

Building a better community

Librarians serving on community nonprofit boards of directors

Service is a component of the job expectations and performance appraisal guidelines in many academic libraries. However, little is known from the literature of academic librarianship about whether this includes service specifically to the local community. The closest it has come are articles about librarians serving on the boards of library-related nonprofits, such as a consortium of libraries or a division of a library association. In this article, I will present the potential advantages, for both academic librarians and community nonprofits, of having a librarian on the board of directors. I will draw on my experience on the board of directors of OASIS, Inc. (Opposing Abuse with Service, Information and Shelter), a nonprofit agency in my region that serves survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual violence.

A personal story

Many years ago, I came home one evening after dinner in town, opened my front door, and found a young woman just inside the door, holding a baby in her arms. She was crying, and she apologized profusely for being inside my house. She had a bruise below one eye. We had gotten to know each other awhile back when a UPS package for me had been left at her house by mistake. I went to her house to pick up the package, and we talked briefly. She told me about herself and her husband. I told her that I normally left my front door unlocked; and if packages came to her house by mistake again, she could place them inside the door.

On this evening, my neighbor said that her husband had hit her, and she was afraid for herself and her child. I knew about OASIS and their services through two friends who were board members. I asked her if I could call OASIS and see if they could take her to safety. She said yes, but she would need to buy some things first. So, I drove her to a store and gave her cash to buy baby formula and cigarettes. Then I drove to a pay phone, called OASIS, and asked if I could get the address of the shelter and drive my neighbor there. The OASIS staff member who answered my call said that the shelter address was confidential, so I would need to call the sheriff's department. A sheriff's deputy would meet me at my current location and drive the young woman to the shelter. I shared this information with my neighbor, but she said that she had changed her mind and wanted to go back home. I felt surprise and confusion, and I feared for her; but I did what she asked me to do.

This experience has remained vivid in my memory for decades. It motivated me to understand what seemed like contradictions—starting with two questions:

Glenn Ellen Starr Stilling retired in 2018 from her position as an information literacy librarian at Appalachian State University, email: gess@hey.com.

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1. Why do survivors return, often several times, to the person who abused them?
2. Why do survivors choose to remain with the abuser?

Through the conversations and reading that followed this experience, I began to learn about the intense vulnerabilities people experience when they are victimized by intimate partner violence and sexual violence. Then, when I joined the OASIS board, I learned even more as the board and staff worked together to create change for people like my neighbor.

Advantages for librarians

One benefit of serving on a board is meeting performance expectations. A survey of performance appraisal systems in academic libraries conducted in 2013 found that service to the community was included in the annual evaluation by 203 respondents (67%), in the evaluation for promotion by 151 respondents (77%), in the evaluation for tenure by 93 respondents (85%), in the post-tenure review by 42 respondents (72%), and in the evaluation for salary adjustments by 29 respondents (56%).¹

