fact sheet #27
for Friends and Foundations
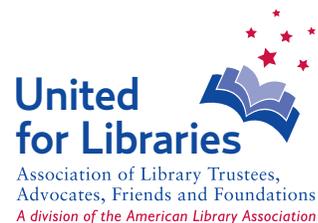
WHEN FRIENDS AREN'T FRIENDLY

Most Friends groups are indispensable to the libraries they serve. Sadly, though, some Friends groups get out of sync with their library, their mission, and their roles. When this happens, trust and goodwill evaporates and relationships break down. Some groups have disbanded over disputes that should never have happened in the first place, and there are library directors who hear about these stories and vow never to have a group of their own. The sad fact is, when the understanding of roles breaks down, the library suffers.

Though we normally hear stories of wonderful groups and their successes, we do sometimes hear from disgruntled groups and/or administrators who are in a conflict about what the Friends role is or should be. Typically problems arise because of the following issues:

Friends are secretive and unwilling to share their organizational and financial information with the library.
Friends don't invite the library's administration to their meetings.
Friends believe that because they raise the money, they should decide how it is spent.
Friends are withholding money for which the library has a legitimate need.
Friends are opposing library policy and/or direction.
Friends are giving their money to organizations or initiatives outside the library.
Friends have become "club-ish" and follow their own agenda vs. that of their mission.
Friends' officers don't turn over, and they begin to think of the money raised as their own.

In all the cases above, both a revisit to the group's mission statement and a look at United for Libraries' role table "The Model Friends Cooperative Network" at http://www.ala.org/united/friends/orgtools and the United for Libraries Toolkits "The Expanded Model Friends Cooperative Network" and "Friends and Libraries: Working Effectively Together" (available to United for Libraries members) should help resolve the problems.

The typical mission of a good Friends group is to "support the library through fundraising and advocacy." This is a tacit agreement to also support the decisions of the Trustees and the library director. If this is not the case, then the Friends are not behaving as Friends. If the group cannot support the decisions of the Trustees and the library director, the group should disband. If an individual has a personal agenda that conflicts with library policy as determined by the Trustees, that person should resign.

In terms of spending decisions, the ideal model is one in which the library director presents the Friends with a wishlist from time to time in priority order, and the Friends provide funding for that wishlist. Remember that people in the community join and give money to the Friends because they believe that money is going to support the library as determined by the library, not as determined by your group.

Libraries need Friends – now more than ever. They need Friends who are positive about the library and its direction, who understand their important role for fundraising and advocacy, and who stick to their mission to support the library.

Other helpful documents are "Guidelines for Giving" (Fact Sheet #23); "Sample Memorandum of Understanding" (Fact Sheet #26); "Library Support for Friends Activities" (Fact Sheet #27).

Updated and adapted from "When a Friend Isn't a Friend" by Sandy Dolnick.

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