

THE GOOD, THE GREAT,

AND THE

Unfriendly

A Librarian's Guide
to Working
with Friends Groups

SALLY GARDNER REED | UNITED FOR LIBRARIES



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How to Start a Friends Group (and Why You Should)

IF YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH, YOU'LL REMEMBER THE GOOD OL' DAYS WHEN library advocacy was not a part of the librarian's lexicon. There was a good reason for that: the typical library got a typical 4 percent or so increase every year to cover the typical rise in the cost of doing business. Back before the dawn of the digital era, libraries generally delivered a straightforward service; they bought, shelved, and circulated books and journals. They used their in-house resources to provide reference and information services and to provide services for youth. Oh, it's true, libraries diversified in the 1950s with filmstrips and again in the 1960s with phonographs, but basically, libraries both public and academic offered a single service operation. Easy peasy!

Then, everything changed. It all started with automated catalogs and circulation systems. There were both funders and patrons who lamented the loss of card catalogs and the ability to see from circulation cards who checked out books before them (never mind the invasion of privacy). Efficiency won out, however, and money was made available to make the move toward 21st century automation.

At about the same time, in the late 1980s and 1990s, libraries began taking steps to capture emerging digital resources to bring their promise for nearly unlimited access to information to their communities. The

Internet was clunky and mostly meant for academic purposes, but with acoustic couplers, it could be made available in public libraries as well. These were exciting times! Libraries were on the forefront of this new era, and many of us thought that this would give us amazing credibility with our funders. They would see us as the entrepreneurs that we truly were and fund libraries as the premier providers of online resources to the public. Boy, were we wrong!

In the public library world, funders initially told us to stick with books; academic libraries were luckier. In both cases, however, our world of information delivery was changed forever. Talk about diversification! Now libraries had many ways to deliver information and literature, and formats were (and are) constantly changing. Books do remain a stalwart, but we now have online information delivery as well. Some libraries continue to provide books on CD and movies on DVD, and who knows what's next. As diversified as format and content are, for a lot of libraries funding remains unresponsive to the costs of delivering widely diverse and constantly changing services that are in demand in the community and on campus. Enter a significant growth in fundraising for libraries, and that often means "friends" or foundations (more on that in chapter 3).

Via stand-alone databases as well as indexes and other information resources on floppy disk, academic libraries embraced technology well in advance of most but the largest public libraries. Because of the scholarly nature of academic libraries, it was easy to make the case to support the continuously changing technological environment. As networks evolved, however, the academic library as a "place" was occasionally questioned as access to digital resources could be achieved in dorm rooms, in the student union, in the cafeteria, and even across the globe.

As libraries progressed further into the digital age (thus, again, diversifying and increasing the costs of doing business significantly), public library funders looked around and decided that, as the Internet became ubiquitous, libraries had been rendered obsolete. After all, they told us, you can get anything on the Internet. Enter the age of advocacy. We had to help "educate" our funders about the fact that everything is *not* available on the Internet—at least not without a cost. And, hey, books are still circulating at a high rate.

Public library supporters had to reiterate the concern about the digital divide. Though this divide has become narrower, it has also become much, much deeper. There are those who do not have access to the Internet at

home. Mostly, these are people living in or near poverty and who have the most to gain from access. Immediately, job search information that is almost entirely online comes to mind, but that's just one hurdle. Government information at national, state, and local levels is increasingly available only online. Those seeking information about health care services, social services, and food support services are at a decided disadvantage in getting access to the information that will help them and their families. Libraries are often the only point of Internet access for the “have-nots.”

We continue to educate our funders that as we embrace all that technology has to offer, all types of libraries have become busier than ever before. It became important to let many of our funders know that even if they believe libraries are no longer essential, the community at large and the student body have been voting with their feet. Librarians have captured technology in its many forms and have turned their libraries into vibrant community and academic centers for learning of all types.

So, if your library doesn't have a “Friends of the Library” group (also known simply as “Friends”), here are some good reasons why it should.

The most obvious is for the fundraising. Friends—the good groups—raise money on a continual basis throughout the year and turn all that money right over to the library to help fill in the gaps that its annual budget doesn't cover.

But there is more that your group can do. A good Friends group can help you engage your community—academic or public. They can help you provide programming that helps your community understand the importance of the library on a daily basis. They can help your library reach out to underserved communities to let them know the library is there for them. And, importantly, they can let your funders know that the library is essential to the community and needs to be fully funded. Libraries across the country have seen their budgets increased or their cuts reversed because of the mighty efforts of their Friends groups (see chapter 4). You need Friends!

STARTING A PUBLIC LIBRARY FRIENDS GROUP

When it comes to starting a Friends group, as the saying goes, it's not rocket science! But, it does take some time from someone at the top. The library

director or his or her designees, along with a trustee and an interested patron or two, are the best people to be in charge of getting this started.

Creating a Friends group will take some time, energy, and expertise. It's a good idea to do it right the first time rather than rush into it, make costly mistakes, and spend months or years to come trying to convince those who may have been turned off by a haphazard approach to join the Friends group once you do have your house in order.

