Towards a modern, inclusive library advisory board

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Abstract

Library advisory boards have served as popular tools, but there is little recent scholarship on their continued utility, particularly in light of recent upheaval to the higher education landscape due to social justice movements and the Covid-19 pandemic. This project aimed to determine the current prevalence and value of these groups, while seeking to determine best practices for modernization of and inclusivity within these groups. A census of ARL library websites showed that advisory groups of varying types are still very common in 2022. Interviews with advisory group facilitators provided greater insight into best practices for supporting inclusivity and encouraging engagement.

Purpose and Goals

This project was undertaken to determine the prevalence, composition, and value of advisory groups for academic libraries in 2022. Results from this study should provide guidance for assessment librarians and others who currently facilitate advisory groups or are interested in doing so, make recommendations for modernization of and inclusivity within these groups, and explore ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic and a broader increase in the availability of virtual/hybrid options for participation have impacted current practice around advisory group recruitment, participation, meeting formats, and overall group utility moving forward.

As a bit of background, I started my current role at the University of Louisville libraries in late 2019, and the position had been vacant for some time before that. Despite the fact that the libraries had previously had a very active student advisory board, engagement was suffering, and the board did not have as many members as in previous years. Then came the pandemic, as well as some time out on parental leave, resulting in additional disruptions to the board and lack of consistency in leadership and operations. As the 2022–2023 academic year would be the first full year of working with the board in a consistent way, there was a desire to improve engagement, get a more diverse group of students.

Looking into research on library advisory groups, it turned out that there is very little published work on advisory groups in academic libraries from the last decade. The most recent articles I found were from 2016–2017, one of which was co-authored by my current dean. The lack of recent research, along with some anecdotal discussion on Listservs, etc. that mentioned discontinuing these groups or letting them go fallow

during pandemic, made it unclear whether advisory groups were still in widespread use in 2022.

Additionally, there was no research evaluating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the context of advisory groups. With an increasing focus on DEI initiatives in Academic Libraries, it is important that libraries ensure these groups are inclusive and representative of our user populations. We must ensure that these groups provide a safe environment for members of diverse and minoritized groups to offer genuine feedback and ensure that participation in library advisory groups leads to tangible improvements to their library experience.

Literature Review

Advisory bodies have a long history in academic libraries. Many universities have long convened advisory boards with representatives from across the institution as part of their charter or governing documents, often primarily comprised of faculty. Farrell (2017) offers a helpful distinction between advisory and governing bodies, with the former holding no legal responsibilities even when established through legislative or other official means. Even where not required, faculty advisory groups can prove very helpful to a library dean or director, particularly in providing advice on collections decisions (Farrell 2011).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, student advisory groups became much more widespread. Benefiel et al. (1999) outline the 1996 establishment of a student advisory committee at Texas A&M and advocated for more university libraries to seek feedback from what is generally their largest constituent group. The 2009 book "The library student advisory board: Why your academic library needs it and how to make it work" (Deuink & Seiler) provided practical guidance to libraries looking to establish a student board. These groups continued to proliferate, and by the mid-2010s Doshi et al. (2016) and Lindsay et al. (2018) refer to them as a valuable tool for both library assessment and outreach.

Study Components

There were two components to this study. First, a census of ARL library websites was intended to determine the prevalence and characteristics of library Advisory Groups in 2022. This was conducted during August and September 2022. The author reviewed the websites of all 126 ARL member libraries for mentions of advisory groups, as an effort to determine how prevalent advisory groups continue to be. This was of course imperfect in a few ways—not all ARL libraries are academic libraries, so this cast a somewhat broader net, but was still narrower than attempting to capture the full spectrum of academic libraries in the United States and Canada.

The second component consisted of semi-structured interviews with librarians who are responsible for facilitation of advisory groups. This component was intended to identify ways in which these groups have evolved and determine best practices for utilizing these groups in the current moment. These interviews were conducted during July and August 2022, and analysis was completed on the transcripts during September and October 2022. The interviews were conducted and recorded on Microsoft Teams, transcribed and anonymized, and then the transcriptions as text documents were uploaded into the MaxQDA software platform to analyze themes.

