

# Innovative Solutions for Building Community in Academic Libraries

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## 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

(Datig, 2014). This means that librarians have an uphill battle in terms of getting them to understand and trust the library. Finally, the library is constantly in the process of building new strategies and policies. At the NYUAD Library, there is no ‘set in stone’ way of doing things. As a result of this situation, the NYUAD SAG has been very useful in connecting with students, developing student-friendly policies, and solidifying the library’s role on campus. Although NYUAD’s situation is unique, SAGs can play a helpful role in any academic library’s outreach program: wherever there are students, there will be a wide range of opinions that the library needs to hear. In addition, by actively soliciting student involvement, libraries can build a valuable sense of community among students, who will see that they are a vital part of the life of the library.

## **Literature Review**

There is a large amount of library literature regarding the value of using students in library outreach and community-building. Several librarians have written accounts of forming Student Advisory Groups to improve university community relations and provide students with a voice in the library (Akers & Summey, 2012; Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999; Crowe, 2010; Deuink & Seiler, 2006; Pillow, 2007; and Smith & Galbraith, 2011). The most comprehensive account of developing and maintaining a SAG comes from Deuink & Seiler (2009), a monograph that covers many of the benefits to academic libraries of forming a SAG, including greater community outreach. Librarians writing on the topic have pointed out the value SAGs can bring to academic libraries. One of the primary benefits comes from hearing opinions from the library’s primary users (Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999; Dorney, 2013; Pillow, 2007; Smith & Galbraith, 2011). As Benefiel, Arant & Gass (1999) argue, library policies almost always have the most impact upon students, and yet students’ voices often go unheard in academic libraries (p. 111). Other benefits include getting innovative ideas (Smith & Galbraith, 2011); building “a more focused connection with students” (Crowe, 2010, p. 154); and taking advantage of students’ ability to influence other students, thereby exponentially increasing the reach of a library’s outreach efforts (Deuink & Seiler, 2006, p. 18). Dorney (2013) points out some of the “intangible” resources that students bring to an advisory group, including “market intelligence, access to data, expertise, and industry reach” (para. 10). Essentially, no one knows the students as well as they know themselves, and no one has as much influence over them as their peers. Browndorf (2014) argues that student advisory councils are one model that can be used to increase students’ connections to and senses of ownership in their academic libraries. In addition, advisory groups do not need to be limited to students. As Farrell (2011) points out, a faculty advisory group can also be an effective technique in recruiting library advocates across campus.

There are other types of student-library collaborations that can serve as complements or alternatives to forming a SAG, and certainly provide useful ideas that can be applied to SAGs. A common technique is to employ students as peer tutors, peer mentors, or library liaisons (Akers, 2011; Gale, 2013; Miller, 2011; Millet & Chamberlain, 2007; Peter, 2013). At the University of Exeter the library employed student ‘library champions’ to promote the library, spend a set budget on additions to the library collections, and serve as a focus group (Gale, 2013). Although the library champions met with liaison librarians individually, rather than as a group, they had many of the same responsibilities of a SAG, such as providing feedback on library policies and services. The University of Southern California Libraries’ ambassador program is also an interesting example: students were recruited, paid a small stipend, and given responsibilities such as answering library-related questions in their residence halls and generally promoting the library to the student body (Peter, 2013). They also brought information back to the li-

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brary regarding the information needs of first-year students. Involving students as representatives of the library has great benefits in terms of student feelings towards the library. According to Peter (2013), “by empowering student representatives with leadership opportunities, libraries can encourage a sense of pride and ownership in the student so that they will represent the library to their peers” (p. 454). Millet and Chamberlain (2007) describe forming a partnership with peer tutors on campus, one value of which came from the fact that “their opinions matter more to new first-year students than those of librarians or other authority figures” (p. 95). In all of these cases, libraries are recognizing the power of students as partners in outreach efforts. This goes hand-in-hand with legitimately listening to students as active participants in the life of the academic library.

## **STUDENT ADVISORY GROUPS AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES**

### **Stage One: Creating the SAG and Setting Responsibilities**

Some investigation is necessary before moving forward with creating a Student Advisory Group. First, the library needs to review any applicable campus policies for groups. Whether or not the SAG becomes an official club, it is worth reviewing university policies regarding student groups in case they affect things like meeting times and membership (Deuink & Seiler, 2009, p. 78). It is also important to make sure that the library administration is ready and willing to hear ideas from students. If this is not the case, the group will be pointless, and student motivation will drop considerably. It might also be an opportunity to go back to the drawing board and build a very strong case for getting student input on the library. Either way, it is important to sound out library administration and see what, if anything, they would be interested to hear about from students. Finally, it is necessary to identify which librarians want to be involved and have the right enthusiasm and motivation. An enthusiastic and engaged librarian advisor is a necessity for any well-run SAG (more information on group leadership is included in the “Logistics” section below).