Here are some of the issues that will have to be addressed as you start a new Friends group:

- Development of a core (executive) group of Friends members who will actually be doing most of the administrative work, recruiting of new members, and planning for Friends' activities.

- Development of a written operating agreement between Friends and library administration, outlining respective roles and authority (see appendix A).

- Establishment of purpose and determination of priorities for service.

- Development of an implementation structure that includes the leadership team and task forces for accomplishing the work for the year ahead, such as book sales, membership drive, fund-raising events.

- Development of organizational bylaws and establishment as a 501(c)(3) organization for the purpose of accepting tax-deductible contributions.

- Development of a dues structure.

- Development of a recruitment campaign.

Addressing this list of objectives might seem daunting, but it constitutes important structural elements for a successful Friends groups. Taken one at a time, each of these components is readily achievable, and addressing each of them will ensure that your new group gets off on the right foot.

Development of a Core Group (Leadership Team)

A new Friends group will be established by a core group of library supporters who may well become the group's first leadership team. Because

there is a good deal of up-front work to do before a membership campaign is kicked off, it makes sense that the work is shared among a small but hard-working group with a real desire to see success.

If you are a library administrator wanting to start a Friends group for your library, you would be wise to turn to those in your community or on campus who are known for their support of your library and for their ability to get things done. If you are a library patron or supporter who realizes that a Friends group can help the library increase and/or improve its services, let the library administrator know and ask him or her to join you (or a library staff liaison) in developing such a group.

Set up a meeting including five to ten supporters who are willing and able to bring a group to life. Go over the aforementioned list of objectives and begin to brainstorm how and who will accomplish them. Some of the objectives can be done simultaneously, and some will have to be done sequentially. For example, it's obvious that the core group will have to be established before a broad-based recruitment campaign begins. The list of objectives has been ordered in a relatively sequential way, and it might be best to tackle each in the order presented. For example, you won't be able to qualify for 501(c)(3) status until you have first identified your organization's structure and developed your bylaws.

The most common way a new and somewhat taxing initiative fails is from lack of sustained momentum. That's why it's important to involve those people who you know will commit for the long term as members of the core committee. It's also important to schedule biweekly or monthly meetings until your core group is ready to launch its first membership campaign. What you are attempting to do is important; remember that and remind your group of that, so their level of commitment stays high.

The Formal Operating Agreement between the Friends and the Library

What? Do we really need to get it in writing? After all, the Friends and the library both have the same ultimate goal in mind—improving and enhancing the library's service. While it's true that you both are undoubtedly focused on the same goal, how that goal is best accomplished can be and often is the road to ruin for many Friends and libraries. The Friends, for example, might see early childhood learning as the most important public library service—and the library itself might even agree! However, that

case may have been well made to the city administration and well funded, whereas the library's program budget may be non-existent and the library may be desperate to create programs for teenagers. Where will the Friends' money go? Should it go to picture books or teen programs? Who decides?

The academic library may be in serious need of a marketing campaign to raise its profile and cache on campus, but the Friends may have been most successful and most interested in raising money for new computers. Should the Friends continue down their traditional path that has been so successful or should they channel their resources into a new, professional marketing campaign? Again, who decides?

Nothing has doomed the relationship between Friends and the library more than misunderstandings about how the money and the time of the Friends group will be spent. Of course, the best working arrangement is to ensure that both the Friends and the library continue to keep one another in the loop. A member of the Friends' leadership team should always attend trustee or library governance meetings to keep this group up to date on the work of the Friends. Paradoxically, in public libraries, it is not recommended that a trustee be assigned to attend the Friends' meetings. Because the money raised is used for operational expenses, a trustee on the Friends board can get involved in decision-making that should be done at the management level, not the governance level.

Nothing will get the Friends and the library on the same page better than working together to design a plan of where the library is heading every year. What are the challenges ahead? What kinds of opportunities are out there that the Friends can help with? When this happens at the beginning of every fiscal year, the Friends' goals will be in alignment with those of the library, greatly reducing any conflicts about how resources will be employed.

To ensure that Friends and the library have a solid foundation for all future funding and advocacy initiatives, it's a good idea to work out how decisions regarding the Friends' efforts will be made and who will make them. The best (and most typical) practice is when the Friends provide funding for items on the library director's wish list. The ideal agreement will involve a spirit of mutual input into the final decision. In the end, the library administration has, by policy and position, the ultimate authority to accept or reject any gift to the library.

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.

Considerations for the operating agreement should include answers to the following:

1. How will the Friends be incorporated into the library's planning process?
2. 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.
3. What support will the library give the Friends in terms of publicity, mailings, and/or labor for the book sale, space for the book sale, office space, office staff support, etc.?
4. 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?
5. What role and authority will the Friends have for developing and implementing programs?

