
Championing the library: involving students in development, advocacy and stock selection



Caroline Gale
*Library Liaison Manager
Library & Research Support
Division, Academic Services
Forum Library,
University of Exeter
caroline.a.gale@exeter.ac.uk*

At the start of the 2011–12 academic year, the library at the University of Exeter launched a new pilot scheme of student ‘library champions’. These students were expected to help us promote the library, to feed back on key issues and to spend a budget on library resources requested by their peers. The champions have proved to be a valuable addition to our service, giving us an instant focus group of students who are enthusiastic about library matters.

BACKGROUND/RATIONALE

The idea of the scheme came from the ‘Students as Change Agents’ project, run at the university.¹ Staff were asked for ideas to complement this scheme. I suggested a parallel set of library reps to be taken from the student body and to represent each subject; the reps would give us key contacts with each subject area to complement the system of staff library liaison officers already in place. At the time we were also looking for ways to improve student satisfaction with library resources and facilities. In the National Student Survey (NSS) students singled out the fabric of the libraries and the lack of core texts as key issues. A large-scale programme of building work has upgraded the fabric of all our libraries, but lack of texts was an issue that we found harder to address as all book budgets are devolved to academic departments. There were clearly budgetary pressures, but students were not getting enough of the right resources at the right time. In response, the university committed an annual

£250 000 of extra funding for taught programmes and gave this money to the library. This offered us a chance to purchase some ‘big ticket’ items that the current funding model prohibits, alongside the opportunity to try out some more innovative methods of spending. The University of Exeter prides itself on its student-centred services, and sees them as key to its recent naming as Sunday Times University of the Year;² this project reflects those values and has provided invaluable benefits in the student–university relationship.

SCHEMES ELSEWHERE

When I was setting up this project I looked for similar schemes run elsewhere: in the UK I found a mention of library ambassadors at Loughborough³ and Southampton Solent.⁴ Both these schemes recruited students and paid them for their time, with students acting as peer mentors, providing practical help to other students and (at Loughborough) developing campaigns to raise awareness of library services. This model is much more common in North America, where students are employed rather than asked to volunteer. The models in the USA and Canada vary – from the peer mentor focus at Emporia State University,⁵ to communications and participation enhancement at Eastern Washington University,⁶ to a particular database focus at the University of Waterloo.⁷ At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a Student Libraries Advisory Council was set up instead, providing a focus group to look at student needs and wants in relation to library services.⁸ I hoped that our own library champions would act in a similar way by providing a conduit of communication from the various student subject groups to the subject librarians, though I decided against council meetings of all champions in favour of regular meetings with their own subject librarian instead.

JOB DESCRIPTION

We decided to keep the job description simple, so we asked them to

- meet regularly with their subject librarian (once or twice a term) to discuss any issues that had come up in their subject area
- collate and communicate feedback on library services and resources when required
- act as a sounding board for library proposals
- promote the libraries to their fellow students
- spend up to £500 on library resources

They were encouraged to make as much of the role as they chose and we welcomed other ideas/projects they suggested.

In return, the students benefited from having the following:

- an opportunity to influence decision-making on library services
- skills development in advocacy, negotiation, budgeting and promotion
- a fast method of ordering library materials
- a role to add to their curriculum vitae
- a certificate acknowledging their input and references on request
- volunteer work that would help them complete the Exeter Award (a university achievement award, designed to increase employability)

We consulted the Students' Guild about the proposed scheme and they were very enthusiastic and keen to help with recruitment. It was agreed that library champion volunteers would be drawn from the ranks of the academic reps: students elected by their peers to sit on the college and department Staff Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs). As library issues are a standing item on the agendas, it was considered most appropriate that one of these students should serve as the library champion. I promoted the scheme to newly elected academic reps at their initial training day and focused the recruitment drive on final-year undergraduates and taught masters students who had completed their first degree here. My aim was to ensure that the champions had as much prior experience of library services as possible. We wanted to recruit a total of 22 champions at the Exeter campuses and seven at the Cornwall campus to represent the spread of subject areas on all sites. Many volunteers came forward: some subjects had job-share champions, whilst mini-elections were held in others. However, we were not able to recruit in all subjects, so our subject librarians took on the budget in these areas. Subject areas where it proved harder to recruit included engineering and drama, though we are not sure of the reasons for this.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF PATRON DRIVEN ACQUISITION

The most attractive element of the scheme to students was the chance to spend a small budget on library resources. Library staff have noticed a growing expectation that the library will carry



Library Champion

Want to comment on Library services?
Want to suggest a book for the Library?

