It's Hard to Make New Friends: What to Think About in Creating a Friends of the Library Group

MERRILY E. TAYLOR

ABSTRACT
THE ARTICLE COVERS KEY ISSUES WHICH MUST be considered as a library begins to create a Friends group, from the group's basic purpose to infrastructure issues such as staffing, programs, and other operating costs. The author makes the case that the success of a Friends group depends on the care with which these issues have been identified and addressed.

INTRODUCTION

As more and more libraries are urged by their boards or parent institutions to address ever-growing operations and collection needs by finding new sources of support, library administrators often contemplate the creation of a "Friends of the Library" group or, in some cases, the revitalization of a Friends group which exists but which is nearly moribund. While it is tempting to move in this direction, especially when senior administrators or eager volunteers are strongly encouraging the idea, initiating a Friends of the Library is not a trivial matter and a number of issues must be explored thoroughly before the final decision is made. Taking the time to contemplate these matters may risk a delay in the formation of a productive group but, in the long run, will enable the Friends to function smoothly and, in the worse case scenario, may prevent the creation of a group which the institution is poorly positioned to support.

The first question to ask in considering the formation of a Friends group is, What does the library want from a Friends group—what will be its primary role? Although it is sometimes taken for granted that Friends

groups are created primarily as another venue for fund-raising, this is not always the case. Indeed, one distinguished library director wrote: "The most successful organizations seem to be those that have had a broad charter from the beginning. Their founders have stressed close personal interest in the library; its general growth and effectiveness; articulation of its needs and problems to others; and not mere 'money-getting'" (Rogers & Weber, 1971, p. 129).

DEFINITION OF PURPOSE

Broadbased or not, forming a Friends group without articulating a clear sense of its purpose(s) may lead to trouble and confusion down the line, especially if other units in your organization—e.g., the Development Office—view the Friends as either rivals or tools. It is for this reason that some institutions—such as the library at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota—initiated their Friends group by first creating a constitution and bylaws, clearly setting out the group's purposes (Haeuser, 1986, p. 25).

A Friends group that has been created with a strong fund-raising orientation will need to make choices accordingly: membership guidelines may be shaped to limit involvement to "good prospects" or events designed to attract individuals with significant amounts of disposable income. A Friends group which is created primarily as a fund-raising entity may be more likely to be administered outside the library, for example, by the institutional development office—something which makes perfect sense if the group is, indeed, mostly about fund-raising. The critical point here is that, before establishing a Friends group which is intended to facilitate fund-raising, it is essential to: (1) recognize the fact and its implications, and (2) consult with other "stakeholders" in the organization who may legitimately see development as their own concern. The clear purpose of the group should be understood by all, and guidelines established for Friends operations within the institution's general development policy and procedures. At Brown University, for example, the Friends may engage in direct fund-raising drives only in certain approved "windows" during the fiscal year, so as not to compete with critical university priorities such as the annual fund drive. It is important, moreover, to make a clean distinction between Friends-sponsored events, which may not always have immediate fund-raising aims, and events which are specifically intended to cultivate potential donors or generate new gifts. A failure to define the difference between the two may lead to hurt feelings in the Friends group when, for example, what appears to be a "Friends event" is limited to "A-List" donors only.

Whether one wishes to create a fund-raising group, or a broader-based Friends group which will generate new ties with the local community or cultivate book collectors over the long term, it is necessary to decide if

what the library wants from the Friends is feasible in the institutional set-
ting and if it is worth the effort that must be put into the Friends. As
Elaine B. Smyth and Robert S. Martin (1994) wrote in an article in *Rare
Books and Manuscripts Librarianship*: "Many state universities are located in
communities where the spirit of volunteerism and the dedication of the
volunteers . . . greatly outweigh their ability and inclination to make ma-
jor financial gifts . . . . Friends groups may be built successfully on the
foundation of volunteer assistance, rather than concentrating on the
moneyed few" (p. 26). True, but in that setting it would be futile to make
the Friends the centerpiece of an institution's major fund-raising cam-
paign; it would be far more productive and cost-effective to work with the
institutional development office to cultivate a handful of key donors. Con-
versely, in a high-pressure urban area where individuals may find it easier
to write a check than to give of their time, defining a Friends group as
"the moneyed few," and expending considerable effort to raise the group's
perceptions of library needs, may make strategic sense.