Once a library has decided to create a SAG, the formation of the group is the first item on the agenda. The composition of the committee, whether elected representatives, library student workers, or volunteers, will influence every aspect of the committee, from when it is able to meet to the level of commitment demonstrated by members. There are several good ideas in the existing literature on SAGs. Deuink & Seiler (2006) formed a group from local contacts within the student body, and expanded from there (p. 19). Benefiel, Arant & Gass (1999) used members of student government, because they were well-informed about the student body and had a lot of ‘reach’ with their fellow students. Crowe (2010) used student government to recruit other students, which was effective because members of student government typically have large social networks. Smith & Galbraith (2011) argue that library student employees are also an option. Akers & Summey (2012) point out that recruitment should last all year, since students (freshmen, in particular) might be too overwhelmed in the fall semester to consider joining a library group (p. 170). The diversity of the student body must be kept in mind and recruits identified from the following groups as appropriate: graduate and undergraduate; adult and traditional-age; and residential and commuter. Groups that traditionally do not use the library, which may vary from campus to campus, can also be sought out. It is also important to remember that recruitment is an ongoing process, especially since undergraduates will eventually graduate and move on (Deuink & Seiler, 2006).

There are benefits and downsides to each approach for constituting the committee. If members are chosen among students already known to library staff (regardless of whether they are student employees), the group may not take advantage of membership in the SAG as an important outreach tool. Furthermore, by selecting students who are already active library users, the group may not represent the full spectrum of student knowledge about, familiarity with, or comfort with the library. However, students who are already library users or work in the library could be more engaged in the SAG than students who have not previously demonstrated any interest in the library.

There are special considerations that need to be taken into account for student employees. If membership in the SAG is part of their job, then it can be reasonably expected that they will attend meetings. Depending on the student worker schedules, meetings could potentially be scheduled during an already-assigned shift, which avoids adding to students' calendar. However, if student workers are engaged in public service activities, their presence at the meeting will necessitate someone else's taking on those responsibilities. Also, as employees, students are likely to already be well-informed about library policies and procedures and may not be as able to think outside the box as students who are less familiar. On the other hand, since they are already familiar with policies and procedures, they may have ideas for improvements and a better understanding of the implications of their suggestions. However, the possibility of self-censorship should not be ignored--if students are meeting with their own supervisor, they may be less likely to be forthcoming with criticism.

Working with student government to nominate or elect members brings with it positive and less positive aspects as well. As mentioned above, members of student government often have large social networks, which can be leveraged both as an outreach and as a recruitment tool. Elected members of student government already have the *imprimatur* of approval of their fellows, as well as the understanding that they are speaking not only for themselves, but for their constituents. Student government generally has established communication channels for their members to connect with their constituents. However, students involved with student government may or may not represent the full spectrum of students who attend a university. For example, for some institutions, commuter students are a small minority who may not be represented via established student government groups.

The library's budget also needs to be taken into account when forming a SAG. There are two prongs to the construction of the budget: meeting expenses and implementation of ideas. Generally, the meeting expenses will be for food and drink; the amount of both will be up to the individual library. The amount of refreshments at a meeting can range from nothing, to light snacks, to a full lunch. Most authors agree that treats can be a motivational tool to encourage students to show up to meetings-- students love free food. In terms of the meeting atmosphere, having lunch meetings can also help make things more friendly and relaxed (Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999). There is also the matter of budgeting the implementation of proposals. Although student recommendations that emerge from SAGs can range in size, many of them will require at least some monetary allocation. However, the money does not necessarily have to come from the library's operating budget. Deuink & Seiler (2009) argue that library SAGs should think about becoming official clubs on campus, which can mean extra funding. They also argue for the importance of fund-raising activities, such as car washes. Librarians can also consider applying for grants, if appropriate.

One of the most important aspects of creating a SAG is deciding what the responsibilities of the group will be. A well-written charge should set parameters for what can be discussed and potentially changed. This should help manage expectations for both the students and their advisor(s). As Farrell (2011) writes regarding faculty advisory groups, these groups "can also add to the workload of a library if they are



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not focused on appropriate activities and issues” (p. 189). In developing the charge, the advisor should consult colleagues and administrators in the library regarding what they believe to be the biggest areas for improvement, where innovative student ideas might be most helpful. In addition, librarians should avoid being too rigid with their charge--students may come up with amazing ideas that are outside of the box. A few general areas where SAGs can provide input include collection development, library policies (especially those that directly affect students), outreach and marketing, and general complaints and concerns. All of these subjects are centered on improving the library’s services and increasing usage.

