

University of Louisville

## ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

---

Faculty Scholarship

---

Winter 2024

### Case Study: Improving Student Advisory Board Engagement

Anita R. Hall

University of Louisville, [anita.hall@louisville.edu](mailto:anita.hall@louisville.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

#### Original Publication Information

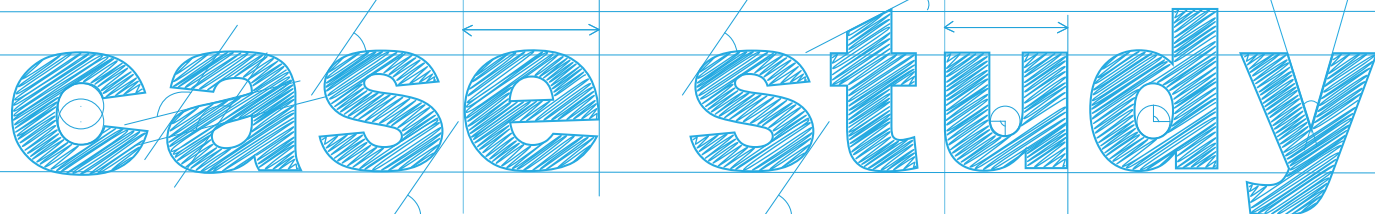
Hall, A. R. (2024). Case Study: Improving Student Advisory Board Engagement. *Kentucky Libraries*, 88(1), 8–10.

#### ThinkIR Citation

Hall, Anita R., "Case Study: Improving Student Advisory Board Engagement" (2024). *Faculty Scholarship*. 945.

<https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty/945>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

The words "case study" are rendered in a blue, hand-drawn, sketchy font. The letters are filled with a fine, cross-hatched pattern. The text is set against a background of light blue horizontal and vertical lines, with several arrows pointing to specific parts of the letters, suggesting a design or construction process.

# IMPROVING STUDENT ADVISORY BOARD ENGAGEMENT

ANITA R. HALL ASSESSMENT & ANALYTICS LIBRARIAN, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE LIBRARIES

## INTRODUCTION

After two pandemic-impacted academic years, the University of Louisville's Libraries Student Advisory Board (LSAB) was starting to feel stagnant. Meetings that had previously included hands-on activities, lively conversation, and free food had settled into the virtual meeting doldrums. Attendance was down and conversation felt stilted, despite the librarian facilitator devoting additional time and effort to preparing for each meeting. In an effort to improve engagement among the group and better understand the continued relevance of advisory groups in the current moment, the author undertook a series of interviews with other advisory group facilitators. Results from these interviews were used to make a series of changes to the LSAB's operations, which led to increased participation and engagement among the members.

## 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. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, student advisory groups became much more widespread. Despite their popularity during this period and seeming continued prevalence, literature on best practices with these groups from the past decade is minimal.

Benefiel et al. outline the 1996 establishment of a student advisory committee at Texas A&M University and advocate 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) provides practical guidance to libraries looking to establish a student board. In a 2013 article, Dorney provides an overview of the benefits and insights that student advisory boards can provide. By the mid-2010s as these groups continued to proliferate, Doshi et al. and Lindsay et al. refer to them as a valuable tool for both library assessment and outreach. In a 2022 paper based on this same set of interviews (Hall), the author discusses efforts towards increasing diversity and inclusivity among student advisory boards in libraries.

## INTERVIEWS

Ten interviews were conducted with academic librarians from nine states, working at a range of institutions. These included private universities with around 1,500 students to large R1 institutions with around 36,000 students. The interviews were semi-structured to allow conversation to flow as naturally as possible. However, specific topics were addressed in each interview, which included:

- Background information on the interviewee's 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

Interviewees stressed the importance of building trust and strong relationships between group members and facilitators. This was generally agreed to be essential for encouraging openness and engaging conversation at group meetings. Of particular importance for building trust is the concept of “closing the loop,” or ensuring that the library responds to feedback and addresses concerns. Demonstrating this responsiveness early in the process of working with a group establishes trust even if requests or issues cannot be addressed at that time. Interviewees overwhelmingly agreed that it was better to give a disappointing response to concerns than for them to be perceived as ignored.

A second strategy frequently mentioned to encourage engagement is general relationship building with group members. Taking the time as a facilitator to get to know board members individually or in smaller groups is beneficial to building trust. During meetings themselves, effective strategies included allowing the group to discuss and set their own norms around privacy and confidentiality and offering group members a variety of ways to provide feedback including nonverbal options. This helps accommodate different personalities and preferences, and can include options such as drawings or photos, brainstorming time before sharing responses, and giving time for group members to provide feedback asynchronously or anonymously – particularly when topics are sensitive.

Additionally, interviewees acknowledged that the types of students who volunteer for library advisory groups are typically busy and often juggle competing priorities. It can be challenging to make the library group a high priority, but it was helpful to give students a sense of ownership over the board and its work. Among the strategies that interviewees used were giving students leadership roles in the group, allowing them to help with setting topics or priorities, and even planning an event or project for the board.

Experiences working with advisory boards during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic were mixed, but almost all facilitators reported leading virtual meetings for at least some period of time and shared the highs and lows of this experience. It was overwhelmingly agreed that facilitating remote meetings was challenging and that engagement decreased during this time period. However, many interviewees reported that offering remote meetings created participation opportunities for students who would not previously have been able to attend or commit their time, including students in

fully online programs.

