STUDENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE AND STAFF LIAISON TO STUDENT GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: FEARS OR HOPES?

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on research that examined the issues of student advisory committee and library staff liaison to student government in Nigerian universities. A survey study was used to collect data online from academic librarians who are members of the Nigerian Library Association forum. The questionnaire contained attitudinal questions on issues pertinent to the participation of students in policy formulation and decision making on issues that affect them as library users. The 60 responses received were processed, analyzed and results presented. The study reveals that the use of student advisory committee and staff liaison to student government is not widely practiced in Nigerian universities. While the study covers only 60 academic librarians, it has application
to other academic librarians in Nigeria. The study provides information on the state of students’ participation in library governance in Nigerian universities. The data and findings may help provide ways to handle the issues of student committee and staff liaison arrangement to student government in Nigerian universities.

**Introduction**

Every organization needs to think of innovative ways to run the organization, particularly a service-oriented one as academic libraries. Consequently, academic libraries should recognize that a strong, high-quality research library requires input and participation from both the student body and faculty. There are approaches to using the student body. One is to use the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) and the other could be the library staff liaison to student government. These approaches should form a fundamental component of the library’s efforts to support research, teaching and learning mission of any university.

The two approaches mentioned here above have been widely practiced in advanced countries of the world, which prompts Deuink and Seiler (2006) to observe that “students are excellent library advocates to their peers when they are well informed about the library’s collection and services and have a clear consistent message to share”. The authors further note the input of students in a particular institution’s interactions with academic librarians as productive because they made a plea for later hours and a café in the library. The academic community comprises of students who also constitute the users of the library. These two categories of resident in academic community all have a creative side, and it can blossom if the culture to encourage is put in place. The practice of library staff-faculty liaison is not strange in Nigerian academic libraries. Also, the use of student representative on library committee is not new in the Nigerian university system. However, the student advisory committee and library staff liaison on student government are not commonly practiced. The idea behind the use of staff liaison is borne out of the fact that innovations and ideas may generate in the interactions. There is no empirical evidence to show what are the views of librarians on library-staff liaison on student government in Nigerian university libraries. The study attempted to fill the gap. To this end, an effort was made to discover whether such relationship exists, and the opinions of librarians in university libraries. The outcome of this study will serve some purpose for library managers by illuminating the scope of the issue as perceived by practicing librarians, as well as making some useful suggestions.

**Review of the Literature**

For the study, attempts were made by the authors to acquaint themselves with relevant studies and writings in the literature of library and information studies. Fortunately, there are authors with writings in foreign literature touching on the use of SAC and library staff liaison to student government in university libraries. However, the authors had to content with the fact that despite the persistent concern of librarians in Nigeria on meeting users' needs, and participative management in
academic libraries, there is hardly any empirical study on the use of students in the
management of libraries. As earlier indicated, evidence in the western-oriented
literature suggests that the use of students in making policies and decisions is
widespread and popular in academic libraries.

The literature has revealed the use of students in university committees that concern
the running and decision making in university libraries. Persily (2010) reports that
in 2005 the university of California, San Francisco constituted an advisory
committee on Library Space planning – consisting of faculty, staff and students
tasked with examining the implications or repositioning library space for new
functions. The inclusion of student is due to the recognition of the fact that they
should be given a say on issues that affect them on campus. Benefiel, et al (1999)
have revealed that in most academic libraries, the largest user-group, the students,
have the least input into library decisions and policies directly affecting them. The
authors did add that “the literature is rich in the area of the virtues of maintaining
close liaison contacts with the university teaching faculty but not student
government.” The same literature says there is an integral part of the student
liaisons outreach program named Gelman Library Student Advisory Board
(GSLAB). The six-member appointed student Board meets twice a semester to
discuss library service issues affecting Gelman University student body. The
committee seeks students input on current policies and procedures and services
from the students. Past issues discussed include the following:

- the opening of the starbucks on the first floor of library building;
- library furniture, comfort level and space to study
- library restroom climate;

The Board welcomes opinions on the Gelman Library System’s policies, services
or initiatives. Board meetings are open to students who may want to attend to hear
agenda item discussions, or to share specific questions of concerns about library
services. The university posts upcoming meeting dates on the students Liaison
homepage and upcoming Events page.

Mayhem (1970) writes “some have argued that students should not be heard and
their educational needs met, they have no inalienate right to participate in academic
governance”. Running universities is indeed a difficult task that requires highly
developed technical and professional skills. Also students do not have the time and
experience to perform the tasks. However Mayhem (1970) says “… until they
know that universities are trying to meet their educational needs, they will quite
arrogantly and presumptuously demand a voice”. Students should have a role in the
governance of academic institutions, however, “their contributions must be
unmistakably clear and explicit. And their role must have relative strength but of a
different quantity from that of the faculty and administration” the author maintains.