*Collection development.* This is an area ripe for student involvement. Students can either provide input on library purchases (i.e., “We need more fiction by 19th century women writers”), or even make some selections themselves (i.e., “Let’s buy *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon”). Students might be especially helpful with technology and multimedia purchases, since these parts of the collection are usually well-used by students. Many students would enjoy having more of a say in their library’s DVD purchases.

*Policies.* This is a clear area where student input is valuable, especially for those policies that directly affect students’ daily lives. Some common policies for students to look at include food and drink policies; loan periods and fines; and library hours (this includes both regular hours and extended hours for final exam periods and other ‘special’ times).

*Communication.* A SAG can serve as an effective, ongoing channel for communication between the library and one of its largest user groups (Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999; Crowe, 2010). Dorney (2013) also points out that, “Students know what will get the attention of other students” (para. 13). In addition, this is an opportunity to gather information on what communication tools students like to use. Would they be comfortable with texting, WhatsApp messaging, or a Facebook group? This information can obviously be used within the group, but more importantly as an outreach tool with other students.

*Outreach.* This is an incredibly valuable aspect of having a SAG. As Deiunk & Seiler (2006) argue, “Students are excellent library advocates to their peers when they are well informed about the library’s collections and services and have a clear, consistent message to share” (p. 18). The more students learn about the library by being part of a SAG, the more information they have to share with their peers. Crowe (2010) points out that SAGs can help a library get feedback on reaching students effectively with various library messages.

*User experience.* Who knows better than the students themselves how the library ‘works’ for its users? A SAG can serve as a “sounding board” that allows students to voice their issues and concerns (Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999, p. 111). Librarians can gather input from students on improving the library atmosphere, especially if user feedback indicates that the library is not a welcoming place. Some examples from the literature include purchasing furniture (Crowe, 2010; Smith & Galbraith, 2011); the creation of a music zone, where classical music is played to help students study (Smith & Galbraith, 2011, p. 395); and improving library signage to make navigation less confusing (Smith & Galbraith, 2011). Pillow (2007) also writes about how their library SAG provided input on new library buildings and renovations.

*Usability testing and focus groups.* SAGs can make a very handy standing committee when it is time to look at purchasing a new electronic resource, such as a database or discovery tool. Libraries can utilize a SAG for quick usability testing (many usability experts say that talking to three users is enough to get valuable insight into a website or tool) or put them together for an interactive focus group. Halling and Carrigan (2012) describe forming a Student Advisory Council to serve as a focus group during a library redesign project.



## The NYUAD Student Advisory Group

During the 2011-2012 academic year, the Access Services Librarian read an article about student advisory groups in the library literature and immediately thought--why not form one at the NYUAD Library? She brought this idea to the attention of the rest of the professional library staff at a weekly meeting. The Library Director thought it was a great idea and agreed to move forward. Once the decision was made, it took some time to determine the composition of the SAG. The Access Services Librarian researched other college and university student advisory groups, in order to learn from the advice of experienced peers. It was decided early on to keep the group small in hopes of convening all members for each meeting. It was also hoped that this would create a cohesive group and encourage the students to be open and honest with their feedback. Librarians had several different ideas for finding students to serve. Would the library solicit applications and choose the members either at random or by selecting a diverse group? Would the library simply accept whoever applied? Would Student Government hold elections specifically for library advisory committee members? The Access Services Librarian met with Student Affairs staff in Career Development, as well as those who advised student government, and sought their advice. While the timing was fortuitous in that students were advocating for more involvement across campus, the library was not so lucky in that student government elections had just taken place. The Access Services Librarian also met with the President and Vice President of student government to gauge their interest and identify potential members of the SAG.

Ultimately the library formed a SAG in spring 2012, using Class Representatives: two students from each class year who are elected by their peers to represent them in a variety of settings. Membership in the library SAG was simply added to their portfolio of responsibilities. As a new institution, NYUAD only had freshmen and sophomore students, and so the group was four students in total. As the study body grew and matured, student government changed the number of Class Representatives to only one student per class year. Student government requires that first, second and fourth-year students serve for the entire term. Third-year students can serve for a single semester if they are studying away from Abu Dhabi one term (which is very common at NYUAD). Some years, the Class Representatives select a delegate to serve on the committee in their place. The library does not have input regarding the selection of members, although it is free to add members to the group as appropriate. All of this means that the SAG has a rotating body of members, sometimes even within one year. In general, this system has worked well and prevents having to spend any time on recruitment. The library has also found that, as participants in student government, members have healthy social networks to assist with the library's outreach efforts. Theoretically, lack of interest in library issues should be a stumbling block, considering the fact that students may not be aware that they are joining the library SAG by becoming a Class Representative. However, almost universally the students have been very engaged in the SAG. This may be a side-effect of a small, tight-knit student community: everyone feels they have a 'stake' in the running of the university. As seen in the literature review above, there are many different ways to form SAG membership, and each library should consider what would work best for their constituents.

