



The Value of a Library Advisory Board in a Research Library

By

Rosa Liu

rosa.liu@nist.gov

Group Leader, Research Library and Information Group

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Background

Academic, research, and public libraries often have library advisory boards consisting of user communities that advise them on resources, services, and priorities. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) library's Research Library Advisory Board (RLAB) is an example of this. The RLAB was established in 2002 nearly one hundred years after the library was originally founded. The Research Library is one of three groups within the Information Services Division (ISD) — along with the Electronic Information and Publications Group and the Museum and History Program— that support the research efforts of the 3,000 scientists and engineers at the NIST campus located in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

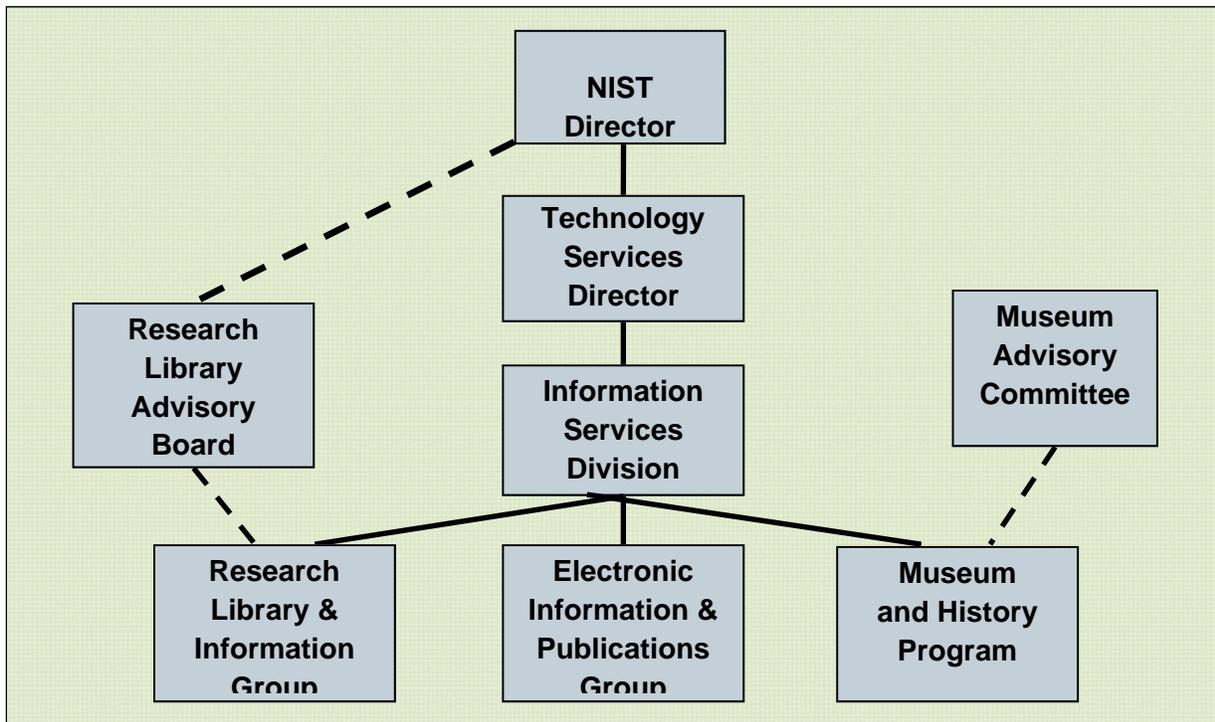


Figure 1. Organizational Chart depicting ISD's Relationships/Governance

How the Advisory Board was formed

The RLAB was formed at the recommendation of the NIST Research Advisory Committee (RAC), in its 2000 annual report to the NIST Director. During that time, the increase in journal prices, databases, and e-resources caused the Research Library to significantly reduce subscriptions to stay within budget. The RAC made two recommendations. First, that the Research Library be given an annual fiscal adjustment to base (ATB) to keep up with inflation. Second, that ISD investigate the establishment of a Research Library Advisory Board consisting of bench scientists to provide more systematic involvement and feedback regarding ISD [NIST Research Library] resource issues.”

Although the RLAB's concern that continued cuts in the Research Library's collections were having a negative impact on NIST research, "as a premier research institute in the U.S", their recommendation to increase annual Library funding by an automatic ATB was not approved. The recommendation to establish the Research Library Advisory Board was formally adopted in 2002, when the RLAB was designated an official NIST Standing Committee by the NIST Director.

"The RLAB would create a partnership dedicated to providing NIST researchers with the most accurate, high quality, and timely information products available. The role of the RLAB is to communicate customers' needs to Library management, recommend directions for the Library's collection and services, communicate about library products and services to the NIST community, and provide Library management feedback and advice."

Since its formation, the RLAB has developed into the Research Library's strong advocate, listening post, advisor, and chief communicator between the Library and the NIST Laboratories that perform the research. Each year the RLAB's impact on the Library grows stronger as librarians and scientists learn to work together for a common goal – a vibrant and proactive Library to support NIST research.

How the Board works

The Director of each of the 12 NIST Labs nominates two bench scientists (one regular and one alternate) to the RLAB. Board members serve a 3-year, renewable term. The RLAB Chairperson and Chairperson Elect are elected by a majority vote by all members present at the time of election. The RLAB Chair is required to submit an annual report to the NIST Director at the end of each Fiscal Year. The Research Library provides administrative support to the RLAB, scheduling the monthly meetings, transcribing meeting minutes, and maintaining the RLAB website, which includes archival access to all meeting minutes and annual reports to the NIST Director.