     Even if the library's primary goal is to create a general support group,
"it is extremely important to look at a . . . library's local situation" (Smyth
& Martin, 1994, p. 27), assess the possibility of community interest care-
fully, and think about alternatives for achieving the ends one might envi-
sion for a Friends group. Assuming that the library has the resources to
underwrite the Friends, can the community support such a group? For
example, is there a reasonable base of local alumni or other "logical" sup-
porters who may take an interest? Critical to the initiation of the effort is
finding the right core group to work with. The library needs people with
strong local contacts, the willingness to commit time, organizational skills,
and agreement with the library's general approach (such people might
not necessarily know much about the library or its collections, at least at
first; they may have given a gift to the library, met the head of special
collections in a social situation, or used the library extensively as an un-
dergraduate). In other words, in looking for a core group for the Friends,
one does not need to restrict the search to people who are "interested in
the Library" per se. An enthusiastic well-connected nucleus of supporters
can attract key individuals, generate excitement, and put together an ap-
pealing group which others in the community will want to join. If these
volunteers are willing to put in the time, they can also keep Friends' activi-
ties "perking" in the early days when resources may be limited but when a
high profile is critical.

     If a realistic analysis does not reveal a true core of local support, there
are other mechanisms besides Friends groups for gaining outside assis-
tance. In the late 1960s, the Wheaton College (Massachusetts) Library
perceived the need for an outside body which could serve as a sounding
board on library issues and as an advocacy group with the college admin-
istration. The creation of a Friends group was considered, but the idea

was set aside when it became clear that Wheaton's geographic location made it unlikely that individuals would journey from Boston, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island—the two nearest cities—to attend library events in Norton, Massachusetts. In addition, Wheaton College (then a school for women) did not have enough alumnae resident in the area to constitute a viable local Friends infrastructure. As a result of this analysis, Wheaton librarians decided to proceed with a small Visiting Committee made up of carefully selected alumnae, donors, friends, and librarians from other institutions. The Visiting Committee, which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, meets once or twice a year, provides useful advice to Wheaton librarians and administrators, and fulfills many of the goals originally foreseen for a Friends group with a good deal less overhead.[1]

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROUP

Once an institution has defined the primary purpose of a proposed Friends group, other decisions remain. Some questions may be dictated by the group's primary purpose; others apply regardless of that purpose. One key decision in libraries with a strong special collections presence is whether the Friends group is truly "The Friends of the *Library*" or is rather "The Friends of *Special Collections.*" This decision will affect recruiting of members, sources of support, programs, the involvement of other library units and, in some cases, the locus of the Friends' administration within the institution. Many Friends groups, especially in older institutions, began as clubs for bibliophiles and presently retain a strong association with the book arts and with special collections. Consequently, Friends groups often originate in special collections and have a natural affinity for that area. For some special collections, indeed, support from a Friends group is critical to the survival of the department since the parent library—having defined special collections, rightly or wrongly, as "non-core"—provides little or no institutional funds for collections, equipment, or other daily needs. In this case, an attempt to "broaden" the perspective of the Friends to incorporate other library needs and issues, however compelling in the abstract, may be met with resistance from the head of special collections, the library director, or quite likely the established Friends membership.

Even if the Friends are not to be seen as an economic lifeline for special collections, it is well to recognize that, in most libraries, the majority of Friends events are built around exhibitions, unique acquisitions and gifts, and "name" collections—in other words, the business of special collections. This being the case, if a library is striving for a true "Friends of the *Library*," some thought needs to be given to the building and maintenance of a broadbased group. The Brown University Library has had some success with programs which appeal to the general public as well as to the bibliophile; since the Friends of the Library of Brown University was reconstituted

in 1983, programs have included a magic show, a visit to the recently reno-
vated university observatory, a lecture by the Dean of the Graduate School
on the library's role in graduate education, a Brown parent talking about
her work as an author of children's books, and several programs demon-
strating the library's latest technological capacities. A series of programs in
1997/98 was built around a special theme, "Friends talk to Friends," and
offered members of the Brown faculty—who are themselves frequently
Friends members—the opportunity to speak about their own work and re-
search. Programs of this nature, while not outnumbering those with a
bibliophilic theme, serve to attract a wider audience and signal that the
Friends group is not only for book collectors.

Another question to be explored is how closely the Friends group will
be affiliated with the library. Many Friends associations are fundamentally
library-driven, with programs and directions established by librarians work-
ing with volunteers. Some Friends groups are independently chartered
and run with limited direction from the library. Still others, primarily fund-
raising-centered, are administered by another institutional entity, often
an institutional "foundation" or development office. There is no single
"correct" approach; the strategy chosen depends entirely on the direction
the institution wants to take, and what is likely to work best given the local
environment. If the Friends group is not to be library-administered, how-
ever, it is critical that the library retain a strong voice in planning and
policy. Although Louisiana State University has had good luck with a Friends
group that "largely runs itself," Smyth and Martin (1994) confirm that the
Friends board "takes direction from and includes the Dean of Libraries,
the Assistant Dean of Libraries for Special Collections, and the Assistant
Dean of Libraries for Collection Development as *ex officio* members" (p. 26).
An effective library voice in Friends planning should avoid the problems
reported by some institutions, namely Friends groups which become inef-
fective through volunteer help which fails to deliver or, conversely, puts in
too much time working on projects which benefit the library tangentially if
at all.