Census Findings

The census portion of the study consisted of reviewing 126 ARL member websites looking for mention of advisory groups. Broadly, I looked for reference to any group composed of members from outside the regular library staff which served an advisory function. For example, many libraries have "advisory groups" focused on specific topics such as DEI issues which are made up of libraries staff, and those were not counted.

This is an imperfect way of counting group prevalence, as there are almost certainly existing groups that either aren't mentioned on their library website or simply weren't found, as well as some groups that are no longer active even though they have a web presence. With these caveats in mind, 84 of the 126 ARL member websites (76%) had evidence of at least one advisory group, and 27 (21% overall, 32% of those with any groups) mentioned multiple groups. Based on this part of the study, it appears that these groups are still widely used, at least among ARL libraries, and a more modern look at their usage and/or utility will add to the overall understanding of assessment and user research in libraries.

Taxonomy of Advisory Groups

Based on this census, these groups were organized into three broad categories. The first two are groups primarily comprised of library users representing various constituent groups. *Chartered* groups, those who exist by mandate—such as boards of trustees, and those mandated by the university's charter or other governing documents. Note that these types of groups may be more prevalent than what was found in the census, as they are often situated organizationally outside of the library and may not be reflected on a library's website even where they do exist.

Discretionary groups are those that have been created voluntarily by the library and its leadership. There is lots of variation in composition and intent among these groups. Some libraries have general advisory boards with broad membership and topics of discussion. Many have boards that focus on a certain population (faculty, undergraduates, a specific library location, etc.) or specific projects/initiatives (DEI, scholarly communications).

And finally, many libraries have *Fundraising* groups such as friends groups or donor councils, which could be either chartered or discretionary in organization but served a unique enough function to be considered separately.

Discretionary groups were the most common type, with 54 libraries having this type of group. This represented 42.86% of all ARL libraries, and 64.29% of those who had any advisory group. Chartered were the second most common, at 32 libraries, and 14 libraries had Fundraising groups.

Board Type	Count	% of Total	% of Groups
Chartered	32	38.10%	25.40%
Discretionary	54	64.29%	42.86%
Fundraising	14	16.67%	11.11%

Interview Findings

Ten interviews were conducted with librarians from a variety of universities. Interview participants were recruited via professional Listservs for academic librarians, and were not limited to ARL member libraries. Interview participants came from 9 states and worked at a range of institution types, from private universities with around 1,500 students to large R1 institutions with around 36,000 students. Interviewees reported working with a mixture of board types, and some had multiple active boards at their institution. They held a range of roles and titles at their libraries. Some were in assessment-specific roles, others in public services or liaison-type positions, and a few were senior administrators at their library. In general, having a Dean or Director of the library who values working with an advisory group seems to be a big driver of their usage, and can often lead to the presence of multiple groups.

Interviews were semi-structured, and allowed conversation to flow as naturally as possible. Specific topics covered in each interview included:

- Background information on the interviewees library, institution, and advisory group(s) or other feedback mechanisms
- Typical structure of the group, recruitment practices, meeting schedules/formats
- Strategies for increasing engagement among group members generally
- Strategies for recruitment of diverse members and engagement around DEI issues specifically
- Pandemic changes to group operations and plans for the future

Composition and Recruitment

Perhaps unsurprisingly, recruitment practices varied by group type. Unsurprisingly, discretionary groups tended to have the most flexibility. For groups that are either partly or entirely composed of students, interviewees typically reported having some sort of application process—even if that process is largely nominal, such as filling out a simple form. Many interviewees reported that they attempt to recruit students in the spring/summer for the coming academic year, although some also accepted students on a rolling basis. There was wide variability in the participation of first-year students, with some accepting first-year students after the start of the school year, while one interviewee mentioned specifically excluding first-year students from their board, and another operated a separate group for first-year students.