In terms of leadership, it seemed natural that the Access Services Librarian would be the Librarian Advisor (hereafter, Advisor) to the SAG, since it was her idea and she already worked closely with students on access and circulation issues. The librarians also theorized that some of the feedback from students would be access-related, such as loan periods and library hours. Therefore, she would have the fullest understanding of these issues of anyone on the professional library staff, and would have the best opinions for moving forward with recommendations and project ideas. She is also an enthusiastic

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supporter of students and is known for forming close relationships with them. While some SAG groups include the library director, the NYUAD Library director felt that the students might be intimidated by her presence. The Access Services Librarian had the right skills and interest for the job, and has enjoyed her role over the past several years.

In terms of setting the charge, the Advisor consulted several libraries' websites that described their advisory committees. She determined that the responsibilities of the committee would be modeled on those of the Student Library Advisory Board at UNC University Libraries (n.d.), which are:

1. To provide a mechanism for student suggestions to the library administration,
2. To involve students in the formulation of new library programs and facilities,
3. To incorporate student input in administrative decisions, and
4. To solicit student opinion regarding library programs and services (para. 2).

She also made it clear during the first meeting (and each subsequent 'first' meeting of the new committee) that the advisory committee did not have *carte blanche* to set library policies, such as loan periods or library hours. While the library is certainly open to student input, particularly on hours during final exams and midterms, there are administrative structures that the students may not be aware of. As most meetings are improved with the addition of edible refreshments, the library is fortunate that the budget allows for providing treats at each meeting. This is also made easier by the fact that there are only five members of the committee, including the Advisor.

The library has sought the SAG's advice on many different issues, including library hours, collection development, outreach, equipment purchases, and lending policies. Library hours of operation are consistently important to students. While the library does not have the budget to support the request for 24/7 service which is repeatedly heard from the SAG and the student body in general, the library has been able to set extended hours during each midterm and final exam period. Many SAGs provide input on collection development; however, in the case of NYUAD, any student may suggest purchases to the library. Thus, the SAG has been used more to raise awareness with their fellow students regarding this particular library service than to actually solicit suggestions. The library has a robust equipment lending program, and consults the SAG regarding new purchases, within reason. For example, the library relies heavily on electronic resources, so the SAG suggested purchasing Kindles. However, the library had previously evaluated Kindles and iPads for the purpose of encouraging students to read e-books on a device rather than printing out chapters. The library found that iPads are compatible with its e-book platform, but that Kindles are not. It was determined that the library should have a smaller number of tablets that were compatible with the entire e-book library, rather than many tablets that would require separate purchases. The Advisor explained the reasoning behind the library's purchase of iPads rather than Kindles to the SAG, which the students then shared with their classmates. Overall, the SAG has been able to work within the responsibilities set by the Advisor and the group continues to evolve as the institution grows.

## **Stage Two: Logistics and Putting Ideas into Practice**

There are many logistical considerations when dealing with a Student Advisory Group. First, the library needs to carefully choose the librarian or librarians who will be in charge of the SAG: they must be fully

invested in the importance of the group. This person needs to be enthusiastic, organized, motivational, and a good leader. A good look at the SAG's charge will help to determine how many librarians need to be involved. There is also the possibility of letting the students essentially be 'in charge' of the group: setting agendas, developing projects, and creating plans for implementation (Smith & Galbraith, 2011). Another big issue is deciding when to meet, and how often. In the literature, meeting frequency varies from once a semester to roughly once per month. Having a regular meeting time (for example, the first Monday of the month at noon) can improve attendance because it is easy for students to mark on their calendar. The librarian advisor should try to schedule at a time that is best for students and is less likely to interfere with classes: some options include lunchtime, dinnertime, or even a 'free period,' if such a time exists (Pillow, 2007). Of course, this is also an opportunity to poll the SAG: what times are best for them?

Once the basic outline of the SAG is set, the advisor should consider creating a governing document that provides guidelines for the goals and membership of the group (Farrell, 2011). This can take the form of a constitution or charter, although it does not need to be overly complicated. The governing document should clearly lay out how long members will serve and what their individual responsibilities should be. There need to be guidelines for minute-taking and reporting. There should be clear pathways for project implementation: who does the group report to, and who is responsible for doing it? If it seems necessary, there is the possibility of having intra-group elections for leadership and administrative roles. This gives students an opportunity to 'step up' and should take some of the burden off of the librarian advisor. This tactic makes sense for larger colleges and universities, who will likely want a larger body of student representation, and will have the requisite numbers to make elections viable. If there are going to be elections, the procedural guidelines should also be included in the governing document.