"Frequently Asked Questions" are posted on the RLAB website to bring new members up to speed on the top 10 FAQ's posed by previous new members, such as:

- How is the Library funded?
- How are materials chosen for the Research Library collection?
- How do you decide which journal titles to add or cancel?

Each meeting agenda is planned jointly by the Library and the Board. The Library brings items to the Board that require input for collection development, including resources to support new research priorities, identifying subject specialists¹, feedback on journal cuts (the Library provides usage data), and new services. The RLAB meeting is also a knowledge sharing opportunity. Each Board member takes a turn giving a presentation on their information needs – some presentations involve complex customer surveys

¹ A Subject Specialist is a representative from a NIST Lab Division (appointed by the Division Chief) to the Library. The major role of the Subject Specialist is to recommend book titles to be purchased by the Library.

and interviews of colleagues resulting in a better understanding of what the Lab is doing and their information gaps. The presentations also have the serendipitous benefit of connecting the bench scientists from the different Labs. While there are collaborations between Labs, in some areas they still operate as separate silos. The Library's Lab Liaisons² also attend the Board meetings to gain insight on their Lab and respond to queries that come up during the meetings.

Value of a Library Board

It would appear that some of the value of a Board is intrinsic, but this is not always the case. The value is dependent on several factors: establishment of the Board member's role to his Lab; relationship of library staff and Board members, and all the entities that function to make the Library useful to NIST.

Since the RLAB was instituted in the last eight years, measuring its value before and after its formation is difficult as changes and results were not instantaneous or immediately obvious. Below are examples of successes that would not have been possible before the Board's formation.

- While the original purpose for the RLAB was to offer guidance primarily on collection development issues, they have proved invaluable on a variety of other issues of importance to the Library. For example, the RLAB has recently helped the Library obtain resources to support NIST's new research priorities. It is a challenge to maintain a research library collection to support NIST's core research activities given the continuously rising costs of scientific and technical literature; it is even more of a challenge to ensure that the collection can also support an organization's new and emerging research priorities. In addition the RLAB has provided input on ways to assess the impact of the Research Library's services on the NIST researchers.
Value and impact: The Library benefits from inputs provided by the user community and the user community in turn gains from making the library more responsive and relevant to their research needs. The Library has changed its course of action after consulting with the Board, for example in delaying the introduction of its e-books program.
- A Board can also facilitate entrée into meetings and arrange demonstrations such as presentations by Lab Liaison Librarian at their Director's management meetings. This is a big breakthrough for us as we had been trying to get our foot in the door at the Lab management level. We did not make much progress until

² The laboratory liaison program facilitates communication between the labs/program offices and the Information Services Division/Research Library. Liaisons work collaboratively with NIST researchers and laboratories and support their information needs. A liaison is assigned to each NIST Laboratory.

the Chair of the RLAB urged the members to create an opportunity and make the appointment for their Librarian Liaison.

Value and impact: This assists in providing higher visibility of the ISD's expertise and resources. Labs Management sometimes does not use the Library personally and are not aware of services that could be provided by the Library. Usage of the Lab Liaison program increased after the presentations.

- In 2007, the RLAB, in collaboration with the RAC, rallied the NIST Fellows³ (30 Fellows including 3 Nobel Prize Physicists) to unanimously write to the NIST Director requesting that special funding be made available for a one time purchase of back years of ISI Web of Science. This was something that the Library really needed, but did not have the funds to purchase. The Director immediately made the funds available because of the persuasiveness of the letter that stressed the importance of the resource to NIST research.

Value and impact: The Board can serve as a champion for support needed by the Library without the Library serving as the instigator.

- In 2009, the RLAB was, again, instrumental in obtaining Institutional Support Funding for the Library that permitted the Library to renew its subscriptions, unscathed, as well as add new journal titles and databases that were needed in new research priority areas. The Board submitted a strong case for funding to stabilize journal subscriptions in its *Annual Report to the NIST Director*; concurrently, the RLAB Chair submitted an Institute Support Funding request for the Library through his own Lab. ISD, through its own management chain, also submitted a funding request. The unified, persuasive, and consistent requests from 3 fronts gave the Library the largest adjustment to base that it has ever received in its existence.

Value and impact: Requests for library resources are best made by groups outside the Library that can better articulate the impact to the agency from firsthand experience. The advocacy group can present a more objective benefit analysis to upper management but it is the Library's responsibility to help the Board understand the cost benefit analysis.

Conclusion

A Library Advisory Board can be a very valuable voice to have on your side to advocate for your cause and give you a reality check of what your customers really want. It can also be your best marketing tool for resources and your expertise. Although it is hard work to engage some of the NIST scientists to collaborate, as some did not volunteer, but were nominated by their Director to serve on the Board, it is worth the extra effort. If you don't have a Library Advisory Board in your agency, I strongly recommend you consider forming one. The benefits in building relationships and having a venue to collaborate as colleagues on a variety of information services requirements, is rewarding for both librarians and their customers.

³Authorized under 5 USC 3104 for scientific and professional positions for carrying out research and development functions which require the services of specially qualified personnel. NIST has 30 Fellow positions.