

1.6.1 Library Advocacy from the U.S. Perspective

Barbara J. Ford

*Director, C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson Center for International Library Programs and Mortenson Distinguished Professor,
Member of IFLA Governing Board,
Past President of the American Library Association*

What Is Library Advocacy?

Library advocacy is the act of voicing your support for libraries and encouraging others to do the same. We cannot assume that others know about the contributions libraries are making to our communities. Library advocates speak up and work together to deliver the library message to everyone needing to hear the message. This group includes legislators who fund libraries; the media that can help in telling the library story; and community, campus and school officials who control support for library services and can help shape public opinion.

The library advocacy message to be delivered may vary but in the U.S. we focus on educating our communities about the importance of libraries and librarians in an information society. Library advocates often speak about the importance of free and equitable access to information in a democratic society.

Why Advocate for Libraries?

Technology has greatly enhanced library services and programs but has also raised some questions about the value and role of libraries. Advocates might seek to increase library funding to expand services using these new technologies or address issues relating to the Internet and other electronic resources. They might campaign for new or remodeled buildings to meet changing user needs or to accommodate expanded literacy and educational programs.

Library advocates know that libraries and librarians are essential for the development of an information literate nation where people can effectively identify, find, analyze and use information for education, economic development, and to improve the quality of life of communities.

In a world where we all are bombarded with information it is important that libraries and librarians learn to be effective in getting their message across and building coalitions to support the important work that we do. Without effective advocates, libraries will not receive the support and visibility they need to obtain the resources to carry out their essential functions.

Who Are Library Advocates?

Library advocates are needed throughout communities including in schools, neighborhoods, universities, and legislative bodies. Anyone can be a library advocate. Library directors and library associations need to develop and coordinate ongoing advocacy efforts with defined roles for various groups.

Friends of libraries groups in U.S. academic, public and school libraries can play a valuable role as the voice, eyes and ears of the library. Spending the time to build and support a Friends group can be

good use of the time of library staff. Legislators and other funding agencies are often influenced by these groups. Friends of Libraries U.S.A. <http://www.folusa.org/> provides services and networking for friends and trustees. They have developed publications on advocacy and fundraising and provide training and consulting to assist libraries in advocacy efforts.

Public library trustees -- whether elected or appointed -- generally have political and community connections that can greatly benefit the library and influence as public officials representing the best interest of the library and their community. Library advisory committees in university or school settings can play a similar role and should be part of any advocacy effort.

Library users are key to advocacy efforts. These users might include business people, students, faculty, and parents, among other groups. Testimonials and stories about how the library has helped individuals and groups can be very helpful and get attention from decision makers. Knowing your users and their needs is essential for good advocacy initiatives.

Institutional and community leaders such as school principals, college presidents, union leaders, business leaders, and elected officials should be part of any advocacy effort. These leaders can get messages out to the highest levels in a community.

Librarians and library staff, at work or outside of work, can be important advocates as they help library users. Library leaders must be certain that staff understand their role in advocacy and provide them with the training and support they need to be strong advocates.

Vendors and businesses who work with libraries can be real assets to an advocacy program. They know what libraries can do and may have business and community connections that can be of real benefit to the library. They might also be of assistance in funding major advocacy campaigns or in developing materials that libraries can use for advocacy.

Potential advocates are often just waiting to be asked to speak out in support of libraries. They may have used libraries to assist their family or business or may simply think libraries are important for strong communities and a strong democratic society. Do not hesitate to ask potential advocates to speak out for libraries. Anyone can be an effective library advocate!

Advocacy in the American Library Association

Advocacy is a priority for the American Library Association (ALA). The vision is that ALA is the leading advocate for the value of libraries and librarians in connecting people to recorded knowledge in all forms and the public's right to a free and open information society. Strategic objectives to make ALA and its members the leading advocates for libraries and the library profession include:

1. Increase support for research and evaluation to provide evidence regarding the value and impact of libraries.
2. Increase public awareness of the value and impact of libraries of all types.
3. Increase public awareness of the value and impact of librarians and library staff.
4. Mobilize, support and sustain grassroots advocacy for libraries and library funding at local, state, and federal levels.

5. Increase collaboration on securing legislation favorable to libraries.
6. Increase public awareness of the importance of intellectual freedom and privacy, and the role of libraries in a democracy.

<http://www.ala.org/ala/ourassociation/governingdocs/aheadto2010/adoptedstrategicplan.htm>

ALA carries out a number of programs to support these strategic objectives with a focus on increasing public awareness, mobilizing grassroots advocacy, and securing legislation favorable to libraries.

Several ALA programs work to secure legislation favorable to libraries. The ALA Washington Office has staff who are experts in working with legislators and knowledgeable about library issues. They work with ALA members and other library associations to mobilize grassroots advocates. National Library Legislative Day in Washington, D.C. is a two-day event in which people who care about libraries participate in advocacy and issue training sessions, interact with Capitol Hill insiders, and visit congressional member offices to ask Congress to pass legislation that supports libraries.

