
Conflicts can come up in any relationship, no matter how good. It’s not unusual for a Friends group to feel, for example, that the library is asking them for money for an inappropriate reason – to cover something that they feel should come from the library’s operating budget or to pay for staff travel or staff appreciation.

When there is concern in an otherwise good working relationship, the concern can usually be addressed by just talking it through. It’s possible that the Friends don’t have all the information they need to understand the library’s request. Perhaps the budget for the library was cut or frozen mid-year and the library is desperate to ensure a particular service can be maintained for the rest of the fiscal year, for example. This background information will help the Friends make a decision about stepping in to help support what normally is or should be in the operating budget.

Similarly, it’s not uncommon for Friends to wonder if they should pay for staff “scholarships” to attend a conference or class. They might wonder if Friends should pay for staff appreciation initiatives (what aboutFriends’ appreciation initiatives?!). Again, a discussion about the importance of staff morale and continuing education may well convince Friends that this is, in fact, a good place to put their money.

On the other side of the coin, the library may feel that the Friends aren’t being as supportive as they could be. For example, the Friends might be amassing a large “reserve” fund and giving the library only enough money to fund one or two items on a wish list. If the Friends have been involved in the strategic planning process and have a clear understanding of the library’s goals and objectives, it’s likely they will be generously funding the wish list. If the Friends decide not to support the wishlist, however, it’s a good time to sit down and discuss again the library’s plan and see where and how the Friends fit into that plan. It could be the Friends are feeling disenfranchised and don’t want to support initiatives they don’t understand or agree with. Often, a heart-to-heart is all it will take to resolve these minor and occasional conflicts.
RESOLVING MAJOR CONFLICTS

Unfortunately, some libraries and Friends groups experience a major “falling out.” Typically, these major conflicts involve such things as significant disagreement with the library’s policies or plans (moving out of the existing building to build a new library on a new site, for example), the library’s belief that the Friends are in violation of their 501c3 status and mission (giving their money to other organizations or publicly opposing the library’s plans, for example), and sometimes conflicts are simply the result of a clash of personalities.

Because a good working relationship between the library and the Friends is so important, it is well worth it for either the library (administration or trustees) or the Friends executive board to initiate a plan to bring the two entities back together. It’s time for an intervention!

If a rift between the library and Friends has become so significant as to render the relationship dysfunctional, it may be time to bring in a neutral party who can help you work through your differences and get back on the right footing. Very often, the library can tap someone from the university or city’s human resource department to facilitate a discussion and help you create a plan for your future working relationship. If not, try contacting the state library to see if they have someone on staff who might help. If this doesn’t work, consider bringing in someone from the private sector who has experience in conflict resolution and/or group facilitation.

Impartiality is important, so no member of the library staff, board of trustees, or the Friends’ executive board should be asked to facilitate. Even if you have someone within one of these entities with a lot of expertise and who everyone agrees (initially) will be impartial, in the end there are likely to be charges that the process of working through the conflict was compromised if there is someone who is dissatisfied with the outcome.

Facilitated Discussion and Problem Solving

If the Friends group and library have come to the point where they need a facilitated discussion, it is likely that there are some passionate feelings about who is “right” and who is “wrong.” Because of the nature of this exercise, it’s important that the discussion include some practical ground rules so that it can be productive.

You will want to be sure that the facilitator has an opportunity to understand the issues from all perspectives prior to your discussion and future planning. The facilitator should work with all those present while observing basic principals that facilitate productive discussions. Communication in an emotional situation is difficult. It is very important that all people have an opportunity to speak and perhaps even more important that everyone is committed to actively listen to what others have to say.

Active Listening

Many people take listening for granted. They confuse hearing with listening. You may hear every word but if you’re not listening, you’ll misunderstand the message. Studies show that the average listener typically comprehends about half of what is said. Within 48 hours, the retention drops to about 25%. After a week, only 10% or less is retained. If you are going to the extent of bringing all parties together with a facilitator, you should encourage everyone involved to fully engage their listening so that the work you do sticks!
It is a good idea for the group to consider the typical obstacles that get in the way of active
listening. These can include:

- Judging and evaluating what others are saying while they are talking.
- Lack of empathy, not putting yourself in their shoes.
- Feeling that the speaker is taking too much time and that you already know what
  they’re trying to say.
- Thinking ahead about what you are going to say instead of listening.
- Becoming disengaged because you can think faster than the other person can speak.