Deiunk & Seiler (2009) recommend having an icebreaker at the first meeting--this sets a casual atmosphere and allows everyone to get to know one another (p. 71). Each meeting should have an agenda and some time for a free discussion period (Pillow, 2007, p. 642). The advisor should ask students serious questions (Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999). The advisor should also listen carefully and respectfully to what the members say (Deiunk & Seiler, 2006). It is important not to dismiss ideas out of hand, while also keeping students relatively on-task. Crowe (2012) argues that the meetings should be kept informal, so people feel free to say what they really think. The advisor should also allow for the opportunity for students' talents to emerge--they may have unexpected skills (Deiunk & Seiler, 2009, p. 40).

Between meetings, it is important that the advisor maintain an open line of communication. This can be done via email or other channels that students have identified. If students have to miss a meeting, which is inevitable given their hectic schedules, the advisor should have a plan to catch up later one-on-one. This emphasizes the importance of the club and their individual responsibilities (Deiunk & Seiler, 2009, p. 68). Once student recommendations start to come in, the importance of taking action cannot be overstated--it will show the students that the library takes the SAG seriously. As Pillow (2007) states, "It is critical to report back to students about actions taken on their concerns; this demonstration of our commitment to their concerns encourages future feedback" (p. 643). Once some projects are underway they can become tools for recruitment of new members, for example by including information on promotional materials such as, "...brought to you by your Library Student Advisory Group." As the SAG grows, there is also the possibility of forming partnerships with other groups on campus, if applicable. In addition, the SAG can get involved with fun events on campus; even if they do not necessarily connect to the library, having the SAG name on a flyer can still be good public relations (Deiunk & Seiler, 2009, p. 33).

## The NYUAD Student Advisory Group

As suggested in both library and project management literature, each meeting has a set agenda with time at the end for free discussion. The agenda is typically shared at least in vague terms before each meeting. For example, the Advisor might send out an email stating, “Next meeting, I’d like to talk about late equipment.” In the early days of the SAG, one of the library assistants attended meetings and took notes. However, she did not enjoy this task, and it was decided that having official minutes taken made the meetings seem overly formal. The Advisor prefers to keep the meetings somewhat informal so that students feel comfortable sharing their opinions without feeling judged. So, now the Advisor writes a simple email recap after each meeting that is shared with both the SAG and the rest of the professional library staff. The Advisor brings snacks or lunch to each meeting, and generally the meetings last around one hour. It is important to not run over time, since students are usually quite busy with meetings and classes during the day.

In terms of meeting frequency, the first cohort of SAG members felt that meeting monthly would be appropriate. However, the Advisor has found that it is more realistic to meet twice per semester. This frequency works well for the library and the students, although it does make building rapport with the committee a bit more difficult, and at least one SAG member mentioned that meetings should be more frequent. Each semester, the Advisor obtains the Class Representatives’ schedules and set up meeting times using Doodle. One of the challenges the Advisor has faced is that with each new student government term (which has varied from calendar year to academic year), it is difficult to get in touch with the newly-elected Class Representatives. This is now made easier because election results are posted to the entire NYUAD community. Also, NYU’s migration to Gmail means that librarians are able to look up student’s email addresses by name, which was not possible before.

At the beginning of each new cohort of students, the first half of the meeting is spent getting to know each other. The Advisor shares some personal information, such as her undergraduate majors, graduate school degrees, her home country and state, job responsibilities, and family life. She then asks the students to do the same, although the amount of information is obviously dependent upon the students’ individual comfort levels. In general, the students have been happy to share information about their lives. This is helpful not only to get to know the students, but also to identify diversity gaps. For example, one year all the group members were male Science or Economics majors. Given the diversity of the campus, librarians felt that the library SAG needed to be a little more representative--having a male-only SAG with Science or Social Science majors would limit the input and ideas gained from the group. With that in mind, the Advisor asked a female Humanities major (who was familiar to the library as one of the ‘regulars’) to join. However, that was the only time the library had to take a step and add a student to the SAG--in general, the Class Representatives have been a diverse group. Additionally, the library relies on them to connect with students via their other extra-curricular activities and social networks as well as their role in student government. NYUAD students tend to be involved in many extra-curricular activities and are a tight-knit group in general, so specifically appealing to them for this type of outreach helps the library build community beyond the members of the SAG and student government.

