

Building and convening an international advisory board for the library and academic technology in a startup university

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Introduction

New York University (NYU) Shanghai is the first Sino-US higher education joint venture university in the People's Republic of China. As part of the Global Network University in New York University, NYU Shanghai is an important portal campus for NYU students who wish to study in China. It opened in fall of 2013 with approximately 300 freshmen: 150 are international students from the USA, Canada, Europe, India, Mexico, etc., while the others are from various parts of China. This hybrid student body makes the university a very diverse community.

In fall 2014, the university enrolled a further 150 international and 150 Chinese national students. The academic technology and library advisory board, known as ATLAB, was formed to address the concerns of students, faculty and staff regarding library or academic technology services. From fall 2014 to spring 2015, ATLAB met three times per semester. The article will describe the role of ATLAB in identifying the needs of international students by looking at discussions held during meetings. It will also present some strategies for starting and managing an academic advisory board.

First meeting: from ideas into actions

Initially the group consisted of two students, two faculty members, a staff member from the academic technology services, a librarian, and a staff member from the academic resource center, which offers tutoring services for students in writing, math and other subjects. The group met once a month to discuss library or academic technology matters, policies, services and resources. As it was very new, other librarians and library staff attended the meetings occasionally, and were viewed as 'guests' at the ATLAB group.

At the first meeting, students discussed concerns about the temperature in the library and about how the library tended to get full. Other members raised questions about student rooms available outside the library, and we all wanted to find out how students can book them for study purposes. At the next meeting members shared their findings with the group: i.e. that students can book rooms outside the library; they were encouraged to inform their peers of this. The library contacted facilities services and arranged for the temperature to be adjusted.

One of the most important topics in the ATLAB meeting was the library's opening hours. The faculty, including the students, wanted to know why the library only opened from Monday to Friday. On being informed that the library did not have enough staff to provide weekend services, they suggested an extension to opening hours during the week to accommodate those who attend classes that run into the evening. The librarian discussed this with the library team and a month later, evening opening started. It was helpful for planning future weekend workshops and events to learn that students study in the library on Sundays, but not on Saturdays. One of the great advantages of working in a new startup university is there is the opportunity to roll out new services and policies in the most efficient way possible. Having this advisory board allowed the library to make decisions that expanded its services to accommodate all users.

Representatives of ATLAB asked the academic technology services, which operate at the other side of the building, about new equipment loans, policies and services. In later meetings, the staff member from this academic technology services addressed concerns about e-book services, programs and other resources on campus.

Library workshops and how they would be scheduled was an important discussion topic. The faculty supported these initiatives and gave input on their development. The representative of the academic resource center offered collaboration in the facilitation of these programs. Students commented

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that it could be difficult to attend, given their heavy work schedules, and the importance of timetabling workshops in the evenings or late afternoons was recognized. We discussed teaching some workshops in Chinese-Mandarin since there are approximately six hundred Chinese students in our university. As they may not be familiar with all the concepts of intellectual property, scholarly research, plagiarism and citation management tools, we felt it may be useful to hold a session or two in Chinese for them. However, the faculty emphasized the importance of students being immersed in the academic culture through the medium of English, since it is the official language of the school. The library therefore decided to offer workshops only in English.

We discussed how to promote these programs. The librarian talked about some of the library outreach tools in social media: Facebook and WeChat. Facebook can be used to disseminate information. The university has access to such a social media network in China through a virtual private network. WeChat is popular in China, with over 300 million followers; it allows users to send texts, video or voice messages and images and updates to users and group. Most if not all students in NYU Shanghai use it since it is free and simple to use. The library maintains a WeChat page to promote events. Our student representatives have let others know about this since it is the simplest and quickest way to communicate.

The last topic was about university events and programs. Since NYU Shanghai is a very new university, many programs and events are organized hastily. It was important to hear which events the student representatives knew about and which were popular or disorganized. They mentioned that there would be a 'hackathon' event at NYU Shanghai, where teams of students collaborate to create a piece of programming software, application or device. About 250 people had signed up for this event, which was open to outsiders. We decided to re-schedule our own programs to avoid clashes.

Post-first meeting: from discussion to policy

After the first meeting, the library convened and discussed several matters such as hours of service, facilities, room reservations, public services, library instruction, and upcoming university programs. Having a focus-group-like advisory board branded the library as an important service provider that is concerned with customer needs.

In the next five meetings, ATLAB played a major role in discussing the university's e-books and students' difficulties in accessing them. It was agreed that the academic technology services team would support students in handling their inquiries with the library. Student representatives shared their peers' concerns about using e-books and some faculty also mentioned how difficult it was for them to access them, to take notes or to read. As a result we created resource guides such as free note-taking apps and programs and e-book workshops.

The discussions opened the members' eyes to the fact that ATLAB works through collaboration, open dialogue and communication and synergy. We received support from the academic resource center to present these opportunities to students in their workshop sessions and tutoring services. Our meetings were brief and productive, and members knew what to do next and how to support the library and academic technology services. By having a diverse group of members, the library and academic technology services benefit from their voices and support; we learned how to plan and strategize better to accommodate all user needs.

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Strategies for organizing or convening an advisory board

The first important role for convening an advisory board is scheduling. Members will have very varied weekly schedules, so it is best to communicate with them well in advance to suggest possible times, dates and venues. One possibility is to create a 'doodle' page using the free online scheduling tool, doodle.com.

It is important to nominate someone to take minutes, or agree to rotate the role minute-taker. For ATLAB the convener took most of the minutes and sent them to all the members. The minutes were deposited into a wiki page – a central resource portal for the library staff and helpful for anyone who missed a meeting or joins the board later on.

The end of each semester's final meeting provides an opportunity for some members to step down and for new members to join. Our international students in NYU Shanghai have been eager to serve on this board because they feel that they want to support the services and resources coming from the library and academic technology, and they can put their volunteering services into their resumé or curriculum vitae.

Conclusion

Convening a new advisory board as a sounding board or focus group of students, faculty and staff is an important way of getting to know more about customers; the meetings and discussions can offer helpful guidance, synergies and ideas to support, enhance or brand your library. We find that having students on the board is an effective way to get to know and respond to their needs. Their inputs and contributions are valued and they can be advocates in promoting upcoming services or resources. It is ultimately up to the convener to manage discussions and address any concerns coming from the group. Having an advisory board presents numerous opportunities to build relationships with these patrons and to enhance services and policies that are reflective of their needs.

The library at NYU Shanghai certainly benefited from these monthly exchanges where faculty and librarians developed new ideas for mutual collaboration and support; academic technology staff and students were able to address the issues of e-book services for international students. Most importantly, the discussions were the joint effort of students, faculty, librarians and staff who serve the needs of the academic community.

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