



HEALTHY,
SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITIES

Leadership Brief: Leadership Roles for Library Trustees

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

This Leadership Brief highlights the essential roles library trustees play in guiding, shaping and supporting the 21st century library. It focuses on how passionate and committed trustees help establish the library's place in the community, ensure that the library stays connected to changing community needs and interests and generate support for the library's long-term future.

OVERVIEW: Library boards of trustees carry out advisory, governing and strategic responsibilities to ensure that the library operates from a solid and trusted foundation. The scope of trustee responsibilities varies depending on the library's governance structure and is usually established in bylaws, local code or state law. Governance roles may include hiring and evaluating the library CEO, reviewing and adopting the annual budget and monitoring and assessing library performance.

While these governing functions are important to library success, trustees have the greatest impact when they work outside the boardroom as visible, knowledgeable and passionate advocates for the library. Spontaneous connections in non-library settings, passionate commitment to the library every day, visible support for the library and its CEO and sustained and proactive advocacy on behalf of the library provide the greatest value and the most promising results.

Regardless of structure, library trustees are most effective when they:

- ▶ Create a strong partnership with the library CEO that is built on trust and open communication
- ▶ Advocate for the library regularly and in diverse settings throughout the community
- ▶ Keep their ears to the ground to identify opportunities, needs and concerns in the community
- ▶ Understand the breadth of what the library does in order to be a well informed and credible voice, while leaving day-to-day management to library staff — “noses in, fingers out”

“As the library has become a more visible, vital part of the community, library trustees must also be more visible and more connected to what's going on in the community.”

— Keith Simmons, Board Chair, Nashville Public Library



URBAN
LIBRARIES
COUNCIL

TRUSTEES GOVERNING ROLES

- ▶ Hiring and evaluating the library CEO
- ▶ Reviewing and adopting the annual budget
- ▶ Monitoring and assessing library performance
- ▶ Succession planning to ensure leadership continuity
- ▶ Participating in strategic discussions
- ▶ Conducting the affairs of the board at regularly scheduled meetings

FIVE STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ROLES

The following sections highlight strategic leadership roles for the 21st-century library trustee and provide examples of how trustees carry out each role.

Library Trustee as Advocate

The trustee's advocacy role is broad and overarching. It includes raising the library's profile among decision makers and community stakeholders, showing how the library supports community priorities, supporting specific library and program needs and keeping the library and its work visible in the community. Successful advocacy grows out of broad knowledge about the library mission, goals and programs combined with a deep passion for the library as an essential anchor institution and a champion of equity, inclusion and democracy.

Examples of ways trustees carry out their advocacy role include:

- ▶ Communicating with confidence and passion about the important role the library plays in the community in diverse settings rather than only in library-specific meetings
- ▶ Becoming familiar with the range of library programs and services to be able to answer questions and speak with authority
- ▶ Interpreting the library for local leaders to demonstrate how libraries support leadership and community priorities
- ▶ Interacting with local leadership individually and as a group to strengthen connections and address specific issues

- ▶ Wearing a library hat at all times to become known as someone who is connected to, knowledgeable about and committed to supporting the library
- ▶ Building public awareness of the library particularly among audiences who tend to fall out of the library's natural reach
- ▶ Participating in meetings where library programs and priorities are being discussed and bringing the library into key conversations
- ▶ Writing letters and communicating with decision makers in support of specific library priorities and needs in partnership with the library CEO to ensure consistent messages
- ▶ Embracing advocacy for the library as an ongoing, front-line trustee responsibility

Library Trustee as Visionary

Working closely with the library CEO, trustees help craft and support implementation of a long-term vision that will strategically position the library in the community. A range of social, economic, environmental and technological trends have influenced the services, direction and long-term 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 long-term support.

Trustees help shape and implement the library's long-term vision by:

- ▶ Engaging in strategic conversations about the library's future
- ▶ Paying attention to and sharing local trends with the board and staff to assess their potential impact on library services
- ▶ Encouraging and supporting innovation, creativity and risk-taking by the library CEO
- ▶ Listening to the community to identify emerging interests and needs to get ahead of the curve
- ▶ Talking about the library vision and strategic plan to increase public awareness of library capacities, services and value as an essential 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

Library Trustee as Connector

Trustees help expand the library's impact in the community by networking on behalf of the library and serving as a bridge between the library and community priorities. Drawing on their knowledge about the library mission, services and capacities, combined with their professional and community connections, trustees can attract and engage new library users, supporters and champions. Importantly, those connections can open doors and ensure that the library is involved in community decision making.