The Advisor tries to follow other best practices from the library literature. If a student misses a meeting, they will receive the meeting recap. Members of the SAG are also kept informed of the progress of the projects that they have recommended. If the library cannot or chooses not to put their ideas into practice, the reasons behind the lack of action are communicated to the SAG. This reaffirms to students that the SAG is a real group with real responsibilities, and that the library administration takes

it seriously. Sometimes these conversations help lead the group to compromises that even the Advisor would not have thought of on her own. Also, the Advisor polls other professional library staff before each meeting: is there anything they would like to bring up to the SAG? Are they considering any major policy changes? Is there a workshop or other event they would like to promote? On many occasions the library has counted on the SAG to advertise library events to their peers, and it has worked very well.

Since 2012, the library has been able to put a number of SAG-recommended projects and initiatives into place. One important outreach initiative was related to the amount of noise in the library, a common problem at many academic and public libraries. Since the beginning the NYUAD Library has been a self-policing environment, with no ‘shushing’ by library staff. This policy was chosen because the library wanted to emphasize the fact that librarians are friendly people, and did not want to seem overly intimidating to students. This was a priority for the NYUAD library, although the situation is obviously different at many other libraries. The NYUAD Library is also located in a small, two-floor space with an open stairwell, where it is easy for noise to carry. Librarians and other staff therefore receive many complaints from students about the noise level. The SAG helped address this issue in a few ways. Weekends are typically quiet in the library due to low usage, so per their suggestion, the library re-branded weekend hours as quiet hours. The library saw a small increase in usage soon after this marketing initiative. The library also designated the instruction room as a space for silent, individual study. However, there have been difficulties promoting this: the SAG explained that this was not clear to the student body because the instruction room is used as a classroom during the day. The classroom has one large table, which the SAG requested be separated into individual tables each evening as a visual ‘cue’ that quiet study time has begun. Also, the SAG requested that the library post signs at the end of each semester asking students to keep the noise down and support an environment conducive to study. This past semester, librarians took this one step further and created a poster with a photo of SAG members and the text “Support your classmates! Keep quiet.” This seems to be the most effective of any signage created to date, and staff regularly receive comments on it at the Information Desk.

Another area for SAG recommendations has been outreach and communication activities. Like many libraries, the NYUAD Library has several social media accounts. When the library first launched a Facebook page, it was a struggle getting students to ‘like’ it and follow announcements. The SAG suggested that the library offer stickers as an incentive for following the NYUAD Library Facebook page. In the words of one of the SAG members, “People love stickers.” The library took this advice and purchased a simple sticker with the words and symbol, “I [Heart] My Library.” While the library did not keep strict statistics regarding the number of ‘likes’ pre- and post- sticker offering, students (as well as some faculty and staff) seemed to like the stickers and reacted positively. Purchasing the stickers in bulk was not expensive, so the library continues to offer them at select times throughout the year.

The SAG has also served as a sounding board for many library policies. In the first year of operation, the library operated in a relatively consequence-free environment; that is, the library did not charge late fees or fines for any reason. As the community grew, so did abuse of this policy. So, the Advisor turned to the SAG for their input on loan periods. Initially, the library had many different loan periods for different items: 3-hour, 5-hour, 2-day, 3-day, 1-week, 2-week, and semester-long. This was confusing to everyone, according to the SAG, so the number of different loan periods was reduced. Also, the library extended the loan period of iPads from two days to one week. When the library launched the iPad lending program, librarians had read in the literature that several other libraries lending iPads had selected a 2-day loan period. However, since the library was hoping students would use the iPads to read e-books, the SAG felt this was too short of a time. This did mean that the library ran out of iPads more frequently



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than occurred with the shorter loan period, but this is seen as a positive, since it means they are being used. Interestingly, each time the Advisor has explored instituting increasingly harsh penalties for late returns, the SAG has been very supportive. They support the idea that they, and their peers, should be responsible for the library materials that they check out. Having this information has made the Access Services team feel more confident when dealing with students who have abused lending policies.

Librarians have also used the SAG for usability testing. In the spring semester of 2013, NYU Libraries in New York had begun looking into purchasing a discovery tool, and had narrowed the field down to two candidates. As part of the NYU global network, librarians in Abu Dhabi also wanted to have some input on the final choice, since members of the NYUAD research community would be among the potential users. To get a student perspective, the Advisor contacted the SAG and asked if they would be willing to use one of their regular meeting times to do some testing. They agreed, and also agreed to bring some friends. Librarians held the usability testing in a public place, so as the students did the testing they were able to see other random students and invite them to participate. Librarians brought donuts as a treat for the SAG, and also to lure in other students. The testing was a success and librarians were able to gather valuable information on how the students felt about the two different discovery tools.

