Who's the BOSS: Building Joint Value into a Student Advisory Board

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Abstract:

Is it possible to create a student advisory board that significantly benefits both the students involved and the library itself?

The library literature on student advisory boards focuses primarily on the mechanics of assembling and moderating such a board, but tends to elide strategies for utilizing student input after the meeting. In planning a new student advisory board, the Library focused how the group could contribute tangible value to the Library, while also empowering students to have ownership over a library improvement project of their own invention.

The Board of Student Stakeholders (BOSS) includes representatives from a variety of student governance groups, including undergraduate and graduate students. The purpose of BOSS is to function as a forum for specific student input on library services, policies, collections, spaces, programming, and technology. This model has dual objectives: To have students provide user experience information on current library initiatives, as well as to design, propose, and implement a project that improves student experience within the Library. The paper suggests concrete strategies for assembling an effective student advisory board, setting a jointly beneficial agenda, and turning student input into library action.

Background

  The Honnold/Mudd Library at the Claremont Colleges serves the seven schools of the Claremont University Consortium, five undergraduate liberal arts colleges and two graduate institutions. For many years, the Library has had a standing advisory board of faculty members, known as the ABLP (Advisory Board for Library Planning), who give guidance to the Library in matters of collections, programming, and services. However, there was no analogous group for students to provide feedback. In order to provide the Library with a consistent means for gathering student input, the Board of Student Stakeholders (BOSS), was founded in 2013 by the Instructional Design Librarian, Dani Brecher Cook, and the Communications and Programs Specialist, Kate Crocker.

Literature Review

  There is relatively little library literature published on academic libraries' student advisory groups, as noted in Dorney (2013), particularly noting the lack of "explorations of how libraries are translating feedback from their advisory boards into relevant change, how they are measuring their advisory boards' success, and how much status or authority they are imparting to the board." Extent library literature on the topic, such as Deuink & Seiler's book (2009), tends to focus on the practical matters of student boards, such as recruitment and activities, rather than how to determine value of the board to both the students and the library. Scharf, Doshi & Fox's recent ACRL conference paper (2015) enumerates a number of best practices for student boards, drawn from their own experiences, as well as business and non-profit literature. The current paper answers Dorney's (2013) call for a student advisory board model that perceives students as stakeholders and "solicit[s] feedback directly from their users and use[s] that information to bring about change."

Program Structure

  In designing the structure of BOSS, Cook and Crocker had two main goals: one, to provide the Library with a representative sample of student users and non-users to serve as a standing focus group for Library issues; and two, to give the student group agency in making suggestions about improvements to library services, collections, and programming that would be taken seriously by library administration. These dual goals work together to provide a framework so that both the students and library staff can derive value from the group's existence.

  BOSS recruits students directly from the student governments of the seven schools each year. The students who serve on the group are appointed by each student government's president or chair, and the students serve for a term of one year. In the annual e-mail requesting student appointments, the BOSS facilitators explicitly ask for "a diversity of viewpoints on the Board (age, disciplinary area, etc.); please consider these aspects in making appointments."

  The group meets six times per year, with each meeting broken into two parts. The first half of the meeting is set aside for presentations from library staff who have current or upcoming projects on which they would like student input. The library staff members work with the two group facilitators to create questions that seek specific student feedback. At the end of the year, the facilitators check in with the library staff members who spoke over the course of the year, and report back to BOSS on how their input was used in a project, or to explain why it was not

incorporated into a project plan. This is meant to close the loop and ensure that the value of student input for these projects is visible.

The second part of the meeting involves the proposal of a year-long project for the group. Beginning from the first meeting of the year, the students begin brainstorming a small library improvement project that they would like to sponsor. Over the course of the fall, with the assistance of the two group facilitators, the students create a proposal for the project to present to the Dean of the Library, who sets aside a small annual budget for the group. The students then work on implementing the project in the spring, with the intent that all projects will be completed before graduation. For additional detail on the program structure, please see Appendix 1. BOSS Charge.

Results

Recruitment for BOSS has been successful for its three years of existence. By explicitly asking for students with a diversity of majors, years, and library experience, each year's group has included students representing humanities, social sciences, and STEM, as well as including at least one non-library user each year. In an exit survey administered to BOSS members at the end of academic year 2014-15, two students suggested adding two library student workers to the Board, in order to bring in an additional student perspective.

Over 50 percent of the students on the Board attend each meeting, but it is usually only the first meeting of the year that includes full attendance. In the 2014-15 exit survey, some students requested that mandatory attendance at meetings be expected of BOSS members, to ensure that each school has representation in library decision making. This was an unexpected result, as it requires additional commitment from students, who we had assumed would prefer more flexibility.

Every department in the Library has now taken advantage of the existence of BOSS to discuss at least one project with the group. Topics have included: the Library strategic plan, the Library's new discovery system, artwork in the Library, exam hours and services, the student worker program, digital spaces in the Library, and outreach to campuses for Library events. In the 2014-15 exit survey, students (n=5) indicated that they found the Library responsive to their concerns, with an average rating of 4, on a scale of 1-5, where 1 equals "not responsive at all" and 5 equals "extremely responsive."

