

LIBRARY ADVOCACY

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ABSTRACT

The paper defines advocacy in general and library advocacy in particular. Gives examples of particular kinds of library advocacy and the problems they may encounter. Stresses the importance of concerted and organized library advocacy campaigns. Describes the types of people and groups that are involved in library advocacy efforts. Indicates the type of goals, messages, and stories that are needed to underpin an advocacy campaign. Describes how library advocates interact with the media and with public officials. Describes the materials that are used in library advocacy campaigns.

What is library advocacy?

To *advocate* is to plead in favor of or to support, promote, and defend publicly, and *advocacy* is a system or discipline of organized support, promotion, and defence of a cause, an association, or an institution in the public arena. In the world of libraries, advocacy has come to mean two things—the public, organized support and promotion of

individual libraries or individual library services and the public, organized support of libraries in general or of library issues and causes. The two words *public* and *organized* are essential to these definitions. Private, individual support can be helpful, but the essential character of advocacy lies in concerted action—campaigns organized around collective action—in the public arena. The organized, public nature of advocacy means that advocacy efforts are, inevitably, involved with politics. In many western democracies, “politics” has come to be seen as equivalent to party and partisan politics—struggles between right and left. In the wider meaning of the word, politics is all about the allocation of resources. Government and private funding agencies never have enough money to do all the things they are called upon to do and the sharing of resources is often dependent on advocacy—that is, which interests represent themselves most effectively in the competition for money and power. The central message of library advocacy is that those who are in favor of libraries and improved library

services must become engaged in public discourse in order to secure their fair share of the resources (often scarce resources) that are available.

Library advocacy, as we have seen, has two faces. Each of those faces has two aspects. Here are examples of each:

Advocating for individual libraries or individual library services.

- (1) A town has an under funded public library with few hours of opening, no professional staff, and an aging collection. The library is financed from a combination of local and national taxes. The problems are easy to diagnose, but supposing one had to choose between having the library open for more hours and hiring a professional librarian? Or suppose one had to choose between hiring a professional librarian and having a much larger materials budget? The solution is easy to see too—increase the revenue from local and/or national taxes or find new sources of revenue.

However, how can the citizens of the town influence local and/or national politicians to allocate more tax money to the town's library? How can they persuade their fellow citizens—some of whom may be indifferent to the library—to vote to raise their taxes for the library or donate private money to the library?

- (2) A university library has a number of departmental libraries and separate collections. The latter include a valuable collection of books and other resources on East Asia that has been neglected for some years. How can a few professors and librarians with an interest in East Asian Studies influence the university's administration and/or the central library administration to allocate extra funds to the East Asian collection? If they are given extra funds, suppose the choice is between hiring a new librarian to catalogue and do reference service in East Asian studies or spending that money to bring the collection up to date?

Advocating for libraries in general or for library issues and causes.

(1)The business people in a city are concerned about the low levels of literacy among the young people who are their future employees. Those young people do not do well in school and fail to obtain university places, thus depriving those businesses of skilled employees who can express themselves well. The business people conclude that the lack of good school libraries staffed by professional librarians is a major contributor to the decline in literacy and determine to improve the school libraries in their city. How do they persuade local politicians to invest in good school library services? How do they persuade the administrators of the schools to divert scarce resources from other school programs? How do they involve the parents of the children in their cause? If they do manage to secure extra resources, what if they have to choose between hiring professional librarians and improving the

physical space in which the school libraries are housed?

(2) A national government in a western democracy has passed legislation in the name of national security enabling the police to gain easy access to records of library use, thus violating a fundamental value of librarianship—that people in a free society have the right to read and view whatever they wish without that reading or viewing being monitored or made public. How can librarians and those concerned with issues of privacy and intellectual freedom work together to influence political and public opinion to have the law changed? How can they act in an organized manner to deal with the law while it is in place? Is it the role of librarians and friends of libraries to influence public policy or should they simply remain silent and obey the law?

These brief examples illustrate that library advocacy is not always easy and that it involves not only organization but

also compromise and many potential dilemmas. They also illustrate that advocacy can be at many levels—from promoting and supporting a single program in a single library to working to influence school policy in a city to attempts to influence national public policy.

The importance of organized action.