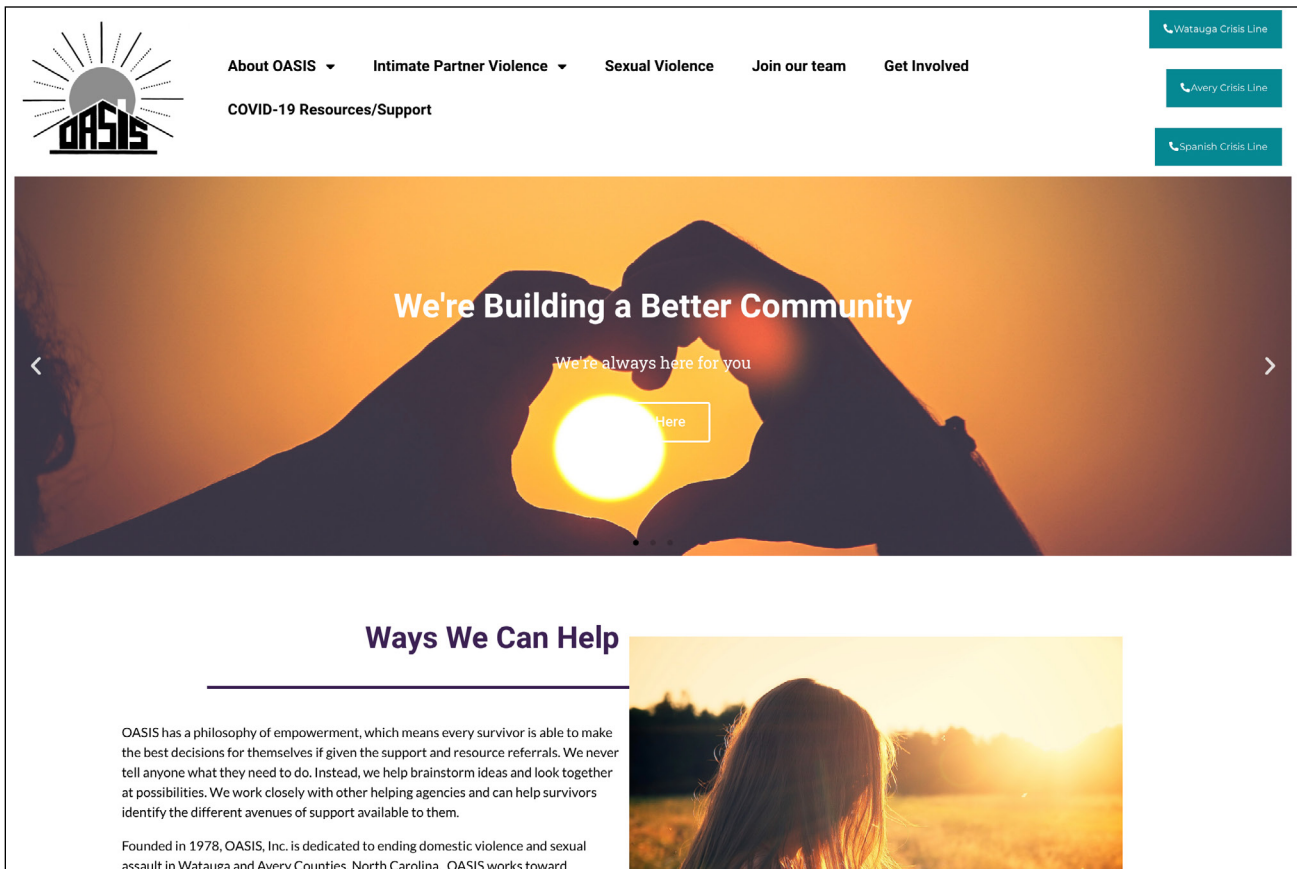
In addition to helping meet performance appraisal expectations, there are other advantages that nonprofit board service might offer. Some academic institutions have earned the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement. When institutions have this designation, there is an expectation for, and encouragement of, everyone on campus to be involved in service to the community.²

Serving on a board can help librarians become better integrated into their community. OASIS seeks out board members with a range of skills and community connections that support the agency and its clients, and this might also be true of other nonprofit agencies. Through board service, I have met community members in the areas of accounting, counseling, health care, industrial-organizational psychology, law enforcement, social work, the faith community, and more. I might not have met these individuals otherwise. In some cases, I deepened my connection with people from my university who also served on the board.

Happiness studies shows that people of all ages receive a boost in well-being from volunteering. Volunteering has been found to be intrinsically rewarding, generating a "warm glow" effect. The boost is stronger for those who volunteer at least once a month (which might be the usual time commitment for board meetings plus board committee meetings).³

Fellow board members, especially over time, can become friends. These friends would be people that you look forward to seeing at meetings, you know will be easy to work with on board tasks, you enjoy learning more about as individuals, and if they asked you to be part of a project they were working on, your first reaction would be, "Sure!" Simply put, these friends enrich your life. Sociologist and coach Christine Carter recommends friendships with people who are part of our community service activities. She writes, "Why not make friends with the people you volunteer with, so that volunteering becomes built-in social time?"⁴

Thinking about the issues the board is involved in, and helping the agency work toward solving them, provides distraction from what can become too rigid a focus on work demands. Task switching has a positive effect that has been documented by research. When we have several areas in which we regularly complete tasks, and we learn to switch easily from one to another, we increase our cognitive flexibility and become more adaptable in our thinking.⁵



Screenshot of the OASIS homepage.

Advantages for nonprofit agencies

Librarians, through our connections (on campus and elsewhere), can become another way for the agency to reach people in need. For example, some people who knew I served on the OASIS board encountered people in need and referred them to OASIS. They told the people they referred, “I know someone who serves on their board. I hear that the board and staff work closely and thoughtfully together. You can trust OASIS.” Sometimes people would ask me questions, such as, “If I did this, or donated that, would it help OASIS?” Or, “How do I go about getting help with X?” Or, “Does OASIS do Y?” I would check with the staff to see what the best way to respond was, and then get back to the questioner.