There are several other ways for librarians and library supporters to get involved as library advocates at the federal level in the U.S. These include an electronic legislative action center, a federal library legislative and advocacy network that helps relay information to reach out to the state level, and a library business alliance where industry leaders can help to sustain and foster growth in libraries. More information is available at:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/washoff/gettinginvolved/gettinginvolved.htm>

Library Advocacy Now! training programs and advocacy institutes are held at ALA and other library meetings. The programs help attendees develop messages to use in advocating for libraries and to build coalitions with others who can support their efforts. These projects often are co-sponsored by divisions of ALA such as the Young Adult Library Services Association and the Public Library Association or state chapters. Campaign sponsors include organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Friends of Libraries USA, the Association of American Publishers, 3M and the H. W. Wilson Foundation among others. <http://www.ala.org/ala/issues/issuesadvocacy.htm>

National campaigns such as the “@ your library” project developed by ALA bring visibility to libraries. Within ALA divisions develop materials useful to specific types of libraries.

The Public Library Association (PLA) developed a campaign with a tagline to support the goal of making the library card the most valued and used card in every wallet. "The Smartest Card. Get it. Use it. @ your library." Many public libraries participated by using Smartest Card art, posters and resources during Library Card Sign-Up Month. PLA also is developing a new toolkit to showcase the value of public libraries based on demonstrated impact, research and stories. <http://www.ala.org/ala/pla/plaissues/issuesadvocacy.htm>

The Association of College and Research Libraries has a number of projects to support academic libraries. These include the @ your Library Toolkit for Academic and Research Libraries and manuals on strategic marketing for academic and research libraries. An award for best practices in marketing academic and research libraries using “@ your library” recognizes and promotes excellence. <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/issuesadvocacy.htm>

An electronic newsletter featuring advocacy information and success stories has been developed by ALA.

A number of electronic discussion lists including ones on idea-sharing and updates on ALA promotional activities, on “@ your library”, on ALA news releases, on important legislative information, and on library advocacy provide opportunities to share ideas and keep informed about what is happening in library advocacy.

A variety of materials designed to complement and enhance local marketing and advocacy efforts have been developed including posters, downloadable art, sample press materials, sample ads, message sheets and other resources. <http://www.ala.org/ala/issues/issuesadvocacy.htm> The Library Advocate’s Handbook is available online at <http://www.ala.org/ala/advocacybucket/libraryadvocateshandbook.pdf> and includes sections on speaking out, dealing with the media and dealing with legislators among other sections. Libraries and the Internet Toolkit was developed to assist librarians in educating the public about how best to use the Internet. <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/iftoolkits/litoolkit/Default2338.htm> Publications like Quotable Facts About American Libraries provide good information that can be used when the media calls or you need to have quotes to use with decision makers. <http://www.ala.org/ala/issues/toolsandpub/quotablefacts/quotablefacts.htm>

Accomplishments and Success Stories from U.S. Library Advocates

Advocacy activities in libraries and the American Library Association have made many of those people working in and with libraries better prepared to be effective library advocates. The traditional image of librarians is changing as we learn the importance of being effective advocates, are educated with the skills and resources we need for the role, and reach out to build coalitions with others who can work with us in these advocacy activities. The ALA website includes press coverage of libraries and some success stories from various types of libraries. Keeping track of our successes is important as we planned for expanded advocacy efforts in the years ahead.

Advocacy in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

Advocacy has become an important focus for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).

The Campaign for the World’s Libraries is a public education campaign co-sponsored by IFLA, ALA, and library associations around the world to speak loudly and clearly about the value of libraries and librarians in the 21st century. The three core messages are that libraries are changing and dynamic places, libraries are places of opportunity, and libraries bridge the world. A number of national library associations around the world have joined the campaign. <http://www.ifla.org/@yourlibrary/index.htm>

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in 2005 provided the impetus for more advocacy activities in IFLA. One ongoing project is the IFLA Success Stories Database, which includes stories from libraries around the world. These types of stories are very useful in talking to decision makers and libraries from all parts of the world are invited to submit their stories. <http://www.ifla.org/III/wsisis.html>

The new IFLA Strategic Plan for 2006-2009 includes advocacy, and the IFLA Governing Board has assigned advocacy the highest priority level. The goal is to create an advocacy capability at IFLA headquarters and develop an advocacy campaign focusing on the following themes: freedom of access to information and free expression and its implementation through library and information services; equity in the area of copyright; information flow among rich and poor nations; intellectual property; inclusion in the areas of information access in an information society; and building information/knowledge societies.

<http://www.ifla.org/V/cdoc/IFLA-StrategicPlan.htm>

As part of this initiative IFLA will consolidate advocacy work at IFLA headquarters with a focus on freedom, equity and inclusion and building on the success at WSIS and the work of done on freedom of access to information and free express and copyright and other legal matters. Funding is being sought from foundations for advocacy staff at IFLA headquarters.

Advocacy for libraries needs to happen at every level – local, national and international. With strong networks and the sharing of successes and approaches libraries around the world will be stronger and librarians will become more effective advocates with networks of supporters willing to speak up for libraries and the vital services they provide to communities.