

Robert V. Labaree

Purposeful engagement

Improving the effectiveness of your campus-wide library committee

Within the academic governance structure of many colleges and universities, there exists a campus-wide committee devoted to the library. The responsibilities of these committees vary depending on the shared decision-making culture of the institution, but most are unique because they oversee a single academic unit rather than specific areas of faculty rights and responsibilities or the operations of a large administrative division. An informal sampling of library committees at various institutions¹ reveals that most have an advisory role to the dean of the library, the faculty senate, and/or the provost. Some have membership composed entirely of faculty, while others include academic staff and student leaders. Almost all include senior leadership in ex officio roles including, in many cases, the dean of the library. If managed effectively and leveraged to support the mission of the library, these committees can serve as a valuable link between librarians and disciplinary faculty and between librarians and campus administrators. However, if not managed effectively, the committee can lack transparency, possess no clear direction, and fail to make meaningful progress on issues of substance. With this in mind, below are recommendations for maximizing the effectiveness of your campus-wide library committee.

Advocate for diverse faculty representation. Diversity is important and can be measured in many different ways. For example, if members are only full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty, then their understanding of the library, its priorities, and any recommendations they promulgate will likely express this mindset. Membership should reflect diversity in faculty rank, disciplinary background, and terms of employment. Most importantly, membership should align with institutional goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that there are voices that can speak to the experiences and concerns of underrepresented faculty. Diversity is also strengthened when there is a regular rotation of members; static membership can lead to static thinking. However, librarians should resist encouraging faculty to serve because they express a nebulous love of the library. Faculty do not serve on the Handbook Committee because they love the handbook; they serve because they want to lead the process of creating policies that protect faculty rights and responsibilities. Faculty should have a clear interest in the library, but the most valuable members are those who cast a critical eye toward the library and, thereby, force us to be introspective about what we do and why we do it.

Include students. The University of Southern California (USC) Libraries Committee does not include student representation. I have always found this to be problematic. Resist the temptation to assume students will only complain about trivial or inconsequential matters.

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This undersells their desire to offer constructive criticism and genuine feedback. Without students, the validity of a library committee's work is diminished because it is the students, after all, who occupy our spaces, use our services, and rely on our resources in far greater numbers than most faculty. That said, university committees that include student representation can favor the privileged and the ambitious.² Therefore, advocate for the inclusion of historically marginalized students. They often benefit the most from the library's services and resources and, as with underrepresented faculty, their service on the committee can help amplify the voices of those who are often silenced and unheard.

Include librarians. If shared governance is to be a foundational feature of structurally empowered decision-making, then non-administrative librarians representing various operational functions should be included as members. For many years at USC, the absence of librarians contributed to ambiguity and indifference about what the committee was doing. This created a disconnect between the priorities of librarians and what the committee focused on. Librarian membership supports shared governance by discouraging reliance on top-down, hierarchical thinking and encouraging bottom-up collaboration and priority setting.

Promote transparency. A library committee should maintain a publicly accessible and up-to-date website where reports and other information can be found. Members should be open to answering questions, obtaining constructive feedback, and taking suggestions about topics that should be addressed. The committee chair should be invited to speak regularly at librarian governance meetings or give a presentation during a library-wide forum. Transparent lines of communication between the committee and the library community support mutually beneficial and more constructive forms of collaboration and idea sharing.

Be proactive in submitting agenda items. Agenda setting varies depending on the advisory role and reporting responsibilities of a committee. However, meetings should be more than just forums for inward-looking discussions, information sharing, celebration, or news about the library. Exploration of issues that impact the academic community must be an inclusive process. Therefore librarians should be proactive in recommending agenda items that uphold the library's goals of supporting student learning and faculty research.

Make the committee work for you! Many campus-wide library committees have overly broad charges that contain passive language, such as, oversee, suggest, manage, guide, monitor, etc. However, committees should do much more than act as insular places to brood over programs and services or debate granular, library-centric issues. An effective committee should be a collaborative, inclusive, and responsive decision-making body that focuses on long-range planning and forward-thinking approaches to examining critical issues that impact the entire campus community.

Purposeful engagement with your campus-wide library committee offers unique opportunities to pursue a clear and sustainable set of service-oriented priorities and outcomes and to model accountability between the library and the academic community. Active engagement can also support a culture of trust, transparency, and collegiality that raises the visibility of librarians as an integral partner in supporting the educational mission of your institution. These recommendations are intended to help realize these opportunities.

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Notes

1. “Faculty Senates on the Web,” USC Academic Senate, accessed August 10, 2023, <https://academicsenate.usc.edu/faculty-senates/>.
2. David A. Farris, *Understanding University Committees: How to Manage and Participate Constructively in Institutional Governance* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2020).