Benefiel, et. al (1999) have said that “for several years, the Texas A&M university
General Libraries have sent librarians to student government meetings. The
reaction of students to this practice has been positive. According to the report, it has
been seen as evidence that the library is interested in student concerns. The practice
has also shown that through such relationship librarians are able to stay abreast of current student issues, while students can directly address questions and concerns to library representative. The practice at Texas A&M University General Libraries described above is a strong motivation for this study. It has been established that there is dearth of materials on the issue of library staff liaison to student government. However, the related literature review have served some useful purpose - it has highlighted the following among others:

- that students have a role to play in decision and policy making in academic libraries.
- that student advisory committee has served a good purpose in academic libraries and should be encouraged.
- that there are values in maintaining close liaison contacts with the student government in universities.
- that the presence of library staff in student government meetings has received a positive reaction in academic libraries.

Objectives
In general the purpose of this study was to examine librarians’ views on library staff liaison to student government in university libraries and ascertain the existence of such relationship and the future of the arrangement – to see if there were signals of hopes or fears from librarians. In specific terms, the study was to:

- determine the existence of library staff liaison in Nigerian universities.
- elicit information from university libraries in Nigeria when the staff-student liaison started.
- find out the opinion of librarians using attitudinal questions whether the use of staff liaison will improve communication with students, create avenue for innovative ideas, foster the formulation of acceptable library user policy among others.
- determine the status and experience of respondents.
- provide useful hints that will assist libraries in planning and executing staff liaison relationship in Nigerian university libraries, and indeed similar libraries in developing countries.

Methodology
A descriptive survey was used to collect data on both the profile of librarians and their views on library staff liaison on student government in Nigerian university libraries. A two-part questionnaire was designed to elicit information from professional librarians in the university system in Nigeria. Part A features questions relating to bio-data of the respondents while Part B addresses the views of librarians about the liaison role of library staff to student government. The questionnaire was designed based on the literature to elicit the information required from respondents. Two senior colleagues validated the questionnaire. The respondents were required
to express their opinion on a 5-point Likert type scale (5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=disagree, 2=strongly disagree and 1=indifferent).

The questionnaire was specifically directed and administered to library personnel in university libraries who are registered with the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) forum (an online discussion group of the NLA hosted on the Yahoo! Group at http://group.yahoo.com/group/nla-online-forum/). The forum which features professional and contemporary issues that are of concern to librarians has 1,211 members from different types of libraries as at October 2011 when the study was undertaken. The online method of data collection was adopted because it ensures truthful responses since many people are often more inclined to be truthful when responding to a machine than to human, and it also removes the interviewer's bias (McIlwraith, 2006). The period of data collection was three weeks – from September 19, to October 10, 2011. The data collected are analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and simple percentages.

Results
Since there is no comprehensive list of professional librarians in university libraries that are members of the NLA forum, no particular sampling procedure was used to select the subject of the study. All those who responded to the survey are considered as samples for the study. A total of 60 librarians from the public and private universities responded to the survey. This according to Singh (2006) is sufficient to make some generalizations as regards this study. The paper presents first, a demographic analysis based on the distribution of responses by type of university, gender of respondents, years of experience and status of librarians as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of University</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 and above</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Librarian II</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Librarian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Librarian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Librarian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Librarian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was discovered from the data that majority of the respondents were from the public universities, out of 47 responses to this question, 38 (80%) of the respondents came from the public universities while 9 (20%) were from private universities. The results showed that there was no significant gap between the sexes of librarians who responded. The male respondents were just 4 (8.2%) higher in number. The 60 librarians responding to the survey reported their years of experience as shown in Table 1. Half of the respondents had less than 11 years, while the remaining half had between 11 and above 25 years of experience. Answers to the question concerning the status of librarian reveals that 39 (65%) of the 60 librarians were from the status of Senior Librarian and above. This has shown that more than half of the respondents were of high status, which may imply that they ought to know more about the management of university libraries more than the other 35%.

A question asked if the librarians have staff-student liaison relationship in their libraries. Only 18 (30%) of the 60 respondents responded in the affirmative. This reveals that liaison programme has not gained wide acceptance in university...
libraries in Nigeria. To further support this observation, majority of those who have a liaison arrangement started less than 5 years ago, while less than 10% started between 5 and 20 years.

