

Forming a Friends Group: The Cameron University Library Experience

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Submitted by

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Introduction

Cameron University, a school with a full time equivalent student body of almost 5,000, is a multi-purpose institution whose main mission is to offer appropriate educational programs to Southwest Oklahoma residents. Cameron University's librarians expressed interest in forming a friends group when the Library's current director began work in July 2000. She took steps to gain knowledge related to the formation of such groups and to put that knowledge into action. Now the library has an established friends group that is supporting library services and resources.

Obtaining the Background Information

In order to chart a course of action designed to result in the creation of a support group, Library Director Sherry Young sought guidance regarding successful academic friends groups. Her knowledge quest was met when she received an Amigos Fellowship Award that enabled her to host and participate in a one-day workshop focused on the subject.

Tom Mendina, Assistant to the Dean of Libraries at University of Memphis and Coordinator of the Friends of Libraries USA academic initiative, facilitated "Building a Successful Academic Friends of Library Group" on the Cameron University campus in September 2001. As a result of Mr. Mendina's willingness to share his expertise, Dr. Young and other workshop participants acquired information relevant to the formation of a friends group.

During the course of Mr. Mendina's presentation, attention to practical considerations and motivation of members emerged as two major themes related to successful library support groups. Practical factors included availability of resources needed to start and maintain group activities and presence of top-level institutional support. Motivational considerations centered on the fact that friends group organizers and members should possess the desire to direct constructive energy toward group activities in order for those activities to occur.

Mr. Mendina's workshop provided detailed descriptions of practical and motivational considerations important to successful support group beginnings. Knowledge of those considerations prepared Dr. Young to initiate the group's formation.

Practical Considerations: Securing Administrative Approval and Start-up Resources

Sufficient regard for the importance of securing administrative approval and start-up resources proved central to the Friends of Cameron University Library formation process. The Library's Director took actions that succeeded in obtaining appropriate approval and needed resources, and the time invested in so doing proved worthwhile.

By focusing administrative attention on the idea of a library friends group, the Library Director secured appropriate administrative approval for the formation of such a group, as recommended by Mr. Mendina. Through written and verbal communication, she presented the idea of a support group to the University's Vice President for University Advancement and provided him information regarding Friends of Libraries groups. Invited to attend the workshop, both the University's President and Vice President for Advancement participated in the event.

Administrative backing, a Friends of Libraries in Oklahoma grant opportunity, and a few library advocates provided the resources needed to form the group. Cameron's Vice President for Advancement worked to secure Cameron University Foundation funds to host a start-up luncheon. The Advancement Officer also provided names of individuals who might be willing to participate in a steering committee, and a Friends of Libraries in Oklahoma grant supplied funds for brochure printing and distribution. A few committed individuals provided creative input that resulted in the creation of membership categories and a membership brochure.

Administrative approval and start-up resources proved important to the group formation process by providing initial financial support, identification of potential committee members, ideas and encouragement, and needed authorization. Attention to practical considerations related to administrative approval and start-up resources enabled formation of a steering committee and distribution of membership information.

Forming the Steering Committee with Motivation in Mind

As she initiated the group's formation, Dr. Young considered thoughts Mr. Mendina shared regarding the key role motivation plays in securing group membership and support. Regard to this concept guided her as she identified prospective committee members, made initial contact with those individuals, and communicated with them.

Dr. Young sought as steering group members those individuals who had expressed special interest in the Library. She believed she could encourage or motivate such individuals to participate in the formation of a Friends of Library Group. In hopes that personal contact would help generate motivation to participate, she contacted by telephone a few such individuals and invited them to a luncheon.

Infused with social and intellectual appeal, the lunch meeting generated interest in the project. Dr. Young provided information about the need for a friends group. She presented her positive vision of a Cameron University Library support group and invited those present to adopt that vision. Guest speaker and author Bob Burke spoke favorably about libraries, books, and writing. The fact that invitees shared similar interests sparked enthusiastic, motivational discussion. The experience of meeting others with similar Library interests, learning about the Director's friends group vision, and hearing an author speak about the importance of libraries in a relaxed environment succeeded in producing a "synergized" atmosphere that paved the way for the next step in the group definition process—formation of a steering committee.

Defining the Cameron University Friends Group

At a follow-up meeting, "start-up" committee members, some of whom were present at the luncheon, established Friends of Cameron University Library. They formulated membership category names and corresponding donation amounts, established member incentives, created a brochure design, and put forth ideas for further consideration. At this meeting, committee members enabled the Director to turn the friends group idea into a reality.

Moving Forward

Friends of Cameron University Library brochures are now available at the Library's reference desk and have been distributed to Cameron University full-time employees. Each courtesy card applicant receives a Friends application form upon receipt of the card. Cameron University Friends funds will be used to make possible an exhibit and accompanying lecture in the library this September, and Friends group members will receive special invitations to these events. As word about the group spreads and membership grows, financial and verbal support will help Cameron's librarians work toward the goal of maintaining and improving the library's high-quality services and resources.

Conclusion

Each library has its own unique story with regard to formation of a support group. Part of Cameron's unique story involved hosting a workshop on campus that provided librarians the information and confidence they needed to form a successful group. Regardless of how it is obtained, those who begin a friends organization must possess knowledge of certain key factors necessary to the formation of such groups. These factors include administrative support, start-up funding for advertising, and the assistance of individuals interested in organizing the unit and defining its membership categories and benefits. Once the work of forming a new support group is completed, members can focus on its maintenance and improvement.