The Board has now undertaken three annual Library improvement projects, involving various departments. In 2013-14, the group sponsored solar lights for the exterior patio seating, to allow students to continue studying outside in the temperate Southern California evenings. In 2014-15, the group sponsored the purchase of a variety of device chargers and portable outlets for loan, to alleviate the demand for electrical outlets during high-use times in the Library. This past year, 2015-16, BOSS sponsored additional services during exam weeks, including therapy dogs and stress-relieving massage. There are a number of other ideas that are consistently raised each year, such as lap desks to provide additional study space during exam time and laptops for long-term loan. These suggestions continually demonstrate the need for additional space and technology resources for students, and have been communicated to the relevant departments for consideration outside of the BOSS sponsorship.

Overall, student representatives report that they feel more informed about the Library and that their campus's requests are taken seriously. One student reported that "We made real changes and impact to the library community," while another stated that "each session was something new and didn't feel repetitive because of the different guests each time." Suggestions

for improvement include "finding ways to bring back what we are learning to our campuses in a more formal way," the addition of student workers to the Board, and providing additional opportunities for student members across campuses to work on Library projects, such as collection development.

Conclusions and Best Practices

Student members of the Board of Student Stakeholders (BOSS) report a high level of satisfaction with having their views valued and acted upon by library staff members. The existence and structure of the Board also allows for the Library to derive significant value from the students by having a mechanism for gathering student feedback in a timely fashion for new projects.

Based on student feedback, the Board will be making several changes in the upcoming year. Using the Library strategic plan as a guide, we have identified two major projects, the redesign of our reference service and the reimagining our popular reading collection, which could benefit from ongoing student input. These two projects will be added to the BOSS agenda each month as iterative projects—the project leads will report back each month and provide opportunities for students to get more involved with the implementation of their ideas. Additionally, student workers will be added as a constituency to the Board. Mandatory attendance and report-outs to student government are still under discussion.

Based on our experience with BOSS, we would recommend the following as "best practices" for establishing a student advisory board that provides value to both students and the Library:

- Recruit highly motivated and involved students, including those who are not library users
- Identify projects that would benefit from concrete student input, and only discuss those projects whose leaders are open to making changes based on student feedback
- Provide the Board with agency and a small budget to make an improvement to the Library with minimal intervention from Library staff
- Follow up on all discussions to let students know how their feedback was (or was not) used

Works Cited

Deuink, Amy, and Marianne Seiler. (2009). *The Library Student Advisory Board: Why Your Academic Library Needs It and How to Make It Work*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Dorney, Erin. (2013, February 6). "Students As Stakeholders: Library Advisory Boards and Privileging Our Users." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2013/students-as-stakeholders-library-advisory-boards-and-privileging-our-users/

Scharf, Meg, Doshi, Ameet, and Bob Fox. (2015). Successful Student Advisory Boards: Best Practices, presented at ACRL 2015, Portland, OR, 2015.

Appendix 1.

BOSS Charge

For the purpose of forwarding the Claremont Colleges Library's mission of "offering user-centered services, building collections, developing innovative technologies, and providing an inviting environment for study, collaboration, and reflection," the Instructional Design and Technology Librarian and the Communications and Programs Specialist propose to establish a CCL Board of Student Stakeholders (BOSS), effective January 2014.

Purpose

The purpose of BOSS is to function as a forum for student input on Library services, policies, collections, spaces, programming, and technology. The Board will increase student engagement with the Library, as well as provide new outlets for reaching the student population at large.

Structure

BOSS will be co-facilitated by the Instructional Design and Technology Librarian and the Communications and Programs Specialist. The Board will consist of a maximum of 14 members (1-2 student representatives from each of the 7Cs). Initially, the facilitators will approach campus student governance to appoint representatives, but then will open the application process to the campus as a whole, should spots be available. Students will be selected from a broad range of disciplinary areas and will represent the full range of class statuses.

BOSS will meet monthly, with a different focus for each meeting. Each department in the Library will have one meeting devoted to it; for example, one month, a representative from Collections will lead the discussion with BOSS about specific issues related to their department. The co-facilitators will assist with developing discussion topics and facilitating the meetings. At the end of each academic year, the co-facilitators will follow up with each department and write a report updating the Board what (if any) changes or improvements have been made, based on the Board's input.

BOSS will propose at least one library enhancement project each semester, to be approved by Library Administration. This will support student engagement and clearly demonstrate that the Library significantly values student input. Possible projects may include, but are not limited to: Adding to the collection, funding a speaker or event, purchasing additional equipment for student checkout, minor space enhancements, etc.

Functions

BOSS will provide user feedback on current library initiatives, as well as recommend student-focused enhancements for the Library. Additionally, members of the Board will serve as ambassadors and advocates for the Library, including services and collections, across the 7Cs.

Budget

BOSS will operate on a minimal budget. An annual $1200 budget, to provide food for approximately eight meetings per year, is requested.

Additionally, funding will be request on a project proposal basis (please see the Structure section). For this initial semester, project funding will not exceed $3000. Formation of the Board is not contingent on this funding.

Review Process

Initially, this charge will be in effect for eighteen months, until Summer 2015. At that time, the charge may be revised, based on feedback from the first semester of the Board's existence. After the initial review, this charge will be in effect for two years. The effectiveness and purpose of BOSS will be reviewed in Spring 2017, and this charge may be revised at that time.