

FIVE LEADERSHIP ROLES FOR LIBRARY TRUSTEES

Library boards of trustees carry out governing, policy, and planning activities to guide public libraries in communities throughout the country. In these turbulent times—when libraries face shrinking resources, demands for new technology services, and changing community expectations—trustees are much more than members of a traditional governing body. They are strategic leaders who serve as visionaries, community connectors, fundraisers, public voices, ambassadors, and persistent champions.

While library services are sometimes considered discretionary when it comes to allocating limited public funds, today's library is an essential community resource that strengthens economic vitality, improves literacy, supports workforce development, and bridges the digital divide. As community leaders who understand the dimensions of modern library services, trustees can be the voice that shifts the library's position among decision makers and funders from discretionary to *essential*.

This Leadership Brief describes the five critical roles elected and appointed trustees play in shaping the 21st-century library. These roles emphasize how trustees help define the public library's place in the community, ensure that the library stays connected to community needs and interests, and generate support for the library's long-term future.

Trustees come to their volunteer community roles with a range of experiences and backgrounds. The decision to become involved with the library might be rooted in a long-time connection as a library user or might be an outgrowth of involvement in other community agendas. But the bottom line is a desire to ensure the long-term vitality of the public library in the community.

Library boards have fundamental governing responsibilities, usually established by local code or state law, which are intended to ensure that the library operates from a solid and trusted governance base.

- Hire and evaluate the library director
- Monitor and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the library
- Set library policies
- Review and adopt the annual budget
- Develop long-term library plans
- Advocate for the library
- Communicate regularly with the library director
- Conduct the affairs of the board at regularly scheduled meetings

Just as the 21st-century library is broadening its impact, expanding its reach and deepening its community connections, library trustees must follow suit, both as a collective governing body and as individuals with community influence. Often it is the trustees' work outside the library—the spontaneous connections in non-library settings, the passionate commitment to the library every day, the visible support for the library and its director, the willingness to

talk about the library regularly—that offers the greatest value and the most promising results.

In addition to the traditional governing responsibilities, five leadership roles that trustees carry out to support the 21st-century public library are

- crafting and supporting implementation of a long-term vision to strategically position the library throughout the community;
- expanding the library's circle of influence in the community by building relationships and creating productive partnerships;
- advocating for the library's budget with financial decision makers and acting as a force for fundraising;
- being a visible, consistent, reliable, determined, and loud voice for the library in the community;
- working together to strengthen the influence of the library board and ensure representative participation when board vacancies occur.

Working closely with the library director, trustees help craft and support implementation of a long-term vision that will strategically position the library throughout the community. A range of social, economic, environmental, and technological trends have influenced the services, direction, and vision for public libraries. A library's ability to anticipate and respond quickly to emerging trends will strengthen its position in the community and build sustained support.

Trustees help shape and implement the library's strategic vision by

- being familiar with and committed to long-term plans and strategies;
- paying attention to and sharing local trends with the board and staff to assess their potential impact on library services;
- supporting creative and visionary action plans recommended by the library director;
- listening to the community to connect emerging interests and needs with library services;
- talking about the library vision and strategic plan whenever and wherever possible to increase public awareness of the library's capacities, services, and long-term role as an essential—*not discretionary*—community asset;
- encouraging and supporting attention to both visionary planning and efficient day-to-day operations to ensure that the trustees and the library staff collectively keep an eye on the future.

- **Strategically positioning the library in the community**
- **Expanding the library's circle of influence in the community**
- **Advocating for the library's budget and acting as a force for fundraising**
- **Being a visible, consistent, reliable, determined, and loud voice for the library**
- **Working together to strengthen the influence of the library board**

Trustees help expand the library's circle of involvement and influence by serving as a bridge between the library and the community. Their broad knowledge of library services and capacities, combined with their deep professional and community connections, can bring new library users, supporters, and champions to the fold. Even more important, these connections will open doors and help the library director get to the tables where important community decisions are made.

Many community and government leaders have acknowledged that they did not recognize the library's potential to support major community initiatives until someone offered it as a resource. From supporting early literacy efforts to providing services to seniors—and everything in between—public libraries build their services and create their program agendas around the needs of the community.

Trustees help broaden the library's circle of influence by

- raising awareness of library services, capacities, plans, and place in the community;
- recognizing and promoting the public library as a resource that has expertise and capacity far beyond lending books;

- attending public meetings such as the city or county council to network with decision makers and learn about public priorities;
- recommending library leaders for positions on non-profit and government boards and commissions;
- creating partnerships with organizations that do not typically work with the library;
- identifying people who have community influence and who may be interested in library service and connections.

Positioning the library in the community is a constant challenge. When services were more traditional and competition more limited, the library's role in the community was simpler, clearer, and narrower. With library agendas and capacities that support larger community goals in education, public safety, economic development, the environment, and more, creating the connections that maximize potential and increase the library's value proposition requires systematic and strategic outreach.