Even if the central development office has administrative responsi-
bility for the Friends and the group has fund-raising as its primary respon-
sibility, there may be some stress between the library and the development
office when it comes to the role of the Friends. Development offices may
welcome a Friends group as a natural base for fund-raising but, at the same
time, may not have much interest in the non-fund-raising aspects of the
group, such as the long-term cultivation of collectors or the strengthening
of community ties. For very legitimate reasons, development operations
tend to be focused on the latest campaign goal and on the bottom line,
whereas with Friends groups, "some entertainment events are strictly for
members and there is no attempt to raise money" (Rogers & Weber, 1971,
p. 129). In addition, the development office may see time invested in the

Friends as having too small a "return," while the library may have a much longer-term point of view. Finally, it is important to remember that the strength of Friends groups arises, to some extent, from the degree to which the group feels closely connected to the library, its collections, and its staff; a Friends group with nominal library involvement, whether run independently or by a development office, will suffer if its programs become pro forma and too much like those offered by a host of other local groups.

STRUCTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Once one has considered the primary role(s) of the Friends and the particular requirements imposed by the local environment, it is time to think about infrastructure. What (and eventually, how much) is likely to be required to support the Friends as an organization—mailings, record keeping, accounting, programs, membership drives, publications, space, and so on? It is difficult, of course, to estimate costs in the abstract, but the library must develop a rough idea of what it plans to do with and for the Friends; this understanding will help determine the feasibility of forming a group and will also affect potential dues, as well as the sort of programs which will be possible. As Rutherford D. Rogers and David Weber (1971) wrote in their still-relevant *University Library Administration*, "the breadth of the membership, the objectives of the Friends, the dues structure, and the perquisites of membership are interrelated" (p. 129). In considering this question, contemplate: What will the Friends expect from the library? What are the benefits of membership? What is envisioned as the "hook" which will draw new members? Will programs and publications be an incentive to membership? If so, how will the library fund these? Food, drink, and facilities cost money, and some speakers will expect a fee. If the library is that of a private institution, will Friends expect, and be given, access to the library? Most of these decisions have associated costs and, indeed, political aspects which must be considered—for example, who handles library access questions in the institution and how will that individual or department perceive offering this privilege to Friends, especially if there is an existing charge to "outside borrowers?" Is it likely that people will join the Friends, not to donate funds or to support the library in other ways but simply as a way to gain access, and is that desirable, given the prospective Friends purpose?

In this stage of planning, one must not forget the far-from-inconsequential issue of administrative support. A productive Friends group requires nurturing, encompassing everything from up-to-date membership records to someone "who knows my name when I call." Some Friends groups make it a point to send out birthday cards to members or flowers when there has been a death in the family. Programs will not be well attended unless invitations go out promptly and are both accurate and

enticing. All of these things require ready and skilled support, and it is dangerous to assume that this can be provided by the already-harried staff in the director's office or by volunteers who may be devoted but unable to devote the necessary time at the critical moment. A fledgling Friends group may be able to get by for awhile with "borrowed" or episodic clerical help, but in the long run it is well to recognize that the group will need steady reliable support and plan accordingly. This is a case where the group's very success creates an increasing workload and increased expectations for businesslike administration and support.

How will the library support the Friends group while it's being developed? Is there enough money to pay for start-up costs? Can the institution absorb the necessary work with existing staff? Even if one assumes that the Friends will eventually be self-supporting, it may be several years before income begins to offset costs; in fact, this may never happen. Can the library afford the Friends? If not, where can start-up and continuing support be found? At Gustavus Adolphus, "the Development Office has, from the outset . . . assumed the overhead costs of organization, communication, and public relations" (Haeuser, 1986, p. 27). On the other hand, at Brown University, a generous gift from a donor covered start-up costs for the group. The continuing costs of staff support, events, publications and other membership-related operating costs are covered largely by Friends dues and other Friends gifts with the library subsidizing expenses in excess of the budget. The institution makes this investment with the full knowledge of the university administration and the Friends board, because overall the Friends are an excellent investment; their gifts to the institution over the years, in cash and in kind, have far exceeded Brown's costs in supporting the group. Whatever the final approach, it is important to consider a Friends cost/benefit analysis early in the planning stage. Smyth and Martin (1994) put it well: "Will the efforts of library staff be repaid? Any development venture, particularly one involving fund-raising events, risks failure, but if the event succeeds, will the payoff be worthwhile?" (p. 27).