Contact your Library Champion:
They can order books and
represent your views



Campaign poster

all the books a student needs for their course. Initially this was the expectation of international students, who may have such a service in their home country's academic libraries, but since the £9000 annual tuition fees were announced, there has been much debate on campus over what a student should be expected to pay for on top of that. Again, some libraries in the USA and Canada have encountered this expectation⁹ and put in place services to give the students what they want.¹⁰ The £250 000 of central funding allowed us to try out some more innovative purchasing methods; these included a standing order for all required purchase textbooks with the university bookshop, a patron driven acquisition (PDA) trial and a general book request scheme called 'I Want One of These'.¹¹ We allocated a total of £20 000 to the library champions, giving a basic budget of £500 to individual champions; in addition, we provided extra funds to subjects where student feedback highlighted real concerns over availability of texts. Many universities, including Exeter last year, have experimented with PDA, often with e-books in particular. However, our students

told us via focus groups and questionnaires that they still valued print and we needed to make sure we were still buying enough in the right format for them. Rather than just relying on usage statistics and reading lists, we wanted to involve students in the identification of key texts, allowing them to act when there weren't enough copies or if a particular new book would be useful to add to stock. Librarians at the University of Florida have already established the need to have a 'patron-centric' approach to library acquisitions¹² rather than rely on traditional methods, though Walters argues that PDA affects the quality of the collection and therefore could harm the overarching educational mission of the university library (p. 17).¹³ However, Barnhart discovered that allowing students a budget and involving them in book selection (in her case as part of a course on bibliography) generated more satisfied users and in itself acted as a positive way of marketing the library.¹⁴ We had the same results with the Library Champions Project: we received lots of positive feedback both from students and from the Students' Guild, leading to the perception of the library improving vastly over the year (as evinced by a huge leap in NSS results this year).

Champions took different approaches to the budget: some canvassed their peers widely via questionnaires, whilst others stood up in lectures to promote themselves and their role; others took a more statistical approach and requested lists of highly used texts, ordering extra copies based on those figures. In all cases, we asked the champions to sign off all orders with their subject chairs (chairs of the SSLCs) in order to ensure expenditure was monitored.

DID IT WORK?

Subject librarians found it a valuable scheme to be involved with: the champions were very engaged and quickly acquired a good grasp of the collection. The librarians also found that they developed a wider network with a particular group of students, which then made it easier to discuss other subjects. In some subject areas, the champions struggled when their peers were not so forthcoming with ideas and feedback, but the relationship with the subject librarian was valued and it raised awareness of information skills needs amongst the students and how the subject librarians could best address these needs. In some of the subjects without volunteers, the subject librarians asked for student suggestions for purchases, with mixed success. In the end, the

subject librarians used their discretion to spend if no suggestions were received.

As expected, we found that experience helped: one subject librarian worked with undergraduate champions at different stages of their university course: the final-year students were most well versed in university life and this helped them to fulfil their roles to a higher standard.

We used the group of champions as a sounding board for new ideas: they provided a valuable focus group that we could call on when contemplating new developments or wanting detailed feedback on a specific part of the service. Their responses were timely and well thought-out: some gave personal feedback and others made the time to canvass other students as well.

When asked at the end of the year, many of the champions reported that they felt empowered by the scheme: they felt valued by the university and able to act. They also said that they felt it was a very democratic way of using the money as it was their belief that students are the only ones who can really gauge what is needed in terms of library materials. Some cited community thinking as a benefit: knowing they were involved in the community of their subject and helping their fellow students. As we had hoped, others stated that the scheme had had a positive impact on their transferable skills:

The scheme has definitely challenged me and pushed me out of my comfort zone, but in a positive and constructive way. It has helped me to undertake tasks I would never have done before – speaking in front of lecture halls full of students, thinking of the best advertising methods for the scheme, representing students in meetings amongst my lecturers – all daunting tasks which have made me more confident in my own abilities.¹⁵

Although we had created a simplified order form, feedback from the champions suggested that some found the process of ordering quite time-consuming and occasionally frustrating, for example, when it was clear that fellow students were requesting books that we already had plenty of. This led to suggestions from the champions for more skills training for fellow students, which in turn has helped our subject librarians to run extra information skills sessions where needed. Overall, the benefits outweighed the frustrations and several champions suggested an increase in the budget for future years to allow them to do more.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The scheme has been so popular with academics and students that it has continued this year. Following student feedback, we have doubled the budget available to each champion to £1000 and we have again allocated extra money to priority subjects. We have also redeveloped our support materials, including providing a poster with a recognisable logo that can be customised for all champions to use to promote their role. The order form for library materials has been further simplified and champions are encouraged to use their online learning environment to collate purchase suggestions from other students. We have set up a closed mailing list in response to a suggestion that we provide some means for all the champions to consult with each other: this way they can share ideas/approaches, but we can also easily consult them simultaneously and start dialogue over library issues. With the growth of social media, it is likely that this group will migrate to Facebook in future, and the recent development of our library Facebook page will facilitate this.

The Students' Guild has developed the champions idea one step further and now encourages all subject chairs to sign up to a subject specialism: the idea is that these students will be involved in a wide variety of activities, from sitting on project boards to peer mentoring, focused around employability (for example), or assessment and feedback. There is a library specialism, which will give us another enthusiastic group of students to draw on and will complement the activities of the champions.

Overall the scheme has really enhanced not only the library's public relations but also students' skills, while also ensuring that students have more of the materials they want on the shelves. We are looking forward to this year's activities and to exploring how we can develop the scheme further.

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