Examples of community connections that help broaden the library's circle of influence include

- local elected officials—mayors, city council members, county executives, and county commissioners;
- school district leaders—superintendents of schools and boards of education chairs;
- key players in economic development;
- groups involved in workforce development/job services;
- health care providers;
- major regional employers;
- local media and communication experts to support library marketing efforts;
- philanthropic leaders;
- key business leaders such as bankers, financial and investment planners, and retail owners.

To be effective in this outreach role, library trustees need resources that support their work—practical information sheets that highlight what makes today’s library different, easy-to-remember messages that summarize the library’s desired role in the community, talking points that highlight current priorities and challenges, and business cards that identify the individual’s connection to the library and highlight library strategies. While seasoned library trustees are generally well-versed in themes and messages, staff can facilitate their effectiveness in diverse settings by providing simple tools and resources.

- **Connected**
- **Committed**
- **Supportive**
- **Apolitical**
- **Passionate**
- **Willing to show up**
- **Dedicated**
- **Open-minded**
- **Curious**
- **Interested in community issues**
- **Visible**

During tough economic times, the trustee role as financial advocate becomes paramount. Regardless of the library’s financial structure or sources of funding, trustees must be financial champions who can articulate the library’s value proposition clearly and confidently. With public budgets tighter than ever, private funding secured through library foundations is becoming essential to sustain library operations.

The network of supporters and community connections that trustees help build provides the foundation for

fundraising. Keys to success as a library financial champion include

- understanding and being able to explain the library’s financial structure; including sources of income and the status of those sources;
- being able to articulate the library’s value to the community;
- knowing what the current financial needs are;
- developing a clear outreach strategy that identifies the best contacts based on their financial capacity and their connection to the library;
- having a specific, well-defined, and well-supported “ask” for each potential funder.

It is important to separate the relationship building and fundraising processes so that it doesn’t appear that all relationships center around seeking financial support. The first contact should not be an “ask” for a donation. However, successful relationship-building processes that bring key stakeholders closer to the library will contribute to successful fundraising efforts.

In an increasingly noisy and competitive market, the library voice must be louder. And library trustees can and should play a major role in that work by finding, defining, and exercising their individual and collective voices on behalf of the public library.

Trustees help raise the library’s profile by being a visible, consistent, reliable, determined, and amplified voice for the library in the community. The broad role libraries play in the community and the remarkable range of services provided are becoming better known. However, some library directors admit that marketing, branding and telling the library story can be difficult, therefore it is essential to have strong trustee voices to share the powerful story of the library.

Some trustees have acknowledged that their role and the work they do is often not visible outside the library. In an effort to meet this challenge, the library can include goals in its strategic plan in which the board’s impact can be broadened, their profile raised, and their voice defined.

Specific ways trustees can use their voice include

- talking about the library often and in diverse settings—rather than just in library-related meetings;
- supporting library marketing and branding, including allocating budget funds to marketing and participating personally in marketing work;
- identifying specific library services or capacities that will resonate with particular constituencies and connections and sharing that information;
- wearing a library hat at all times, not just when doing library business;
- being identified throughout the community as someone who is connected to, knowledgeable about, and dedicated to supporting the public library.

Trustees are both individuals with a commitment to the library’s success and members of a governing board. It is important to give equal attention to both roles. As members of a governing board, trustees work together—in partnership with the library staff—to ensure effective operations, monitor finances, assess user input, and develop a shared vision for the library’s future. As individuals, trustees leverage their personal and professional interests and connections to raise the library’s profile in the community and support the shared library vision.

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Connecting the group and individual roles will increase the board's influence and credibility. For example, systematically cataloguing individual connections, developing coordinated outreach plans, sharing successful outreach and fundraising techniques, and monitoring results will broaden the impact of efforts to increase the library's circle of influence.

Because of the importance of the trustee's external role, ensuring that the board represents all sectors of the community will increase its credibility and influence. And board members can play an important role in identifying people to fill vacancies on the board to provide the best balance.

- Trustees carry out their team member roles by
- participating in all board activities;
 - communicating openly to build strong relationships with other board members and library staff;
 - supporting team-building efforts to increase board effectiveness;
 - participating enthusiastically in training and professional development opportunities designed to enhance trustee effectiveness;
 - speaking and presenting regularly on behalf of the board as a collective community resource;
 - working in partnership with other trustees on outreach and fundraising when multiple contacts will increase the likelihood of success;
 - identifying with the board as a team.

- Know the library
- Bring new people to the table
- Be there
- Open doors

Trustees are essential to long-term library success. Their ability to connect with the community, work closely with the staff, and help raise funds to provide financial stability all contribute to stronger, more successful public libraries.

As with any volunteer commitment, serving on a library board of trustees is time consuming, demanding, and seemingly thankless. But the thanks comes from seeing the increasingly vital role that libraries play in communities

throughout North America. From the smile on a child's face when he or she first discovers the magic of the public library, to the intense focus of job seekers using public library Internet access to submit applications, to the relief of new immigrants who rely on the library to guide them in a strange new home, supporting successful public libraries provides incredible rewards.



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