Respectful Dialog

Respectful dialog assumes that everyone has legitimate concerns and that everyone is
interested in the same goal – a productive outcome of the meeting and positive working
relations for the future. Respectful dialog:

- Encourages others to express their point of view.
- Establishes an atmosphere of acceptance and interest as opposed to one of
  interrogation.
- Increases your knowledge of facts as well as others’ feelings and opinions.
- Simultaneously gathers information and improves your relationship with those you
  disagree with.
- Helps the group come up with solutions.

How can the group ensure respectful dialog? Here are some tips that should be shared with
the group before you begin your discussion:

- Ask permission questions such as “I’m not sure I’m following you. Can I ask you a
couple of questions so that I can get a better understanding of what you are saying?”
- Ask open ended questions instead of “yes” or “no” questions so that the person
  responding has the opportunity to expound on his or her point of view.
- Practice active listening.
- Be patient with others trying to express their points of view.
- Use relaxed voices to convey that it is safe for others to respond openly, fully, and
  honestly.
- Pursue one line of thought at a time. Don’t jump from topic to topic.

The Session

Once all those in the group and the facilitator have agreed on ground rules for a productive
dialog, it is time to move on to understanding the conflict, discussing remedies, and
developing a plan to move forward together.

Almost every major conflict between the library and the Friends includes some
misunderstanding of each groups respective roles, an overstepping of one’s role, and/or a
perception that one group is over stepping their role. Conflicts usually center around who
has the authority for final decision-making so it is a good idea to start with a discussion of
roles. One way to do this in a non-threatening way is for each entity (library administration
and Friends board) to write down their role as they see it along with stating how they see the
other groups’ roles in support of the library.
The facilitator can show on a flip chart, with a vertical line down the center, the role as the particular entity sees it (on the left) and that entity’s role as the others see it. It can be very illuminating to see how each group perceives its role and how others do. This toolkit can be used as a guideline to articulate actual roles for each group (see “Understanding Roles” above). Once the library and the Friends have a clear understanding of how each other fits into the overall picture, it is time to move on to articulating and understanding the conflict.

Understanding the Conflict

Understanding and articulating the conflict will be at the heart of the session. This will be the most difficult part (which is why having a facilitator is a good idea) because there will be some passion surrounding the different points of view. If this isn’t the case, then you wouldn’t be at this point!

It is critical that each side has an uninterrupted opportunity to state their concerns. Why is there conflict? What does each side see as the reason for the breakdown in the relationship? Is there more than one issue that has brought you to this point?

Working Through the Conflict

The most important component in reaching agreement and compromise is understanding exactly what the other party’s concerns are. If you can understand why another person or party feels so strongly, you can often make great strides in coming together to create a solution that works for everyone.

The Friends of Kansas Libraries (FoKL) along with the Kansas Library Trustee Association (KLTA) have used an ingenious method for helping disparate parties to understand another’s point of view. Using “Social Action Theater” (SAT), every “side” gets a chance to play the role of someone with an opposing point of view and work through a problem through a different point of view than their own.

Vignettes (or a parody of a situation) can provide an opportunity to touch on serious issues. Using SAT helps create a safe environment for discussion. Participants and actors talk about the values of clarity, respect, and trust as essential parts of communication between librarians and Friends. SAT can help participants view local experiences with a new perspective.

To engage in SAT, ask three characters to sit at a table. Each has a table tent identifying a character. The facilitator reads the vignette scene. The volunteers improvise and act out the scene, which lasts about four minutes and is completed when the facilitator claps hands once. Actors stay in character and the facilitator asks if there are any questions. While in character, actors answer questions from the facilitator or audience (HINT: write several questions ahead of time for the facilitator to ask.) Questions should spark discussion about the issues presented. The vignettes are designed to be both humorous and satirical.

Sample: How Funds Raised by the Friends Should be Spent

Scene

Board room of Oz Public Library, in a small rural community where the Library Director, and Friends President are meeting to discuss how to spend the $6000 raised by the Friends at their recent book sale.
Library Director
Fredrica Dingle desperately wants to replace her seven year old PC, loud dot matrix printer, and shabby desk held up by bricks with a state-of-the-art ipad, printer and furniture to bring her into the 21st century – and $6000 would do it!