Librarians can provide the agency with additional perspectives on decision-making processes and personnel matters. Our perspectives come from our experience in our library and on our campus. The OASIS board provides guidance to the agency on staff personnel areas such as salaries, holiday bonuses, contributions to the staff’s retirement plan, procedures for performance appraisals, and guidelines for vacation and leave time. In addition, just as libraries do, nonprofits engage in strategic planning to enhance current service areas and venture into new ones.

Finally, librarians can search for relevant information sources for the agency—if there are situations when it is needed and if the board and the agency have sufficient time to use the additional information. We might suggest, “I can do some database searches to see if my library has books or articles that might help with this.”

Considerations for librarians

Think carefully before putting your name forward as a board member. Your motivation needs to be more than a slight interest in the agency's work or a need to fulfill a service requirement for the library. Cynthia Jarboe, in *A Guide to Nonprofit Board Success*, recommends, "Never agree to serve an organization if you are not or do not think you can become passionate about its cause."⁶ Additionally, learn about the time commitments that board service will require. These will probably include monthly board meetings and preparation (reading the materials distributed prior to each board meeting), board committee meetings and preparation (each board member might also serve on one or more committees), board/staff social events, and strategic planning sessions, which the agency's grant funders might require.

There will be times when a good deal of work is needed from board members, perhaps coinciding with deadlines and demands in other areas of our life. The agency might be facing a new, complex issue or adjusting to growth in its services. There will also be many stretches when things are more routine. The same strategies we use to cope with busy periods in our primary job responsibilities will help with nonprofit board service.

Expect sadness along with service on nonprofit boards in human services. As I learned more about the challenges faced by the victims OASIS served, I noticed that my sadness required recovery time. Helen Riess articulates three facets of empathy that can help us understand the recovery process that we will cycle through. The first facet is *emotional empathy* ("that sense that you can feel what other people feel") as you see, or hear descriptions of, what people experience. The second facet is *cognitive empathy* (your "sophisticated neurological system allows you to observe others hurting and gives you just enough of a taste of the pain to consider helping them out"). We must be careful, if our library work or another area of our life exposes us to a good deal of pain and suffering, not to move into compassion fatigue. The third facet is *empathic concern* ("the inner motivation that moves people to respond and express the urge to care about another person's welfare"). It is "the warm-hearted response to another's suffering" and may lead to compassionate acts.⁷

As I became more experienced as an OASIS board member, and as I followed the example of the organization's staff and my fellow board members, I realized that I was spending less time in the first facet (emotional empathy) and more time in the second facet (cognitive empathy). As the staff and board worked together to find longer-term solutions for the clients of OASIS, I also spent more time in the third facet (empathic concern). One thing that has always made me feel that I have helped has been when the staff and the board celebrate progress together.

Conclusion

I have found, after serving on the OASIS board both before and since retirement from my career as an academic librarian, that the benefits are strong and numerous. The best part of my experience on the board of OASIS has been the shared part. I joined the board hoping to do something that would make a difference for survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual violence. I found a way, through board service. I recommend nonprofit board service to academic librarians—whether or not this service is considered by their library for performance appraisal. If it is not, librarians could advocate to have it added. For librarians who join nonprofit boards, as well as for nonprofit agencies and those they serve, I predict abundant positive outcomes.

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Notes

1. Glenn Ellen Starr Stilling et al., “Still a Deadly Disease? Performance Appraisal Systems in Academic Libraries in the United States,” *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 3 (April 2018), <https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/download/16690/18166>. The numbers of respondents and percentages are drawn from the raw survey data. This raw data is not included in the journal article, other than in Annual/Periodic Evaluation, figure 3, p. 376. See also figure 6, p. 378, and the article text, for context on the survey.

2. “The Elective Classification for Community Engagement,” Carnegie Elective Classifications, American Council on Education, 2022, <https://carnegieelectiveclassifications.org/the-2024-elective-classification-for-community-engagement/>.

3. Elizabeth Hopper, “How Volunteering Can Help Your Mental Health,” Mind & Body, *Greater Good Magazine*, July 3, 2020, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_volunteering_can_help_your_mental_health.

4. Christine Carter, *The Sweet Spot: How to Find Your Groove at Home and Work* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2015), 149.

5. Elaine Fox, *Switch Craft: The Hidden Power of Mental Agility* (New York: HarperOne, 2022), 93.

6. Cynthia Jarboe, *A Guide to Nonprofit Board Success: Answering the Call of Leadership* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2020), 1.

7. Helen Riess and Liz Neporent, *The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), 26–30.