

Teen Advisory Boards Work to Impact Libraries— and Communities

by [Marlaina Cockcroft](#)

Aug 05, 2019 | Filed in [News & Features](#)



Teen Advisory Boards from libraries in Columbia, SC

Teen advisory boards (TAB) don't just help libraries with programming and book selection. Increasingly, they're looking beyond the library walls and helping their communities.

"With everything going on in the news, the media, the world, the kids are tuned into that now more than ever, and they understand what's going on," says Matthew Lorenzo, teen services librarian at the Cupertino (CA) Library. "I also feel that they know that they have a responsibility to try to help change the world for the better, if you will."

In Huntington Station, NY, the TAB offers drop-in homework help to younger students. The TAB in Cupertino hosted a social justice app design contest and a teen TEDx talk. In Columbia, SC, they combined a movie night with a canned food drive and made pet toys for animals in shelters. And in Clayton, NC, they held a scavenger hunt to help families discover downtown businesses.

These advisory boards, councils, and similarly named groups serve twin goals: They keep teenagers involved in the local library at an age when they're likely to lose interest, and they enable teens to learn leadership and teamwork skills.

The library also benefits from a TAB, gaining enthusiastic volunteers with new ideas about how to serve patrons. According to several librarians, in recent years, the teens in their TABs have focused on different ways to help the community and, in some places, pursue projects related to social justice issues.

“I think kids are looking for more than just staying on their phones and playing video games,” says Pam Taylor, TAB liaison at Hocutt-Ellington Memorial Library in Clayton, NC. “I think they really want to be involved and make a difference. When they’re given the opportunity and they get some guidance, they can kind of run with that.”

Social justice, culture, community

Lorenzo’s app contest last year had a social justice focus at the teens’ suggestion. The competition took place during the summer so teens had time to choose their area of focus, and if required the use of library databases to ensure they were using credible, vetted resources. It also tied in with the coding workshops TAB had previously set up for the annual CU Hacks hackathon event.

In the end, there were 15 different app projects, addressing issues such as hate crimes, racism, depression and anxiety, immigration, helping refugees, cyberbullying, and food insecurity.

In June, the TAB hosted its first TEDx talk, featuring teen speakers on topics from the gender gap in technology to self-reflection and how we view ourselves. Cupertino is the home of Apple, “so there’s a lot of interest in technology and coding, robotics and AI, things like that,” Lorenzo says. “So where my craft programs wouldn’t bring in a lot of kids, we had to restructure our way of thinking” around hands-on learning experiences.

The library also hosted a Culture Community Change teen photography contest. The TAB researched and brought in photographers to give workshops. “Then the teens went out into the community and they had to take pictures reflecting their interpretation of what culture is to them, what change means to them, what our community means to them.”

Lorenzo has run the TAB for seven years and watched it grow from four or five kids to 13. “They develop a lot of leadership and teamwork skills, and we have a lot of fun doing it, too, which is one of the biggest reasons we take on large projects.”

The TAB’s purpose and programming have changed during his time there.



Teen Advisory Boards from libraries in Cupertino, CA

“We started off not doing these major events [and] hands-on workshops,” instead giving input on craft projects teens could do or what movies they’d like to watch. Now “we want to help foster their learning and their skill-building.”



Teen Advisory Boards from libraries in Clayton, NC

In Clayton, Taylor says the goal of the TAB is to bridge the gap between the community and the library. Library use has evolved over the years, and people aren’t just coming in to get books; they’re using the computers for job applications or using the library’s makerspace, she says.

The library launched the TAB in 2016 to draw more teens. After starting with five kids, it grew to 12 this past school year. As of June, the library already had 10 applications for the coming school year.

Members are expected to take ownership of the group, and everyone needs to play a part, so they need to be committed. “One person can’t make Teen Advisory Board,” says Taylor. “It takes the whole group.”

In May, the TAB hosted the library’s first downtown scavenger hunt. The 14 participating families visited Main Street businesses to get clues, then returned to the library to complete the hunt and get prizes. The event, which helped families learn more about downtown Clayton, was the teens’ idea, Taylor says. Business owners have already asked them to do another scavenger hunt in the fall.

Her teens have also made holiday cards to hand out to residents at an assisted living home. Some of those residents never have visitors, and the teens saw how much the cards meant to them, Taylor says.

The TAB also participates in library-related activities that are more traditional for the group. It advises on books to acquire and programming and organizes events, including a Halloween make-your-own costume contest. The teens are responsible for promoting the library and events in their schools and on social media, and leaving flyers with local businesses.

Service and fun

Flagging interest in the TAB at Richland Library in Columbia inspired the library to revamp it in 2016, according to teen services associate Brittany Crowley.

“We did so with the goal of making it more service-oriented,” she says.

It worked. Now, there are about 30 active members in the group, though that varies based on the time of year, and many members are fulfilling a public service requirement for school or another organization. Teens generally join because they want to help the library, which recently underwent a renovation and opened a bigger teen center. But in the nearly six years she's been at this library, Crowley has seen more interest among teens in doing things for the community. "A lot of them are very excited about that opportunity," she says.

In addition to making toys for animal shelters, they've decorated water bottles with encouraging messages and donated them to homeless shelters, and paired their canned food drive with a showing of *Moana*. Other events include Love Your Library Day two to three times a year, where the teens might clean shelves or help with library programs.

Crowley says she's trying to establish a TAB leadership team of four to five members who will meet separately to help set goals for the group.

Jen Griffing, young adult librarian at South Huntington Public Library in Huntington Station, has been running the TAB program for about 10 years. The number of members fluctuates depending on the time of year and students' other commitments, but there are about 50 kids on her email list.

They volunteer at library events, run programs for the children's department, provide community services, and organize activities for teens themselves.

High school students have offered the Homework Help program for about three years. One of Griffing's volunteers is bilingual in English and Spanish, a valuable skill because some parents are not confident with English, so they're not comfortable helping their children with their homework, she says.

The homework program launched based on a need library staff saw in the community, while other activities have been suggested by the teens. "I often say that community service can be fun, so why not make it fun if you can?" says Griffing.

"This is your community"

The Aloha Winter Reading Carnival, created as a TAB project, is held every January so families in South Huntington have something to do in the cold weather.

"The idea is, turn off the TV, put on your shoes, and go to the library," Griffing says. The teenagers run the event, which has games and crafts.

The TAB recently launched a mini Comic Con, with crafts and pop culture discussions. The teens let loose with an after-hours program, Zombie Survival Workshop, in which they fight off “zombies” with Nerf guns in time to find an antidote for the zombie virus.

Griffing is working on developing a teen acting troupe at the library and wants the TAB to handle lighting and sound.

In addition, she wants to make sure TAB members are ready for the work world. She offers training for the seventh and eighth grade volunteers so they know how to behave when on the job. The training includes such topics as appropriate clothing, timeliness, and not checking their phones—and focuses on giving kids work experience for summer jobs and college.

Overall, it’s important that teenagers be invested beyond themselves and the library, she says.

“This is a world where it’s very easy for you to isolate yourself with technology, because we feel like we’re connected,” but that leaves out the human factor, Griffing says, adding it’s important for kids to look around and realize, “This is your community. These are your people.”



TAB members at South Huntington’s Aloha Winter Reading Carnival

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- Teen Advisory Boards
 - public libraries
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 - job readiness
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