Board President
Miss Rosanna Gulch (of the Belmont Gulch family) has two nieces and a nephew at Oz Middle School who use the library’s reference collection to do their homework. She is horrified at the low percentage of the library’s budget allocated to keep the reference collection current, and strongly feels the money should be used for that purpose.

Friends President
Jane Von Good thinks the word “Carnegie” over the library door does not properly identify the building. She wants to use the money to purchase a large, beautiful marble sign (in pink tones) to be placed near the main entrance. Of course, engraved under the words “OZ PUBLIC LIBRARY” would be “given by the Friends of Oz Public Library.”

Samples Questions
1. Was there a prior understanding of who decides how money raised by the Friends is spent?
2. Is it the responsibility of the Friends to raise money for reference books or any part of the library’s budget that should be in its annual budget?
3. How can this situation be avoided in the future?

Using this technique, the facilitator could be asked to develop a scenario that reflects the issues involved in the conflict. Those representing the library can step into the role of the Friends while Friends executive members can play the role of trustees and/or library administration. Once the role playing is complete, each group should be asked to talk about whether they feel the exercise helped them better understand the others’ point of view and if so, how.

Resolving the Conflict

Once you have worked to understand the disagreements by listening to all sides and even engaging in a side not your own through role playing, it’s time to work on a solution. The goal, of course is to come up with a solution that everyone can be happy with. It might be, however, that the solution is one that at least everyone feels he or she can live with if not love.

At this point, everyone should be encouraged to share possible ways to resolve the conflict. Being honest and respectful of others’ feelings and opinions will allow a variety of suggestions to come forth. Everyone should be encouraged to remain open minded and creative. There may be solutions offered that will, indeed, resolve the conflicts and disagreements but may entail doing things in a whole new way.

The library administration, for example, may have always had carte blanche over some of all of the Friends revenues. It may be time to change, instead, to providing a wish list allowing the Friends to select from a menu of choices where they would like to put their money.

The Friends may feel that all their money should go to children’s books but after discussion, realize that while children’s materials are already well funded, there are no after school programs for Teens. The Friends might have to agree as well to a wish list approach rather than automatically designating funds for a specific purpose each year.
If the Friends have been involved in planning and are always kept up to date regarding the state of the library, these choices will be easy to make and in alignment with the library’s opportunities and challenges.

Change and compromise can be difficult especially if there is long standing tradition of doing things a certain way. If changing the working relationship will make it better, however, it will be well worth it. Friends are an incredibly valuable support system for the library – not just for the funds they generate but for the goodwill, the public awareness they create for the library, and for the advocacy they can provide when the library is in need of capital funds or significant increases in their operating budget.

**Where Will You Go From Here – Putting a Good Structure in Place for the Future**

If you are able to work through the conflict – congratulations! Now it’s time to put into place a structure to help you avoid any serious conflicts in the future. Some of this organizational structure may already be in place but not adhered to. For example, the Friends should take a fresh look at their mission statement, their constitution and bylaws. Are they being actively employed? Is there an operating agreement between the library and Friends? If not, it’s time to establish one. It’s amazing how “getting it in writing” can keep conflicts from surfacing. Even if you’ve found new admiration and respect for one another after a long, heartfelt discussion and resolution of your problems, conflicts can occur again over time with changes in personnel in the library, on the board of trustees and within the Friends executive board, conflicts could occur again.

**Operating Agreement**

If you have an operating agreement, get it out and look it over. Is it still relevant? Is it reflective of the way you work together or the way you *want* to work together? If you don’t have an operating agreement, now is a good time to establish one.

The goal in an operating agreement should be that all Friends’ gifts (of money, time, or talent) meet exactly the highest needs of the library. An agreement that requires negotiation for all gifts offered and requested is best. In other words, the agreement might state that the Friends will work with library administration and trustees once each year in a planning session to determine goals for fundraising, advocacy, and volunteer services. A model that works well is for the Library to submit a wish list to the Friends in priority order with strong justification for the request. The Friends may of course determine what areas of the wish list they want to support. If the once a year joint planning session has taken place, there should be no surprises in either the Library’s request or the Friends’ priorities for funding.