## **Stage Three: Assessment**

It is essential that libraries evaluate the effectiveness of their Student Advisory Groups. Evaluation helps to improve the operation of the group and also can help to justify its existence (and the time and money that it requires). Assessment can be done in many different ways. One way to measure achievement is to count how many projects the library has acted upon, and how many purchases the SAG has influenced (Benefiel, Arant & Gass, 1999; Crowe, 2010; Deuink & Seiler, 2006). If the SAG has been assisting with collection development, librarians can check the circulation numbers of SAG-selected titles or equipment (Crowe, 2010; Deuink & Seiler, 2006). If hours have been extended or modified per SAG request, the library can measure gate counts and space use (Crowe, 2010; Smith & Galbraith, 2011). Librarians can also measure overall satisfaction levels with the library over a period of time, to see if numbers improve as more SAG-based projects come into effect (Crowe, 2010).

It is also important to get feedback from SAG members (Smith & Galbraith, 2011). Questions can include: How did you feel being part of the SAG? What do you think the main accomplishments of the group were? Do you have any recommendations for the future? Members can also answer questions regarding meeting logistics and what changes or modifications might help the group run more smoothly. These comments can be tracked and used to recruit new members in the future. The feedback can be made anonymous, if that will improve the truthfulness of the students' answers. The summer break is usually a good time to implement logistical changes, and students can be brought up to speed at the first meeting of the year in the autumn.

The library has undertaken several assessment efforts in regard to the SAG. Firstly, the library has measured gate counts and space use during the extended hours during finals which were recommended by the SAG. Like many smaller libraries, gate count numbers at the NYUAD Library severely diminish in the evening hours. During the regular semester the library has stayed open until 9 PM, and usually there are only a few people (if any) in the library at that time. In the fall semester of 2012 the SAG recommended staying open later, until midnight, during final exam periods. The library advertised the extended hours on the Student Portal and social media outlets. To track usage, during the later hours library staff scanned the entire library and took simple notes on how many people were studying in the library at the beginning of each hour. While the library did see an increase in traffic over the rest of



the academic year, the numbers were still quite low, with only 10-15 students taking advantage of the extended hours each day. However, the library has continued to maintain later hours during final exam periods as a goodwill measure towards the community. Students generally respond positively when staff tell them that the library is open later during finals, even if they do not often take advantage.

The library has also sought feedback from the SAG regarding their opinions of the group. Their responses, both formally and informally, have been very positive. In the spring of 2014 the Advisor asked SAG members past and present to respond to a survey about their experiences as part of the group. They were asked, “Do you feel the student advisory group has made a difference (in library services, communication, collection, policies, or anything else) to students? If so, how?” One student replied:

*I do feel that the student advisory has made a difference. It created an important link between the student body and the library administration, empowering the students to have an actual voice in how such an important part of student life operates – the library. From an institutional development standpoint, it allowed for progress through cooperation and mutual respect, not a top-down enforcement of policies. This, in turn, ensures that in the future we will be able to continue to cooperate and listen to what the needs of the administration and the student body are with the end goal of creating an institution that is not only transparent, but also flexible and thus, is able to endure.*

They were also asked, “Has being a part of the student advisory group made you feel closer or more connected to the library? In what way?” Some of their answers include:

*Definitely. I pay more attention to the policies and feel more responsible with regard to the library.*

*Absolutely. Though participating in the student advisory board I had the ability to voice my opinion about certain policies, opening hours and much more, while at the same time getting first-hand information from the administration. It not only allowed me to connect with the library but I actually felt empowered as a member of the student body.*

They also provided some feedback on how to improve the operations of the group:

*[The group should be more active in] promoting the library resources and be able to create more interaction, with a special emphasis on the books. It definitely requires participation from very active and concerned students who have a willingness to work on the issues on a weekly/monthly basis.*

One of the Advisor’s goals is to continue to poll SAG members at the end of each academic year, with the hope of improving the experience of being in the group for future members. On a personal level, it is also heartwarming to hear that the students find being in the SAG to be such a positive experience.

In the future the library hopes to more formally track the SAG’s suggestions and the library’s responses. The plan is to create a matrix that charts both concrete recommendations from the SAG and the related library projects or policies. Each project will have a recommended set of assessment tools, as well as the person responsible for carrying them out. Ideas or recommendations that do not become projects should include a note regarding why this particular recommendation was not pursued. Tracking of SAG recommendations is an area that has been neglected and only considered very informally. As mentioned in the literature, this is an important part of assessment that could help the library in myriad ways, including marketing of the library’s services.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

It can be difficult for academic libraries to build a sense of community among their users. A constantly-changing student body, competition from the internet and bookstores, and the continued prevalence of librarian stereotypes are just some of the issues librarians face. Forming a SAG helps with these challenges in several ways. Although the student body may change, the SAG as an institution and its contributions will stay in place, with the added benefit of flexibility as new members with new ideas come in. SAGs can help put a human face on the library. Members get to know the library and librarians well, and they spread that knowledge to their peers. SAGs offer students the potential to help personalize the library according to their needs. All of these factors help make SAGs an effective community-building tool. As an example, the library has recently moved to a new location on the university's permanent campus. One of the new features is a Silent Study area. Whenever librarians give library tours, they mention that the policies governing this area, including no food or cell phones, came directly from the SAG.

