Against the Grain

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Optimizing Library Services--SAGs to the Rescue: Student Advisory Groups in the Library

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Optimizing Library Services — SAGs to the Rescue: Student Advisory Groups in the Library

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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 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 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.

Many options exist for the creation of SAGs, defining and developing their role at the library, and measuring their success. SAGs are flexible, in that they can be designed to suit small liberal arts institutions as well as large research universities. In implementing SAGs at the **New York University Abu Dhabi Library**, we got to witness firsthand the benefits of these important organizations.

The benefits of forming a SAG go far beyond increasing library gate counts or circulation statistics. SAGs improve student and librarian experience by creating a new level of interaction and involvement for both parties. SAGs have the potential to enrich any academic library's community-building efforts by creating a group of library advocates and giving students a vested interest in the library.

SAGs give students a real voice in the library's collections, policies, and programming, making these advocates most 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." Students 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,

feel ownership of the institution and make decisions that best suit themselves, their peers, and the library as a whole." And involvement in on-campus groups helps with student retention as well. 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."

On the librarian side, involvement in a SAG offers the possibility of forming rich and long-lasting relationships with students. 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. Most libraries want to be known as "student-friendly." As **Benefiel**, **Arant**, and **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." As librarians work with students, it is important that they not 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 librarians care about their ideas, hopefully encouraging the students to rise to the challenge of leadership in sharing their ideas, opinions, and concerns. This, in turn, will help students feel a strong sense of connection to "their" library.

There are challenges, however. A constantly-changing student body, competition from the Internet and bookstores, and the continuing prevalence of librarian stereotypes are just some of the issues librarians face. But although the student body may change, an established SAG will stay in place as an institution, with the added benefit of flexibility as new members with new ideas come in. SAGs put a human face on the library, offering students the potential to help personalize the library according to their needs. All of these factors help make SAGs a truly effective community-building tool. A SAG can also create benefits for 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 and Seiler, 2009).

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 **New York University Abu Dhabi Library**, we have experienced firsthand how 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. 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 endless opportunities for future research and development 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 current library literature. For more on our research with SAGs at **NYUAD**, read the **IGI Global** article "Friends with Benefits: Fostering Community in an Academic Library with a Student Advisory Group."

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@Brunning: People & Technology

At the Only Edge that Means Anything / How We Understand What We Do

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Annals of Conspicuous Consumption: My iPhone 6S Plus

"Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz, my friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends." — Janis Joplin

Don't drool on my iPhone 6S Plus. Do not swipe, tap, or jiggle. And don't roll your eyes, snub your nose, turn away. If you do — and you will — it means you probably own an android phone or worse still, for you, another iPhone, say, an iPhone 6. You are out of cycle and you know it. Step aside.

My time for renewal had arrived, wouldn't you know it, just when S models came out. Really, it's as exciting as driving a Tesla S silently by your neighbors. The Tesla is simply an iPhone with wheels.

It's fate, I'm sure of it, how **Apple** rolls these shiny gadgets out, with enfant terrible assurance they will prevail.

My Verizon Wireless customer rep handled the swap as smoothly as a high-end drug pusher or jewel thief. Once my cell phone number was typed into, yes, an iPad Air 2, standard tool now in these stores, we were off and running to our satisfaction goal. Yes, **Mr. Brunning**, we can cut data costs remarkably, you don't watch **Netflix** do you? Warm smile. Yes, we can save you at least $80.00 a month — give that data to someone else, yes? But how about the product of the month, the **Dr. Dre** mono-stereo globe? Fits in your hand, cranks out pure 100 watts of delicious **Beyoncé** or for you, from the looks of you, some sweet **Leonard Cohen**, am I right?

Yes, right, throw it in.

And your wife, **Mr. Brunning**, the lovely **Mrs. Brunning**, that Wi-Fi only iPad Mini with so many months left on its contract. I'll bet she'd like better, easier, more convenient connectivity, correcto?

How did he know this? Why yes, the iPhone as Wi-Fi hot spot is as convenient as the monthly magazine arriving days late, news old, with long articles so long to read. Yes, yes, yes, at any moment around **Apple** products we become **Molly Bloom** aroused into ecstatic regions, powered by the élan vital which is nowadays iPhone releases.

Eduardo, the rep, showed genuine envy as he prepped the new phone, cradling it in one hand as he tapped tapped tapped on the iPad Air 2 in the other. Like a jeweler he squared up the InstaShield Glass by Zagg, 19.95, and pressed out air bubbles to bond it like invisible anti-crack strength to the iPhone Gorilla glass display. And I won't marvel at how smoothly he slipped my new iPhone 6S Plus into its Tech2 case, one we together had selected