Opinion questions
In spite of the fact that such liaison programme has not been established in most Nigerian universities, majority had a positive view of the virtues of the relationship as revealed in Table 2

<table>
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<th>Table 2: Librarians opinion about staff liaison to student government.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serving as library liaison staff to student government is worthwhile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Such liaison relationship is a means to “gauge the temperature” of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a means to improve and strengthen library’s communication with the students body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It creates an avenue for innovative idea from students for the running and funding of the library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It fosters the formulation of acceptable library user policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It may lead to the establishment of students advisory committee (SAC) to the library with agreed terms of reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff liaison relationship should be more than a public relationship asset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library management may not show commitment in maintaining the channel of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The establishment of student advisory committee is a way to reach out to students to show that the library is dynamic and responsive to user needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff liaison will not only help the library to continue to provide excellent services and resources but also to give students opinion a chance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that overwhelming majority of the respondents (81.4%) accepted that library staff liaison to student governance is worthwhile, and 88% also agreed that the such relationship provides a means to know what is of concern to students. It is not also surprising to note that 94% respondents agree that the arrangement will help to improve and strengthen library’s communication with the students. Similar views have been expressed that “liaison relationships involve communicating with
students … regarding the library’s needs, and depending on students for input in the areas of policy, user comfort and facilities” (Rutgers University Libraries). On the issues of such relationship providing innovative ideas and fostering the formulation of acceptable library policies, respondents agreed to the two issues with 85.8% and 85.7% respectively. The issue of student advisory committee was well accepted with 88.5% response. Smith (2011) refers to the use of student committee as vital and describes how it can bring innovative ideas to academic libraries.

Almost all the respondents (91.1%) agreed that staff liaison should not be used for the purpose of publicity only. It should go beyond that. According to Benefiel et. al. “the relationship should be to better understand the needs and preferences of the library’s primary user group”. It is instructive to note that of the 46 respondents to the opinion that library management may not show the required commitment in maintaining the channel of communication, slightly below half (38.3%) of the respondents agreed that management may not show commitment, while 47.7% disagreed. To find out whether the establishment of student advisory committee is a way to reach out to students and show that the library is dynamic and responsive to users, almost all the respondents (94.3%) felt so. This implies that most librarians in Nigerian university libraries see the establishment of SAC as a way to boost the image of the library. In a continued attempt to identify what liaison arrangement can also achieve, particularly in giving students opinions a chance, a good number of respondents (94.3%) agreed it is indeed an opportunity to give them a voice in policy formulation and decision making in the library. Mayhem (1970) reminds students here that they “…should participate in governance but not as a warrantable right. Rather participation should be for the purpose of additional educational experience which the faculty judges will help individual development.”

Of the participants, 91% responded to the comment section of the questionnaire. A number of the comments offered are of utmost importance not because they are positive, but because they are worthy of note. However, the issues were carefully considered and grouped thematically for the purpose of brevity. In the end, the following points aptly summarize the various comments offered concerning staff-student relationship in university libraries in Nigeria.

- the relationship should be strongly encouraged.
- it is an innovative effort.
- it will help libraries to prioritize and improve services in the face of dwindling economy.
- it helps peace and tranquillity to reign in libraries.
- it helps students know the rules and regulations of the library.
- student advisory committee should be made a statutory committee in Nigerian universities.
- it ensures that cordial relationship exists between the university library and students.
- it is a worthwhile exercise that can bring about fair information transfer
from the library to the students.

- the relationship is necessary for better understanding of the information needs and behaviour of the 21st century student.

**Conclusion**

Evidence from the literature shows that academic libraries in the developed countries have widely used student committee and liaison relationship to foster good relationship and service, as well as to bringing students closer to university library administration. However, in Nigeria it is evident from the results of the study that library staff liaison programmes have not gained wide acceptance. This study focused on the opinions and views of academic librarians on the inherent values of committee and staff liaison to student government in Nigerian university libraries. This study has shown that there a lot to derive in the relationship, and also show that the establishment of student advisory committee is desirable. This study has confirmed that most academic librarians would gladly welcome the establishment of staff liaison to student government in Nigerian libraries as no fears were expressed but hopes. This is quite evident as majority of the respondents agreed that such relationship will provide university administration with user feedback and advice on library services, and provide input on library policies. When the results from the past western-oriented studies are compared with the results from this one, interesting similarities of opinions on the use of library staff on student committee and liaison emerge.

Also, the study has shown that the use of library staff on student committee and particularly staff liaison to student government has wide acceptance among academic librarians. However, the current study cannot stand alone in presenting final conclusions regarding such arrangement for one singular reason: it deals with only academic librarians who are members of NLA forum. In spite of this, the study can provide the way forward for head of academic libraries. The literature cited can provide additional information on the establishment of this type of staff student relationship.

**REFERENCES**