Considerations for the operating agreement should include:

- How will the Friends be incorporated into the library's planning process?

- Are Friends authorized to spend their funds on organizations, agencies, programs or projects that are not directly linked to the library and, if so, under what conditions? This will be included in the mission and bylaws of the Friends group, and it is good to be clear about this upfront, since money spent for other purposes can be a point of contention between the library and the Friends and may even adversely affect the
Friends’ 501c3 status if “significant” funds are spent in areas outside the group’s mission.

- What support will the Library give the Friends in terms of publicity, mailings, labor for the book sale, space for the book sale, office space, office staff support, etc.?

- Will the Friends engage in advocacy campaigns on behalf of the library and, if so, who will be involved in the design and message of those campaigns?

- What role and authority will the Friends have for developing and implementing programs?

- Will the library administration and a member of the trustees attend all Friends board meetings? Will a member of the Friends executive board attend all trustee meetings? Will there be an opportunity on each other’s meeting agendas for a report from the visiting liaison?

You can view a sample formal Operating Agreement between Friends and the library at [http://www.ala.org/united/friends/orgtools](http://www.ala.org/united/friends/orgtools). Take advantage of the hard work you all did in resolving your conflicts by putting in writing the ways in which you’ll operate together in the future.
Can This Relationship Be Saved? When All Else Fails...

Sadly, there are extreme circumstances where the relationship cannot be saved. The disagreements run too deep or are truly irreconcilable. Sometimes, there are significant differences within the group itself, sometimes it’s an inability to support the library’s plans and direction (as in the case where the library is moving to a new facility, for example), and sometimes there is a strong clash among key personalities.

Conflicts have been known to occur within a group itself (therefore greatly affecting its ability to support the library) because of one or two very strong personalities. Though sometimes nothing is harder than asking for someone’s resignation, it should be done if one or two individuals are causing a dysfunctional situation. Sometimes this occurs when the leadership of the group remains the same year after year giving at least perceived authority to these longtime leaders that they have veto power. Again, the Friends constitution and bylaws may provide for a continuing turn-over of leadership. This is healthy and the group should abide by it. If there is not such a provision, consider amending your bylaws to include one.

Many groups (the longtime leaders to be precise!) feel that if the same leadership isn’t kept year after year, the group will dissolve from neglect. If the group’s livelihood and ability to function rests with just a few, it may be time to let the group dissolve. On the other hand, there may be a strong perception in the community that this longtime leadership is somehow ordained and that the Friends are, in fact, a closed club. See United for Libraries Toolkit #1, Creating a Friends Group and Revitalizing the One You Have for ways to refresh your group and bring in new leaders.

If everything has been tried to bring the library and Friends mission and goals into alignment to no avail, it may well be best to formally dissolve the group.

When a group cannot proceed together because of irreconcilable differences, or when the group cannot support the library – its policies, its direction, its leadership – it is the honorable and ethical thing to dissolve the group. It is not okay for a Friends group to continue when it can no longer support the library or the library’s plans and policies. Friends, by mission and purpose, exist to support the library. It is unethical for a “Friends of the Library” group to work autonomously and in conflict with the library. By doing so, such a group is in violation of its mission. In addition, if such a group continues to call itself “Friends of the Library,” while opposing the library, it makes it difficult for a group that does support the library to use the “Friends” name. Finally, it is unethical if not illegal to accept membership dues and raise funds when members and donors believe that their gifts support the library rather than an agenda to move the library in a direction not sanctioned by the trustees who have the legal authority to govern the library and set policy.

Whether the library administration, trustees, or Friends are at “fault” for irreconcilable differences, Friends can only be effective if they can support the library’s agenda and if they have the full support and approval from the library administration. If these key ingredients are missing, it is time to look for other ways to support worthy organizations in your community. In time, a new group may evolve or library leadership may change allowing a brand new opportunity to support this wonderful institution – the library.
**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**


*Creating a Friends Group and Revitalizing the One You Have* – available, free, through your membership in United for Libraries and accessible in the Friends & Foundations Zone.

*CRinfo – A Comprehensive Gateway to Conflict Resolution Resources* ([www.crinfo.org](http://www.crinfo.org)). This website provides all the information you need to understand conflict resolution, find additional materials about conflict resolution, and even find professional mediators to help with conflict resolution.