



Friends of Libraries Section

FLS creates a network to connect and inspire Friends groups in all types of libraries to support the New York library community.

Keepin' It Friendly!

Communications Tips for Library Staff, Trustees, and Friends of the Library

Library administrators and volunteers, whether library trustees or members of the Friends of the Library, should be aware of the style, clarity, and frequency of their communications. It is easy to read a “tone” into an e-mail when you are on the receiving end. Maybe the person was harried the day they sent you the note—you’ll probably never really know.

A Communication Triad of Liaisons

Improving communication to and from all parties is vital for keeping relationships friendly between volunteer support groups and the library they serve. Are all the players on the same page? An alliance of three liaisons for the library, its staff, and the Friends can work to everyone’s advantage, strengthening the relationships among everybody involved, encouraging cooperation, and increasing opportunities for collaboration.

It is important to remember that the Friends is a separate entity, with its own legal status and governing body. While one or more library trustees may help to create or organize the group, the Friends should have its own, independent board composed of interested community members. This board may be referred to as a Friends Council or Steering Committee, depending on the language in the group’s governance documents.

While they should be encouraged to be members of the Friends, library staff members and current members of the library’s Board of Trustees should not serve as officers of the Friends. Otherwise, the library would effectively control the operation and decision-making of the Friends. The Friends’ conflict of interest policy must identify the procedures for disclosing, addressing, and documenting the conflicts, restricting individuals from unduly influencing decision-making in the group’s deliberations.

The Friends of the Library group will have some Ex Officio Members, meaning appointees who do not have a vote in the organization’s official business (e.g., use of funds). These ex officio members also do not count in a quorum to conduct business at the meeting. They serve on the Friends Board by virtue of their position in the library or on the library’s governance board.

The first ex officio member of the Friends board is the **Staff Liaison to the Friends**. This may be the Library Director/Manager or another staff member who is appointed by the chief operating officer of the library to work with the Friends. The Staff Liaison plays a critical role in identifying opportunities for the members of the Friends to be useful to the library within the scope of their mission. The Staff Liaison should keep the group informed of training available to them and ensure that the library provides the Friends with basic assistance to carry out their work (e.g., workspace, photocopier). Library staff can be champions for the Friends, informing patrons of upcoming events and encouraging community members to becoming involved with the group. Friends operations have direct day-to-day implications for staff members, whether accepting donated materials for the

book sale or handling payments for the ongoing book sale corner. It is imperative to keep all staff members well informed and have clear procedures in place.

The second ex officio member is a **Trustee Liaison to the Friends Board**. In a show of “we want better communication,” the Board of Trustees should appoint a representative of the library board as Trustee Liaison to the Friends to attend the Friends meetings (advised in the *Handbook for Library Trustees*, p.75, 2018 ed.) If the Staff Liaison to the Friends regularly attends meetings of the Board of Trustees, it might seem this is not necessary. But having the trustee at the Friends meetings has a certain cache: the Friends may feel more empowered, recognized as true partners, and appreciate that their concerns and needs are heard without being filtered through the staff. At each meeting of the Friends executive committee, be certain to have an item on the meeting agenda “Report from the Library’s Board of Trustees” to be made by this liaison. It is up to the Friends President to include this when the meeting agenda is drawn up.

In the spirit of reciprocity and in order to improve the relationships among all interested parties, the library’s Board of Trustees should welcome a representative of the Friends of the Library at each of their meetings. With the Board of Trustees in agreement with having this ex officio member from the Friends, the President of the library board (not the library director) should issue a personal invitation to the officers of the Friends board to appoint a **Friends Liaison to the library’s Board of Trustees**.

At each meeting of the library trustees, be certain to have an item on the meeting agenda “Report from the Friends of the Library” to be made by this liaison. It is up to the trustees’ President and Library Director to include this as they draw up each agenda. The Friends Liaison will be asked to make an oral or written report on Friends activities to the library board. Like the ex officio members at the Friends meetings, the Friends Liaison does not have a vote in any business transacted by the library trustees. The Friends Liaison carries trustees’ concerns and needs back to the Friends. This relationship can be extremely critical if the library board has a strategic or long-range plan. What is the Friends role in supporting the execution of that plan? Do the trustees have expectations for the Friends that the group needs to meet?

A Friends “presence” is vital at the Board of Trustees’ meetings, reminding trustees there is a volunteer corps available to assist the library. Consider rotating this duty among the Friends officers and committee chairs. It is often an eye-opener to attend the library board meetings and understand the complexity of the business of the library board. This method sometimes helps the library find new volunteer trustees when the time comes.

Funding Decisions

Is there a capital campaign, a new service, or a major building renovation coming up for the library? United for Libraries: The Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations, a division of the American Library Association, briefly discusses reserve funds in their Fact Sheet #22, Guidelines for Giving. The key phrase regarding reserve funds is “the group might consider holding back 20% of one year’s typical budget to cover the costs of operations for a year or two...”

However, this national organization for Friends advises that groups divest themselves of 80% of their annual revenue each year. For every \$1,000 raised at the book sale, the Friend should donate \$800 to the library that same year, minus any operating costs. Always remember: the funds that are in the Friends bank accounts are not the “Friends money.” Friends are actually trustees of these funds that have been raised on behalf of a specific beneficiary, the library. The Friends

cannot hold back funds that the library truly needs.

Operating Agreements (Memorandum of Understanding)

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is a written agreement that specifies the principles and guidelines under which the various parties seek to clarify and formalize their respective roles, responsibilities, and general arrangements for working together. A cooperative relationship among the library staff, board of trustees, and the community volunteers in the Friends is critically important to the success of Friends and the library itself. But it must also be recognized that the responsibilities of these three entities (Trustees, Friends, and library administration) are truly separate and have different levels of authority. The agreement should be jointly drafted by the library board, library director, and representatives from the Friends. It should be reviewed on a regular basis.

If the Friends elected officers bring the idea for this written communication to the library's director or Board of Trustees, the response might be *"We don't need that. We're all happy. Other groups might have had problems, but we do not."* The library administration might not be thinking about being proactive, to prevent problems before they occur. *"We have a Friends representative at the library board meetings, so we know what is going on."* But sadly, Friends groups have dissolved over issues of large-scale gifts and who has the control of the funds that the donor hoped would help their community library.

Sources:

Consult the handout, **"A Primer on Friends Operating Agreements,"** for more details and a sample Memorandum of Understanding. **"Guidelines for Expenditures of Funds Raised by the Friends"** is a second handout that can assist with decision-making. These handouts are posted with the webinar, "Before Friends Become Frenemies" and are posted on the FLS webpage. To watch FLS-sponsored webinars, go to www.nyla.org/friends > Events > FLS Webinars.

Nichols, Jerry and Rebekkah Smith Aldrich. ***Handbook for Library Trustees of New York State.*** 2018 edition. Available for free download at:
<http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/trustees/handbook/index.html>.

See "Working Together: Roles & Responsibilities Guidelines" pages 107-108 which details the specific responsibilities of the library director, the Board of Trustees, and the Friends of the Library.

Find the following newsletter articles at www.nyla.org/friends > Publications:

- "From the FLS Inbox: Reserve Funds." *Friends News and Notes*, vol. 6, no. 2 (March 2020), pg. 2 and 6.
- Wemett, Lisa C. "What's So Scary About a Memorandum of Understanding?" *Empire Friends: News and Notes*, the Empire Friends Roundtable (issue no. 57, Fall 2014), p. 5-6.

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