Though there are examples of small-scale, library advocacy involving few people, organized library advocacy must be carried on within the structure of a planned and coordinated campaign. There are two elements that must be present if that campaign is to be successful. The first is a person who is, or a group of people who are, willing to take a leadership role. That person or group must be willing to work hard and effectively in marshalling the human and other resources that are essential to success. The second is a comprehensive plan of action. That plan should have a few clear goals (for example, to pass a new library tax measure; to add a certain sum of money to the library's annual budget; to influence public opinion to pass a law or

to change a law), a clear delineation of the roles of all the people involved in the campaign, a clearly defined time table, and a realistic budget. Advocacy cannot be effective if it is under-planned and disorganized, if it lacks appropriate resources, if effective leadership is absent or if the stated goals are too numerous and lack clarity.

Who are the advocates?

Libraries of all kinds have many groups that take an interest in them and their possibilities for improvement. An effective library advocacy campaign involves reaching out to those groups and persuading them to work together for their common goals. The groups include:

- Library users. The people who use the library regularly or, in the case of school libraries, the parents of the children who use the library are those most likely to be supporters and promoters of libraries. They have good feelings toward the library, but cannot turn those good feelings into effective political action unless they are organized. However, they are usually willing to

advocate and willing to work to influence the funding agency for the library. Testimonials and statements of support for the library are particularly effective if they come from those who really know the library and its services.

- Trustees and members of library boards. Many libraries have an elected or appointed board to which they report, either directly or indirectly. Those people have a vested interest in the success of the library. Also, they are usually the kind of people who are well connected with community and/ or institutional leaders.
- Institutional, community, and business leaders. Libraries exist within their own community (a city, a university, a government agency, a school) but also within a wider community (for example, an academic library is part of a university, but that university is an important element of the city in which it is situated or of the state or province it is in). Those communities have political, institutional, and financial leaders who

have an appreciation of what the library contributes to their community—directly or as part of the educational infrastructure of the community. Those community leaders often display an enlightened self-interest that leads them into philanthropy—direct donations to libraries—and/or political support for the library’s campaign.

- Librarians and library staff. The people who work in the library have the most direct interest in its success. They can be invaluable parts of an advocacy campaign because they combine knowledge of the needs of the library with enthusiasm for an advocacy campaign that will, if successful, improve the library services they can deliver.
- Organized “Friends” groups. Libraries in the United States commonly have an organized group, often call the Friends of the library, who act as “ambassadors” from the library to the community it serves, organize cultural, literary, etc., events that are centered on the

- library, and act as a liaison between the library and the community it serves. Such groups can play a helpful part in an advocacy campaign.
- Cultural figures. The library is, in any community, part of a wider cultural grouping. Such groupings include art galleries, museums, theatrical and other performance groups, literary clubs, and art centers. These institutions share a commonality of purpose and interest with libraries. Because of that shared interest, their officials and members will often join an advocacy campaign on behalf of the cultural life of the community.
 - “Silent supporters.” All studies of the matter show that there are large numbers of people in any community who have a general benevolence toward libraries, even if they are only occasional users of libraries and have never been deeply involved in the life of the library. A well-designed library advocacy campaign will seek to

involve those “silent supporters” and engage their interest and support for the campaign

Telling the library story and dealing with the media.

If you are to create an advocacy campaign, it is imperative that you have a clear message that can be simply expressed and easily understood. Such messages could be, for example:

- “A good school library is an essential part of a child’s education.”
- “Our public library serves the whole community.”
- “Our students deserve longer library hours.”
- “Build the new library our town deserves.”
- “Vote for the new tax measure and bring library services to all.”

These messages should be based on careful consideration of the issues and on, if possible, scientific studies of community opinion. The latter will tell what it is that the members of a community prize about your library and its services. A study of public opinion might reveal, for example, that 80% of the

citizens want the library to have a good children's department, 35% value access to computers in the library, 52% want the library's book collection to be expanded and strengthened, but only 20% want more videos and sound records. Such a survey would lead you to concentrate on children's library services and the book collection in your message. This is the way that modern politics works—you appeal to what the voters say they value most in order to get their support. Librarians and library supporters need to study what is effective in politics and marketing and, if you like, "sell" their most valued services as the basis for more financial support.

Every library has a story to tell—a story of lives changed and improved because of access to recorded knowledge and information—and a sophisticated campaign will tell that story in vivid, attractive terms. The campaign should create brochures that contain testimonials from library users, "silent" supporters, and others with personal experience of the library and its services.