There are multiple avenues for future research regarding SAGs. One possible avenue for research could involve comparing SAGs at different types of academic libraries, such as community colleges, research universities, and liberal arts institutions. A holistic review of advisory groups beyond academia, including public and school libraries, might be of interest. In addition, assessment of SAGs is an area that is relatively under-studied. Future research could include tracking the success of outreach efforts suggested by SAGs, for example by measuring the knowledge of library policies and their popularity across campus. Libraries that use Lib-QUAL or other assessment tools and create a SAG could compare student satisfaction before and after the SAG's creation. A focus on SAG members could also be illuminating--librarians could study students to determine if membership affects student retention, academic achievement, information literacy skills, or other measures of student success. Overall, any attempt to measure the efficacy of SAGs as outreach and community-building tools, perhaps in comparison to other outreach options, would be a worthwhile addition to the current library literature.

## **CONCLUSION**

Libraries should consider establishing a Student Advisory Group for many reasons. A SAG has the potential to be a valuable contribution to any library's outreach efforts. SAGs build community by creating a group of library advocates who 'spread the word' about the academic library throughout the college. Giving students a real voice in the library's collections, policies and programming makes these advocates more effective, because they appreciate that their voices are being heard. As Dorney (2013) writes, "Students are the primary clientele of most academic libraries. By giving them an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, libraries can ensure that the collections, services, and programming they offer are truly student-centered" (para. 9). Also, students will feel a greater connection to the library if they are allowed to be part of the institution. According to Browndorf (2014), "the more students make decisions about the library, the more they will value the library and feel ownership of the institution and make decisions that best suit themselves, their peers, and the library as a whole" (p. 88). Although it may seem like a lot of work, once a SAG has been formed it should run relatively smoothly. The real work comes when it is time to implement new proposals--but this is something that librarians already do on a regular basis. With the support of a SAG behind their ideas, librarians can

be more assured that their new projects have a good chance of being effective. Having a SAG should not keep librarians from speaking to other stakeholders, including faculty and alumni. As all librarians know, students are just one of the voices that need to be heard.

At the NYUAD Library the SAG has been valuable in a number of ways. Librarians have been able to connect with students in a more meaningful way by hearing their opinions and voices on a regular basis. They have given the library ideas and support for a number of projects. As a relatively new institution, with no ‘set’ way of doing things, this help has been extremely valuable. The NYUAD Library has become a more student-centered library because of the input received from the SAG. Meetings with the SAG are a constant reminder that librarians should not be making assumptions about what students want and expect from the library. The best way of finding out what students want is, of course, to ask: having a SAG formalizes this line of communication and makes library staff’s job that much easier. The SAG has helped the library understand and reach its community of users much more effectively, which has in turn improved community relations.

Most libraries want to be known as ‘student-friendly.’ Forming and maintaining a SAG is an effective way to do it. As Benefiel, Arant & Gass (1999) write, “A library which works with student government to address student concerns will present itself as a campus entity which listens to, and cares about, its student users, and, in turn, has the support of students as users, advocates, and financial supporters” (p. 113). As librarians work with students, it is important not to underestimate the value of peer influence. Hearing their fellows advocating for the library can have a huge effect on students. At any academic library students will appreciate the fact that the library cares about their ideas and will, hopefully, rise to the challenge by sharing their ideas, opinions, and concerns. This, in turn, will help students feel a strong sense of connection to ‘their’ library.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Charge:** A list of responsibilities for a group. Should set parameters for what can be discussed and potentially changed.

**Collection Development:** The processes by which libraries gather and maintain physical and digital resources.

**Logistics:** Everyday, practical issues and considerations (e.g., group leadership).

**Library Administration:** Library staff who provide overall direction and vision for the library. In the case of NYUAD, the library director and associate director.

**Outreach:** Library activities aimed at increasing the community’s knowledge of library resources, services, and facilities.

**Policies:** Library-created guidelines regarding different aspects of library service (e.g., overdue fines).

**Student Advisory Group:** A group of students who meet with library staff on a regular basis to discuss and provide advice on library policies, resources, and strategies.

**User Experience:** The full picture of how users interact with the library, at both physical and virtual touchpoints.