



TOMPKINS  
COUNTY  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY

# Statement on Board Accountability

Tompkins County Public Library- Adopted March 26, 2008  
Board of Trustees

## **Tompkins County Public Library Statement on Board Accountability March 26, 2008**

The goals of the Tompkins County Public Library Board of Trustees “Statement on Board Accountability” are:

- to define the core principles of the Board’s responsibilities,
- to secure a wider and deeper commitment of the Board to broadly shared principles and policies,
- to guide the annual review of board responsibilities

### **Defining “Board Accountability”**

Members of the Tompkins County Public Library Board of Trustees (the Board) are bound by the duties of integrity, responsibility, respect and loyalty. The Board is accountable to the:

- Library’s mission and cultural heritage,
- values and principles that guide and shape the Library’s mission,
- public interest and public trust, and
- legitimate and relevant interests of the Library’s various constituencies.

The exercise of independent judgment is an essential function of the Board. Although board members must be conscious of formal and legal lines of authority, they must also be free to make their own judgments, reflecting the highest level of accountability.

- **The Board is accountable to and for the mission and heritage of its institution.** The mission and heritage of the Library guide the Board’s work and affect how the Board addresses its responsibilities. The Board has a fiduciary responsibility to advance the Library’s mission and to promote the Library’s integrity and quality. The Board also has a responsibility to reexamine and reshape that mission (or to make recommendations to the Tompkins County Legislature) as needs and conditions indicate.
- **The Board is accountable to and for the values that guide and shape its institutional mission.** Among those abiding values are self-regulation and autonomy, intellectual freedom, shared governance, quality, service transparency, and fiscal integrity.
- **The Board is accountable to the public interest and the public trust.** It is accountable to the broad public interest. Thus, the Board incurs a special duty to preserve and enhance the Library for future generations. As a board whose members are appointed by the Tompkins County Legislature, authority derives from and accountability pertains to the people of Tompkins County.

- **The Board is accountable to the legitimate and relevant interests that various constituencies represent.** The Board must exercise its best judgment to accommodate such interests, but it is the Board that makes the ultimate decision in light of the Library's mission, values and the law. The Board bears ultimate responsibility for weighing conflicting claims of interested parties and the good of the Library.

## **Fiscal Integrity**

Among the responsibilities of the Library Board, maintaining the Library's fiscal integrity is fundamental. The Board bears ultimate legal responsibility for approving the Library's annual budget and for monitoring the Library's fiscal welfare. The Board is the ultimate fiduciary of the Library, even though day-to-day operations are properly delegated to its administration.

The public's perception of the Library's fiscal integrity is greatly influenced by the standards prescribed and observed by the Board. Among the imperatives that follow from these premises are the following:

- Since the Board bears ultimate fiduciary responsibility, among its primary concerns should be the effectiveness and efficiency of services offered by the Library.
- To fulfill their oversight responsibilities concerning management of Library resources, the Board must ensure quality of operations, taking into account not only current but future generations of Library users.
- Such fiscal integrity entails full compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws.
- Beyond what the law requires, the Board should impose upon itself the highest standards of fiscal integrity and accountability. The Board should focus special attention on auditor independence, transparency and accountability in governance, and full financial disclosure.

The Board also bears special responsibility to help the Library anticipate natural or man-made disasters or other crises that may profoundly disrupt the operation and financial stability of the institution. The Board should ensure that the Library has developed, and periodically updates, a comprehensive emergency-preparedness and disaster-response plan that provides mechanisms for backup and preservation of vital library records. Such plans should include provision for board-administration interaction during times of crisis, as well as for emergency board meetings.

## Quality

The Board broadly defines the mission of the Library, determines generally the types of programs the Library will offer and is ultimately accountable for the quality of the library experience.

The proper exercise of this role entails several specific board responsibilities:

- The Board should inform itself about the array of educational, research, and service programs the Library offers, ensuring that these programs reflect the Library's identity and mission.
- The Board should determine that systematic and rigorous assessment of the quality of all programs is conducted periodically, and board members should receive the results of such assessment.

## Board Performance

No aspect of a governing board's activity is more visible than the conduct of its business as a board. The quality of a board's conduct of its business should be a model that guides the rest of the Library, setting standards that invite emulation in management. Because of the high visibility of the example they set, board members must be individually accountable to one another for civility, preparedness, ethical behavior, restraint, cohesion, and sound judgment.

While no person deliberately joins a governing board unprepared for the tasks of trusteeship, trustees are volunteers for whom much of the role initially may be unfamiliar, and the full dimensions of that role may exceed their expectations. The process of becoming and remaining adequately informed about the responsibilities of trusteeship is an important component of accountability.