Once the story is created and the message is clear, an advocacy campaign has to deal with an inescapable fact of modern life—the media, principally print, radio, and television. Increasing public awareness of the library is the first step. Conversations with local newspapers and local TV and radio stations about the library may result in stories that inform the community about the library and its strengths. Such increased awareness will be the foundation of the next step—informing the community about the issue (increased funding for collections; money for a new building; literacy programs at the library; etc.) that is at the heart of the advocacy campaign. Once you have built that awareness, it is vital that you cultivate a continuing relationship with journalists and other media figures—both to ensure that there are general stories about the library being put before the public and that you have sympathetic press and other media coverage of the specific advocacy campaign. Again, the twin aims are to create a favorable image of the library and to advance the goals of your campaign. The time when

libraries were universally perceived as being a necessary part of a civilized society are long gone and it is imperative that those who want to gain public support for libraries engage the modern world of media as well as the real world of politics.

Being political.

Successful library advocacy is largely made up of political action and the activities that support that action. This means that supporters of libraries have to engage with legislators and public officials at all levels of government. Obviously, the level of government will be that which is appropriate to the status of a school and to the political conditions of a country or region. In the United States, a school library will be part of a school district that is run by an elected school board. In that case the immediate level will be that of the school board, but a campaign for a school library will also have to reach the mayor and councilors of the city or county in which the school is situated. To give another example, a public library in a town may be a branch

of a county library system. That system is governed by an elected county board of commissioners, which has direct oversight of the county library system, but the branch is in a town that has its own elected officials and the campaign should seek their involvement and endorsement too.

The American Library Association *Library advocates handbookⁱ*, from which I have derived many ideas for this paper, has a number of recommendations on dealing with legislators and public officials as part of library advocacy.

They can be summarized as follows:

- Develop continuing relationships with legislators and public officials at all levels. National policies and national budgets can have an effect on regional, provincial, and state policies and budgets, and all these policies and budgets can intersect with local policies and budgets.
- Begin with the legislators with a record of supporting libraries. A good advocacy campaign will be prepared to do detailed research into the public policy positions

and statements of relevant politicians. It is important to build a base of support among those who are already on record as supporting libraries and education in general.

- Be prepared to provide officials with relevant information, position papers, etc. Legislators cannot be experts on every issue and need to be informed about the salient issues involved in a library campaign. Such papers and information must be brief, easily understood, and to the point.
- Deal with one issue. Library advocates, in speaking to legislators, should concentrate on the single message of the campaign and communicate that message as directly, clearly, and concisely as possible. Politicians are very busy people and cannot be expected to be able to react positively to more than one issue at one time.
- Take advantage of informal networks. Politicians, like most of us, prefer to deal with people they know.

There will be, in the group assembled to work on a library advocacy campaign, individuals who have friendships with, or political connections to, or shared memberships in other organizations, or any one of a variety of direct or indirect connections to public officials. Such pre-existing relationships can be very beneficial in choosing the individuals who will carry the message of the campaign to relevant officials.

- Communicate by all means available. Though personal visits to officials are probably the most efficient manner of communication, the modern world offers us many other communication media: letters, e-mails, fax messages, telephone calls, telegrams, and communications via web sites. The medium selected should be the one that has the most impact and gives the best chance of the message being read and understood. As always, all communications should be as brief as possible.

Advocacy materials.

An effective library advocacy campaign will involve a variety of materials. These include posters, book marks, messages on web sites, buttons, and banners—all the paraphernalia involved in a modern political campaign. Apart from the fact that these materials are dedicated to a cause—the promotion and support of library services—and not to the election of individuals, library advocacy campaigns have a lot in common with, and a lot to learn from, political campaigns. They never have the monetary resources or access to media that political campaigns enjoy, but they have the great advantage of being affirmative rather than negative and, because of that, often enjoy the support of a wider range of people.

Summary.

Library advocacy consists or organized action to gain support for libraries, to promote libraries, and to present library issues. It is, at heart, political, in that it is concerned with the allocation of resources, particularly monetary resources. To be successful, library advocacy must be

carried out in an organized planned manner and must be coordinated by leaders and leadership groups. It must also involve as wide a range of community members and groups as possible and be modern and sophisticated in conveying the library message to the media and to public officials. Library advocacy can learn a lot from the techniques of modern marketing, opinion polling and political campaigns.

Thank you.

¹. Available at the ALA website at <http://www.ala.org/ala/advocacybucket/libraryadvocateshandbook.pdf>