Trustees carry out their connector role by:

- ▶ Promoting the public library as a resource that has expertise and capacity to support current and emerging community priorities
- ▶ Attending events as a library representative
- ▶ Recommending library leaders for positions on nonprofit/government boards and commissions
- ▶ Connecting with organizations that do not typically work with the library as possible partners on specific library programs
- ▶ Moving casual contacts to meaningful relationships through sustained and consistent engagement
- ▶ Identifying people who have community influence and/or special expertise who might be good library resources
- ▶ Attracting new people to library leadership roles to ensure the board reflects the community that the library serves

As public libraries have increased their capacity to support broad community goals in education, economic development, entrepreneurship, race and social equity, digital inclusion, healthy communities and more, creating connections that strengthen the library's value proposition requires systematic and strategic outreach.

Examples of community connections that help broaden the library's impact include:

- ▶ Local elected officials — e.g., the mayor, city council, county executive, county commissioners
- ▶ School district leaders — e.g., the superintendent of schools, board of education chair

- ▶ Higher education leaders
- ▶ Key players in the entrepreneurial ecosystem
- ▶ Technology professionals and vendors
- ▶ Workforce development and job services groups
- ▶ Major regional employers
- ▶ Local media and communications experts
- ▶ Philanthropic leaders
- ▶ Local business leaders — e.g., bankers, real estate brokers, financial/investment planners, retail owners

Library Trustee as Financial Steward

While direct involvement in budget development and financial oversight varies based on governance structure, all trustees serve as stewards through their knowledge of and commitment to maintain the library's long-term financial health. Trustees carry out this leadership role by:

- ▶ 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 proposition to community leaders, residents and stakeholders
- ▶ Knowing the library's current and future financial needs

CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBRARY TRUSTEES

- ▶ Dependable — shows up when needed
- ▶ Passionate — driven to make a difference in the community
- ▶ Proactive — actively engaged in the community and the library's role
- ▶ Innovative — open to change and new ideas
- ▶ Inquisitive and curious — interested in and knowledgeable about community issues
- ▶ Collaborative — team player; operates from a foundation of trust
- ▶ Good communicator — comfortable with high community visibility

- ▶ Actively participating in fundraising efforts with guidance from and in partnership with the library CEO
- ▶ Developing a clear outreach strategy for fundraising 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 potential funders

It is important to separate the relationship-building and fundraising processes so that it doesn’t look like all relationships are about money. However, successful relationship building that brings key stakeholders closer to the library will contribute to successful fundraising efforts.

Library Trustee as Team Player

Trustees are individuals with a commitment to the library’s success and members of a board with responsibilities for guiding, advising and governing the library. It is important to give equal attention to both roles. As members of a board, trustees work together to carry out governing and advisory roles, assess customer input, encourage innovation and creativity, participate in thoughtful and strategic discussions about opportunities and challenges and support the library staff. As individuals, trustees leverage their personal and professional interests, expertise and connections to raise the library’s profile in the community and support the library’s vision.

Connecting the group and individual trustee roles will increase the board’s influence and credibility. For example, cataloging individual connections, developing coordinated outreach plans, sharing successful outreach and fundraising techniques and monitoring results will strengthen the library’s position in the community and ensure sustained effectiveness.

Trustees carry out their team player role by:

- ▶ Participating in all board activities
- ▶ Investing in communications to strengthen relationships with other board members and library staff
- ▶ Supporting team-building efforts to increase board effectiveness

- ▶ Participating in orientation, training and professional development activities to enhance trustee effectiveness
- ▶ Bringing expertise from other professional roles to the work of the library board to strengthen its collective capacity
- ▶ Speaking regularly on behalf of the board as a community resource
- ▶ Working in partnership with other trustees on outreach and fundraising where multiple contacts will increase the likelihood of success
- ▶ Identifying with the board of trustees as a team

STRENGTHENING THE 21ST CENTURY LIBRARY

Trustees are essential to long-term library success. Their ability to connect with the community, work closely with staff, identify emerging community challenges and broadly advocate for the library contributes to stronger, more successful libraries.

As with any volunteer commitment, the work can be time consuming, but trustees say the benefits are powerful. The rewards come from being part of an essential institution, strengthening the library’s role in the community, connecting people throughout the community to the opportunities offered at the library and contributing to the library’s long-term success.

The **Urban Libraries Council**, founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. For more information, visit urbanlibraries.org.

The Urban Libraries Council thanks the following individuals for contributing to this Leadership Brief:

- ▶ **Tammy Baggett**, Director, Durham County Library
- ▶ **Sandra Chambers**, Trustee, Durham County Library
- ▶ **Phillip Harris**, Trustee, Durham County Library
- ▶ **Melanie Huggins**, Executive Director, Richland Library
- ▶ **Janet Hutchinson**, Board Chair, Calgary Public Library
- ▶ **Kim Johnson**, Chief Executive Officer, Tulsa City-County Library
- ▶ **Michael Lambert**, City Librarian, San Francisco Public Library
- ▶ **Kent Oliver**, Director, Nashville Public Library
- ▶ **Avnish Mehta**, Board Chair, Calgary Public Library
- ▶ **Bill Ptacek**, Chief Executive Officer, Calgary Public Library
- ▶ **Keith Simmons**, Board Chair, Nashville Public Library