Several elements are especially pertinent in the areas of the conduct of the Board's business, the Board's structure and selection process, trustee preparation, and oversight of institutional performance:

In regard to conduct of the Board's business:

- The Board should foster a paramount commitment to integrity in all its functions.
- The Board should regularly review principles of fiduciary oversight as well as institutional bylaws and operating policies.
- The Board should promulgate a code of trustee conduct and ensure that members meet the requirements of all applicable laws and policies.
- Board proceedings and communications should be as accessible as applicable practices and policies permit. This means that Board and

committee sessions take place in public, save for those discussions that are expressly exempt from open-meeting laws because they relate to such sensitive matters as personnel, real estate transactions, pending negotiations, and legal consultations.

In regard to the Board's structure and trustee selection process:

- The Board should regularly review its membership composition, with the goal of sustaining or expanding financial expertise; experience within the community; racial, ethnic, gender, geographic, vocational, and other forms of diversity.

In regard to trusteeship preparation and performance oversight:

- The Board should provide all new trustees with a comprehensive orientation program focused on the duties of trusteeship and the values of and challenges confronting the institution. The Board will maintain records of such participation by new members.
- The Board may schedule periodic retreats at which major policy issues are discussed apart from the urgent pressures and preemptive agendas of regular business sessions.
- Board education and development should be a continual process. Educational sessions should be a regular part of Board meetings. Board members are encouraged to find opportunities to enhance understanding of their role by following developments within the public library trustees' community at a regional or national level when appropriate.
- The Board should ensure that a process exists for the regular and rigorous assessment of the Board's own performance.

## **Director Assessment and Compensation**

Just as the Board is ultimately responsible for selecting the Library Director, it also is responsible for determining the Library Director's compensation and assessing his or her performance. In conducting regular evaluations and providing feedback, the Board provides a meaningful gauge of leadership performance; at the same time, the Board gains valuable perspectives on the institution's progress in achieving its goals.

Regular evaluations of the Library Director also help ensure that a board fulfills its fiduciary responsibility in setting compensation. Board members, especially the President, should establish and maintain regular and candid communication with the Library Director, apart from standard performance assessment process. The Board

should offer support and guidance to the Library Director throughout his or her tenure and at moments of transition.

- The Board should evaluate the Director's performance on the basis of clearly defined, mutually agreed-upon performance goals. The Board should lead an annual assessment process in a timely manner and provide feedback to the Library Director that is both candid and constructive.
- The Board should have clearly defined policies on setting the Library Director's compensation. The Board should disclose the Library Director's total compensation package, including all sources of compensation.
- The Board should base the Library Director's compensation on explicit and justifiable benchmarks from within and outside the institution. The Board must remain sensitive to the perceptions of stakeholders and the public. .

## Conclusion

A firm commitment to accountability in each of the areas discussed in this document will enhance Board performance, enhance the Board's reputation within the community and help the Library continuously improve its overall level of service.

(Adapted from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges Statement on Board Accountability January 17, 2007)

## Appendix I

### **(Adapted from . . .)A Governing Board's Basic Responsibilities Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges**

Accountability naturally flows from the Board's basic responsibilities:

- Approve the mission and purpose of the institution.
- Recruit, appoint, support and evaluate the library director.
- Guard the fiscal integrity of the institution:
  - Consider and approve the institution's budget.
  - Monitor the resources and productivity of the institution.
  - Participate in fund-raising, both through personal philanthropy and advocacy.
  - Ensure that annual independent audits are conducted.

- Meet the expectations of board accountability and transparency in the conduct of board affairs.
- Be aware of service programs and demand evidence that the institution's priorities are being met.
- Remain informed about institutional issues and the challenges confronting libraries.

## **Appendix II**

### **Ethics Statement for Public Library Trustees Association for Library Trustees and Advocates (ALTA)**

- Trustees in the capacity of trust bestowed upon them, shall observe ethical standards with absolute truth, integrity and honor.
- Trustees must avoid situations in which personal interests might be served or financial benefits gained at the expense of library users, colleagues, or the situation.
- It is incumbent upon any trustee to disqualify himself/herself immediately whenever a conflict of interest exists or the appearance of one exists.
- Trustees must distinguish clearly in their actions and statements between their personal philosophies and attitudes and those of the institution, acknowledging the formal position of the Board even if they personally disagree.
- A trustee must respect the confidential nature of library business while being aware of and in compliance with applicable laws governing freedom of information.
- Trustees must be prepared to support to the fullest the efforts of librarians in resisting censorship of library materials by groups or individuals.
- Trustees who accept library board responsibilities are expected to perform all of the functions of library trustees.