Finally, in the realm of infrastructure, it will be essential to determine who, within the library, will have the primary day-to-day administrative responsibility for the Friends. In most libraries, administrative responsibility for the Friends is centered in special collections for a number of reasons: as noted above, Friends members are often book collectors; many Friends events are centered around significant gifts, unique holdings, exhibits, or other activities usually the province of special collections; and finally, special collections librarians, as a result of their routine responsibilities, frequently have valuable experience in working with alumni, donors, and others who may be key elements in a successful Friends group. Centering the Friends group in special collections need not mean, of course, that the group's benefits are restricted to that area. As Rogers and Weber (1971) write:

> No matter how broadly based a Friends organization may be in theory,
> it is likely to concentrate on rare and special collections . . . the
> challenge to the director is to channel this enthusiasm to areas of
> major need, thereby building strengths that could otherwise not be
> achieved, or through such channeling to release general funds that
> may be used to benefit other, more prosaic and less attractive but
> nonetheless essential parts of the library's program. (p. 130)

If a Friends group is *not* to be administered through special collec-
tions, the most likely alternative home for the group is the director's of-
fice or, if one exists, the unit responsible for library public relations and
fund-raising. Just as it is important for Friends groups which are adminis-
tered outside the library to have strong involvement and guidance from
the library, so too it will be important for special collections to be closely
involved in a Friends group which is directed from another department.
To the extent that many Friends programs originate around special col-
lections, special collections staff must be involved in planning, especially
when a proposed program—for example, an exhibit—involves many weeks
of preparation.

A responsible administrator must be in charge of the Friends, but
librarians considering the creation of such a group need to recognize
the critical role of the library director as well. The library director, when
interested and involved, brings to the group the broadest organizational
perspective, the ability to commit institutional resources to the effort,
contacts with senior institutional officials which may be critical, and the
"cachet" which is associated with the position, something which is im-
portant to many Friends. The director's active involvement, moreover,
signals to the Friends that their efforts are important to the library, ap-
preciated, and recognized. Rogers and Weber's (1971) conclusion on
this point is that: "A successful Friends group will not succeed without a
great deal of highly personalized attention of an important official of
the library . . . although . . . [either the head of special collections or the
director] may assume the primary responsibility, both of these officials
are certain to be deeply involved if the group is to be successful" (p. 129).

CONCLUSION

A Friends of the Library group can be extremely useful to a library in
ways both tangible and intangible. Friends provide gifts in cash and in
kind, plan programs to highlight and showcase the collections, and serve
as "roving ambassadors" in the community for the library's strengths as
well as its needs. A handful of Friends are often substantial donors to the
institution. But Friends provide other support as well, as outlined in the
Spring 1999 edition of *Among Friends*, the newsletter of the Friends of the
Library of Brown University. As the University Librarian wrote:

> thank you simply for being there. Not all of our Library staff members are able to get to Friends events, but I wish more of them could, so as to experience, as I do, your sincere interest and support for what we do. It is wonderful to see both your fascination with our collections and your respect for those of us who have devoted our lives to libraries, and to this one in particular. As with all service operations, we occasionally experience days when the challenges before us seem overwhelming and the struggle thankless. Because we have our Friends, however, we know at heart that the challenges can be met, and that the gratitude is real! (Taylor, 1999, p.1)

As librarians contemplate the creation of a new Friends group, however, it is important that they remember not simply what the Friends may do for the library but what the library owes to its Friends. The Friends deserve well-planned, lively, quality programs, and publications which reflect high standards and topics which will capture Friends' interest. They may reasonably expect some library "privileges" commensurate with the level of support they have provided. The Friends should feel that key library staff know them as individuals, and that their questions and concerns will be responded to promptly and cheerfully. And, at the most basic level, Friends must be assured that their membership records are maintained in a business-like way, that dues and donations are recorded expeditiously and accurately, and that they are recognized appropriately for their gifts. If a library can begin a Friends program with the assurance that the infrastructure for such support is in place—or that at least a plan for a Friends infrastructure exists—then it can be assured that its Friends group will be productive, supportive and, indeed, fun for all concerned.

NOTE

[1] The author is a member of the Wheaton College Library Visiting Committee and, as a member, heard this history recounted by the Wheaton College librarians.

REFERENCES

Haeuser, M. (1986). What friends are for: Gaining financial independence. *Wilson Library Bulletin, 60*(9), 25-27.

Rogers, R. D., & Weber, D. C. (1971). *University library administration.* New York: H. W. Wilson Company.

Smyth, E. B., & Martin, R. S. (1994). Working with friends of the libraries to augment staff resources: A case history. *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship, 9*(1), 19-28.

Taylor, M. (1999). A heartfelt thank you. *Among Friends: Newsletter of the Friends of the Library of Brown University,* Spring.