

For the Love of Libraries: Active Advocacy for Protecting Libraries

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With a constantly shifting economy, budget cuts are inevitable. Often times, the public library is first to suffer by cutting hours or cutting the materials budget that the library needs to keep up. It is important to support library groups by practicing advocacy for public libraries. There are many cases where advocacy campaigns have helped to save libraries from closing.

In 2003, the Maryland Public Library community (Division of Library Development Services) sent out a citizen poll via telephone survey. What they discovered was that people supported the library, not only were the responses overwhelming in number, but also surprisingly positive in nature. Out of a four grade system (A, B, C or D) “Marylanders gave public libraries the highest grade of A, numerically averaging 3.3 out of 4 statewide...” (Baykan, 2006). The responses they got from the survey showed that a majority of people believed that the library in their area had knowledgeable staff, the information they needed and viewed their library as a service as essential as their local school. A surprising majority of people believed that libraries helped people (young or old) to learn something and a similar number of people believed that libraries were a constructive use of their tax dollars. The survey proved to be a powerful tool for “not only for protecting funding, also to increase it” (Baykan, 2006). One of the most powerful tools in a library’s arsenal is the public need. These statistics showed just how important the libraries were to their communities, not just in one region, but also across the state. Using these statistics, the Library Development Services went to state legislatures to show that the citizenry both used and valued their public libraries. When attention is taken off of the library, extreme advocacy can be taken to ensure the safety of the library’s future.

One of the most unusual cases of library advocacy occurred in the small city of Troy, Michigan. In the height of the recession, Troy decided to make some cuts to their public spending. One of the most unfortunate victims of the cuts hit the wonderful Troy Public Library (Jaffe, 2012). Voting was held to increase taxes for the sake of the library, but the town continued to vote against the increase until the library was forced to consider closing. A proposal came to the table that “called for a 0.7 percent tax increase –enough to fund the library for 5 years” (Jaffe, 2012). Troy Citizens United (an anti-tax organization) opposed the proposal on anti-tax grounds. A new group called Safeguarding American Families surprisingly stepped in to support the opposition by proposing a book-burning party. Signs were printed, ads were placed for additional entertainment and social media network pages started appearing for the event, even a band was booked for the event. The people of Troy were outraged by the event drawing attention from local leaders and major media. The event was attacked violently until everything was revealed to be a hoax. Safeguarding American Families was a false group invented by a publicity agency to draw attention to the vote. The publicity stunt had been in support of the library by changing all of their messages to say “A vote against the library is like a vote to burn books” (Jaffe, 2012). The conversation had shifted from discussions of taxes to a discussion about libraries and by drawing attention to that fact, the library survived. Not everyone appreciated the ruse, but the end goal of saving the library had been achieved through a powerful ad campaign.

Beyond the small-scale demonstrations for individual libraries, there are groups (both professional and informal) that fight to protect libraries. Private groups care about their public libraries, but sometimes libraries can be threatened within larger bills and go

unnoticed if not carefully watched. The American Library Association has a recently developed office for library advocacy. The Office of Library Advocacy (OLA, 2013) works closely with Public Information groups, Public Relations office and other American Library Association groups in order to help better integrate library advocacy efforts into other offices. By working with public information groups, the OLA can keep track of libraries and see where libraries are in trouble. The site offers resources for generating an advocacy effort as well as other ways to get involved. It also offers an option to be alerted when there are advocacy “updates and legislative alerts of special interest to library advocates” (OLA, 2013). One of the most dangerous threats to library advocacy is not being heard. With online groups watching over them, libraries are protected from being forgotten. When libraries are in danger, advocacy groups like the OLA step forward and alert the public to the threat before the library falls into serious trouble. The strongest part of any library’s advocacy campaign is it’s ability to be heard and in the age of social media, it’s easier to be heard more than ever.

It is often advocacy that keeps libraries from suffering. Sometimes, the most powerful tool at a library’s disposal is the raw data supporting the library from citizens. Shock and awe campaigns can also draw attention to the library’s financial plights, but these campaigns are not as popular. While both are extreme on opposite ends of the scale, both have proven effective in gaining support for libraries. Groups of people work to protect libraries from being forgotten by developing advocacy updates online so that legislation does not hide cuts for library funding in larger bills and lose libraries to anti-tax groups (such as the case with Troy). With groups like the Office of Library Advocacy, populations can be informed if their library is in trouble, and get resources to

develop their own advocacy plans to protect these invaluable institutions. Libraries are often one of the first institutions to get attacked when budget cuts lead to spending cuts in public areas. Sometimes, the safety of the library's future is put into jeopardy when money is tight in a local government. By fighting for libraries in influential and creative ways, citizens can actively advocate for the protection of that institution.

References

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