## IMPLEMENTING CHANGES

These interviews were conducted during Summer 2022 and the library made changes based on these results for the upcoming academic year. These efforts took several forms, and the overall goal was to increase engagement, create more connections, and build a sense of ownership among board members. Our goals were to increase opportunities for remote participation, create deeper connections with students serving on the board, and giving students ownership over the group.

In order to facilitate participation from a wider variety of students, we utilized recently acquired teleconferencing equipment and planned to host all-hybrid meetings moving forward. While in-person attendance always exceeded virtual, we had at least one virtual attendee at every meeting during the year. When planning discussion topics and activities for the group meetings, participation options for virtual attendees sometimes required creativity, such as switching to a tablet when walking around various physical spaces in the library. One other perk of hosting all meetings in a hybrid format was the ability to record meetings, so that the facilitator did not need to take notes during the session and could be more engaged in conversations.

Our board typically meets three times per semester, but we chose to cancel one of our Fall semester meetings and instead the facilitator set up individual

or small group coffee chats with members. This allowed the facilitator to get to know the students in more depth and get feedback on topics of interest to the libraries in a smaller and more intimate setting. The cost of purchasing beverages for these meetups did not exceed the amount that we typically spend on catering for our full-group meetings.

We made two primary changes to give students more ownership over the group. First, we created a role for a student Chair or Co-Chairs. As this was the first year for this role, the facilitator spoke directly with some of our longer-serving members to gauge their interest in serving and was able to find two volunteers. The group then elected the two volunteers as co-chairs at the start of the year. At the end of this first year, new chairs were elected to serve the following year, which will continue going forward. The chairs collaborated with facilitators from the libraries to develop agenda topics and activities, as well as advise on logistical questions about meetings.

The centerpiece of our ownership effort was a process of proposing and selecting a project for the board to sponsor. This



Figure 1 - LSAB “Shark Tank” Proposal Selection



Figure 2 - “One Book” Reading & Resource Series

was designed to be fun and involve personnel from throughout the libraries (See Figure 1). Faculty and staff who were proposing projects attended a spring-semester board meeting to give quick, three-minute project pitches using a standardized slide deck followed by two minutes of Q&A from Board Members. At the following month's meeting, Board Members discussed their options and voted for a winning project. Their selection during this first year was a One Book reading and resource series (See Figure 2). Board Members and facilitators alike found the process enjoyable, and we are working to implement the One Book project during the 2023-2024 academic year while also planning to conduct a new round of project pitches and selections during the spring.

## RESULTS

Our efforts to reinvigorate the Libraries Student Advisory Board at UofL have thus far proven successful, resulting in better attendance from board members as well as engaging conversations and thoughtful insights about projects. During the 2022-2023 academic year, we experienced higher attendance than prior to the pandemic. This was particularly notable towards the end of the academic year, when attendance would typically start to wane – we continued to have eight or more attendees at meetings. Adding student chairs and seeking their input on agenda items resulted in interesting topics of discussion that libraries staff would not have come up with on our own, as well as helpful recommendations about communication with members.

While we are still in the process of implementing our board-selected project and it remains to be seen whether the project itself

will ultimately be a success, the process of choosing the project and making implementation decisions with the group has been fun and informative in unexpected ways. As often happens in focus group settings, allowing the discussion about project options to flow naturally led to deeper insights about how students perceive the libraries and our spaces, services, and collections. It was particularly revealing to hear them discuss the financial aspects of the various proposals and how they perceived the relative costs.

## DISCUSSION

Before undertaking this project, we had begun to question the value of continuing to work with a student advisory board. There was little to no recent research on best practices for working with these groups, and anecdotally it seemed that many libraries were choosing to discontinue them. Interviewing other advisory group facilitators provided valuable and actionable ideas for improving attendance and engagement with our longstanding board. We have continued the changes that we put in place for academic year 2022-2023 into the current year. Overall, we are pleased to have found working with our advisory board remains beneficial and hope that this increased engagement continues into the future.

Anita R. Hall  
University of Louisville  
[anita.hall@louisville.edu](mailto:anita.hall@louisville.edu)

## WORKS CITED

- Benefiel, Candace R., Wendi Arant, and Elaine Gass. "A new dialogue: A student advisory committee in an academic library." *The Journal of academic librarianship* 25.2 (1999): 111-113.
- Deuink, Amy L., and Marianne Seiler. *The library student advisory board: Why your academic library needs it and how to make it work*. McFarland, 2009.
- Dorney, Erin. "Students as stakeholders: Library advisory boards and privileging our users." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2013): 1-6. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2013/students-as-stakeholders-library-advisory-boards-and-privileging-our-users/>.
- Doshi, Ameet, Meg Scharf, and Robert Fox. "The Role of Student Advisory Boards in Assessment." *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 11(2), (2016). 34-38 <https://doi.org/10.18438/B8NP76>
- Hall, Anita Riley. "Towards a modern, inclusive library advisory board." *Proceedings of the 2022 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment*, November 1-3, 2022, virtual conference, edited by Angela Pappalardo, Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2023.
- Lindsay, Beth Daniel, et al. "Optimizing Library Services-SAGs to the Rescue: Student Advisory Groups in the Library." *Against the Grain* 28.1 (2016): 29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7287>