Establishing the Friends' Mission, Purpose, and Structure

Establishing a mission and articulating the purpose of your Friends group are excellent ways to focus your group on the roles you feel are most important, and they will help you develop a useful structure. In addition, knowing and articulating your key mission will help you recruit the people with the talents you need most to serve on committees, task forces, and in leadership roles. The purpose of your group will depend on the group's interests and the library's needs. If you are forming a Friends group for the first time, it is likely that there is some imminent need that you wish to address right away. This should be reflected in your mission, but the mission should not be so narrowly defined that once an immediate need is met, the mission of the Friends isn't as relevant to meeting future needs as it should be.

If you are establishing a Friends group because the library has been chronically under-funded to such a degree that services are inadequate and you want to form a group to pass a special tax levy or create an advocacy

campaign aimed at the community or college administration, the role of advocates should be included in the mission. However, this role is best articulated generally, and there should be room for other enterprises. In other words, the group's mission might be to work to ensure adequate funds for the library through advocacy, fundraising, and promotion. Once you've been successful in achieving your initial objective (you've passed the levy or the administration has increased the library's budget), your group is now positioned to continue its good work in other ways—such as establishing a foundation, raising additional money for collections, or supporting a library marketing campaign. In general, most Friends groups work to achieve the following objectives:

- Provide direct additional financial assistance.
- Advocate for the library at the local level for increased financial support by the library's parent institution or the community.
- Encourage gifts.
- Raise money or pass bond issues for building and other capital projects.
- Provide volunteer services to the library.
- Increase community or campus awareness about the library.

The way in which any of these or other objectives are achieved will be determined by the group at large, along with input from the library's administration and governance. The most effective way to accomplish such goals is to set up a structure within the Friends organization so that focused work can be accomplished. Committees and/or task forces will be important for the smooth operation of the Friends group, and the successful achievement of its objectives include (but certainly aren't limited to):

- A leadership team
- Membership and Friends promotions
- Library promotions and advocacy
- Book sales
- Nominations
- Development
- Programs
- A newsletter

The charges for these committees and task forces will mostly be self-evident, but some might have charges that are a reflection of the library's needs. For example, the Development Task Force may want to work on establishing a fundraising campaign, a library foundation, or investigate further ways for the Friends to generate income. (Book sales are common ways to do this, but Friends groups across the country have been extremely creative in finding other ways.)

The leadership team will mostly oversee and support, as the work is assigned to a task force or is done by the library. It's entirely conceivable, for example, that the library staff will publish the newsletter under the Friends' name while the Friends contribute the funds and some of the content. The same is true for "Library Promotions and Advocacy." It may be that the trustees have this as their primary role, and the Friends' job will be to support their initiatives with resources, such as personnel and funds.

Establishment of Bylaws and 501(c)(3) Status

Before you go "live" with a membership drive, it's important to establish your Friends as a 501(c)(3) organization if this group is to work for a public library. If you are forming a group for an academic environment, you might be able to organize under the development office's status. For academics, it is not only wise but also imperative that your development office is on board with your plan to form a Friends group.

The 501(c)(3) status means that your organization is nonprofit and, therefore, tax exempt—which means your group can accept tax-deductible contributions. It's not that difficult to get this status, but in order to ensure that you cover your legal bases (on both the state and federal levels), it is best to hire an attorney, prevail upon your institution's attorney, or see if you can find an attorney within your library "family" and try to get pro bono assistance.

There will be some restrictions with the 501(c)(3) status such as a limit on advocacy. This doesn't mean you can't engage in capital campaigns or public awareness campaigns, but it does mean that you will be restricted as to how much of your group's income can be spent on "lobbying" (see appendix B). Much of what the Friends do in promoting the library, however, is "educational"—i.e., informing the community or administration about the value of libraries. Very often, an advocacy campaign will include

much that is simply “educational” in nature; funds spent in this manner are completely legitimate.

One criterion that will be required for your 501(c)(3) status is that your organization has established bylaws. These bylaws should include:

1. Name of the Friends group and its headquarters (which might be the library itself).
2. Mission statement.
3. Who will be served by your organization?
4. Governing body, including:
 - Titles of officers.
 - Terms of office.
 - How officers are selected.
 - Appointment and duties of standing committees.
 - Provisions for special or ad hoc committees.
5. Meetings:
 - Time, place, and frequency of meetings.
 - Method for calling regular and special meetings.
 - Attendance requirements.
 - Quorum requirements.
 - Order of business.
6. Procedures for amending bylaws.
7. Parliamentary authority.
8. Dissolution clause (detailing what will happen to the group’s assets if it should dissolve).
9. Date of adoption.

Be sure to check the requirements for your 501(c)(3) status before adopting your bylaws, as the IRS requires that certain items be included. To get an excellent overview of what will be required to establish your Friends as a nonprofit organization, go to www.nolo.com, and in the search window at the bottom of the lower left-hand side of the first web page, type in “nonprofit organizations.” Next, click on “How to form a nonprofit organization.” In addition to this excellent overview online, Nolo Press has a number of publications addressing the legal requirements for nonprofits.

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