There was also significant variability in terms of the participation of student employees. Student employees are often passionate and more knowledgeable about the library and its services, but this experience can also set them apart from other library users. For example, Sexton (2022) notes that the student worker population is typically not representative of the broader student population. However, interviewees from smaller institutions did tend to include student employees in their advisory groups, as they did not have as large of a pool of students to recruit from. One interviewee operated a board entirely composed of library student employees and noted that one advantage of this is that it allows the students to be paid for their time. Some specifically excluded student employees, while others allowed them to participate and simply attempted to stay mindful of their different library experiences and knowledgeability.

In terms of strategies for recruiting students, most interviewees reported doing general recruitment via existing communications channels such as email, social media, and the library website. Most interviewees also reported relying heavily on word-of-mouth recruitment from existing members and found this to be extremely fruitful. Interviewees also performed direct outreach to key campus offices, such as scholarship groups, cultural heritage organizations, and their university's accessibility office, in an effort to recruit a broad range of participants.

Chartered groups generally have more restricted membership, and even explicit composition requirements in some cases. For example, groups mandated by a university charter may specify that the group includes at least one faculty member from each college or department. Interviewees were sometimes able to have some influence on membership, for example by steering faculty who had an interest in the libraries to volunteer for the group. Terms (and sometimes term limits) also vary with these types of groups, so some are able to keep engaged members in the group for a longer period of time, while others had more turnover. Some chartered groups also included student representation, but these were typically appointed from student governance organizations rather than by application.

Fundraising groups were really another type of recruitment process entirely, and involved significant relationship building on the front end before individuals were added to the board. Some fundraising groups have minimum donation or fundraising requirements for members. The particular institutional context for fundraising and development also impacts recruitment for these groups.

Meeting Schedules and Formats

Most interviewees reported that their advisory groups meet at least twice per semester, with some as frequently as once per month during the academic year. Chartered groups again tend to have less flexibility and may have specific requirements for meeting frequency and even format. For discretionary groups this tends to reflect the practicalities of the facilitators' schedules and working around the rhythms of their other job responsibilities, as well as general university happenings. For example, interviewees in liaison roles often need to be mindful of instruction calendars, class and exam schedules, and academic breaks when scheduling meetings. Fundraising groups are once again the exception and tend to meet only once or twice per year. These are often longer meetings or functions.

Historically, interviewees reported that advisory group meetings were near universally in-person, with food provided—particularly if students were involved. However, one interviewee did report that their institution had been experimenting with hybrid meetings before the pandemic. In-person meetings are generally felt to be easier to facilitate and sustain engaging conversation. However, most interviewees report that hybrid and/or virtual meetings have allowed them to involve a greater number of participants and recruit from groups that they have previously struggled to engage with.

Encouraging Engagement and Open Conversation

Interviewees overwhelmingly reported that having trust and strong relationships between group members and facilitators is key to encouraging engagement and open conversation at group meetings. Perhaps the most important strategy for building trust is "closing the loop"—demonstrating that the library will respond to feedback and address concerns. It is particularly valuable to demonstrate this early in the process of working with a group, as it helps to establish a pattern of responsiveness. Interviewees also mentioned the importance of communication when requests or issues could not be addressed, so that they are not seen as ignored.

Another frequently mentioned strategy that is key for encouraging engagement among group members is relationship building. Interviewees reported that when they as facilitators were able to get to know board members either individually or in smaller groups, this helped to build trust. Another effective strategy was providing a variety of ways to give feedback during/around meetings. Some ways to accomplish this are

allowing for nonverbal feedback such as doodles or photos, and giving time for group members to provide feedback asynchronously or anonymously—particularly when topics are sensitive. Allowing the group to discuss and set their own norms around confidentiality is another effective way to build trust.

Lastly, interviewees who worked with student boards acknowledged that these students are typically busy and juggling multiple priorities. Giving students a sense of ownership over the board was viewed as helpful in making the board a higher priority for them and not just another line on their resume. Some suggestions for accomplishing this were giving students leadership roles in the group, allowing them to help with setting topics or priorities, or even planning an event or project for the board.

Recruiting for Diversity & Representativeness

The intent of this project was to look at inclusivity specifically in a DEI context—how advisory group facilitators seek feedback from underrepresented groups. In general, most interviewees felt that their boards were representative of the cultural makeup of their institution (with some interviewees lamenting that the student body at their universities is not particularly diverse, although faculty were typically more so). However, disciplinary representativeness was at least equally important to the interviewees, and often required in the case of chartered groups. Interviewees also expressed a desire for representativeness from other demographic groups beyond DEI-specific concerns, such as online-only students or postdoctoral research fellows. Fundraising groups face slightly different challenges, as these groups tend to be reflective of the demographics of the broader donor class. These demographics are slow to change, but interviewees had some success by targeting outreach to more diverse donors, reaching out to younger alumni specifically, and reducing or removing minimum donation requirements when possible.

Outreach to specific cultural offices or organizations on campus was helpful for recruitment, particularly if the library could share some clear goals or projects relevant to members of those groups. For example, one interviewee described a successful collaboration with their previously-reticent disability resource office by outlining the specific accessibility concerns that the library was hoping to address, which helped motivate students to volunteer. Word-of-mouth recruitment was particularly helpful for recruiting board members from underrepresented groups, as there was demonstrated trust in place already.

Engagement and Openness on DEI Issues

In terms of engagement around DEI issues specifically, there was a notable lack of racial/cultural diversity among facilitators of these groups—most interviewees (as well as the author) self-identified as white and noted that there was not a lot of diversity in the regular facilitation group for their board. However, many noted that their broader

library staff is in fact more diverse, and bringing in a variety of staff at meetings can help to demonstrate that diversity.

In general, the same best practices for engagement apply to DEI issues as any others, but building trust and demonstrating responsiveness are particularly important. It was viewed as important to acknowledge when participants are being asked to discuss sensitive topics and share personal experiences, and show appreciation for their willingness to open up. Interviewees stressed the need to respond to concerns and demonstrate that the library is taking this feedback seriously in order to encourage board members to share beyond a surface level.

Pandemic Operational Changes

Lastly, the pandemic did cause a number of operational changes to these groups out of necessity, with some libraries completely suspending their boards for a period and all switching to remote meetings for at least some portion of the past two years. Despite a return to more normal operations, most interviewees reported sticking with a hybrid meeting format indefinitely or even staying fully remote for some groups.

Although interviewees generally felt that in-person meetings were easier to facilitate, there was a general sense that virtual and hybrid meetings allowed for involvement of a broader range of participants. Specific groups mentioned included part-time, commuter, and online-only students, alumni who are not local to the university area, and generally people with busy schedules who are more easily able to squeeze in a virtual meeting. As a final (and lighter) note, several interviewees noted their surprise that food was not as big of a motivator for participation as they had always assumed— whether for students or wealthy donors.

Future Directions

There is significant room for further exploration of current library advisory boards. In general, it would be valuable to speak with libraries who have discontinued their advisory groups, both for additional context on why this occurred and to learn what feedback mechanisms have been adopted in their stead. During that census portion of this study, it appeared that some ARL libraries have DEI-specific advisory groups. Additional outreach to these libraries specifically to learn more about their usage would be informative, and it may prove valuable track the prevalence of these types of topical groups over time.

Finally, one theme that arose frequently in interviews was that the people facilitating these advisory groups are not well-connected with others who are doing similar work, and often did not have experience with this kind of work before taking on their current role. For those who continue to work with advisory groups, an email list or other community of practice for facilitators of advisory groups to share tips and suggestions

would be extremely beneficial, and hopefully contribute to increased understanding of their value in the future.

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