RAILS Board Engagement & Communications Survey Results

and Recommendations for Follow-up by RAILS

March 2021

Overview

In February 2021, RAILS asked our 15 board members to complete an engagement and communications survey to ensure that their experience on the board is as rewarding as possible. We also wanted to know what we could do to communicate more effectively with the board, including making sure that they were aware of all RAILS' major programs and services so they would be better equipped to serve as ambassadors for the system. We received 13 responses to the survey.

The following is a recap of the major findings of the survey and recommendations for moving forward. We look forward to discussing the findings and recommendations with the board and hearing if our suggestions are on target or if there are additional ideas and solutions.

RAILS Board Service in General

Board Job Description

Board members were asked about the current RAILS Board Job Description. Most found the description to be accurate, clear and reflective of work board members are currently doing. Written suggestions included:

RAILS Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
Add language indicating board members should attend conferences, webinars, events, etc. to keep up on what is happening in the library world	Yes, we will do this. Would a calendar help? Other?

RAILS Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
Add language indicating that board members should look for opportunities to network with other library professionals, trustees, advocates, etc.	Yes, and we can provide suggestions for opportunities.
Two board members commented that it would be helpful to better understand what RAILS does or to have more examples of how to be an effective ambassador for RAILS.	RAILS will include suggestions for promoting specific RAILS programs/services in the monthly board report
Highlight the "not so obvious" duties once a year in a board meeting	Staying informed about RAILS programs/ services, promoting the latest RAILS news, and serving as a RAILS ambassador could be considered "less obvious" duties. RAILS will find ways to highlight these duties in monthly board meetings.
Put more focus on how board members can advocate for member libraries. Have one example of advocacy at every meeting that is clearly labelled – "here is something you can do right now."	RAILS will alert board members to advocacy opportunities and actions they can take in the monthly board meeting report

Expectations for RAILS Board Service

Board members were asked if their service on the RAILS Board thus far was what they expected. All respondents indicated that it was.

Board Meetings – Making Meetings More Productive

When asked if monthly board meetings were productive and included the information needed to perform board member duties effectively, board members responded this way:

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	8	66.67%
Agree	3	25%
Neutral	1	8.33%

Suggestions for making RAILS Board meetings more productive included:

Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
Taking a short five to ten minute break during the meeting to "reset," get a break from sitting for long stretches of time, and/or to speak to other board members	Discuss with board
After agenda items have come to a close or require further discussion, restate and place emphasis on the status of the item so everyone will know where things stand. When several people talk about a topic, the outcome can be confusing.	Executive Director can do this
Have a summary of committee meetings in the board packet so board members would have the chance to digest the information beyond the committee chair presenting it in the meeting	RAILS staff can provide this, or committee chairs
Have more networking opportunities for board members	We will certainly do this post-pandemic. Traveling to other sites for meetings, networking meetings before board meetings, all of these were very popular and educational activities before the pandemic. Are there virtual ways we can do this now?
Have a presentation by a RAILS member library ("Tell us about your library")	Yes. Are there some topics or issues?
I think a document with action items for the topics we discuss is a good idea. Maybe a separate document in the board packet	We are not clear on exactly what this suggestion is referring to and would like to clarify.

Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
that is just a bulleted list of action items with dates. Something easy for board members to refer to.	

Board Meetings – Ensuring Everyone Has an Opportunity to Participate

When asked if all board members had an equal opportunity to speak and participate in the meeting, whether they attend in person or via Zoom, board members responded this way:

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	5	41.67%
Agree	6	50%
Neutral	1	8.33%

When asked if they felt comfortable asking a question at a board meeting if not familiar with the topic being discussed, board members responded this way:

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	6	50%
Agree	4	33.33%
Neutral	1	8.33%
Disagree	1	8.33%

Survey respondents had several suggestions for making it easier for all board members to speak during the meeting. Suggestions made more than once included providing opportunities for board members to network and to build stronger relationships with each other so they would feel more comfortable with each other, and providing a more standard way for those attending the meeting virtually to indicate that they wished to speak.

Document 9.1

Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
As much as possible, make it equally easy for everyone to speak no matter how/where they attend the meeting. It is easier for those attending the meeting in person at Burr Ridge to speak. This can make it difficult for others to contribute to the conversation.	The next several suggestions all related to board meeting participation. There are a variety of steps we can take, but this has always been an issue with our meetings because people are not in the same room. Remote attendees are at a disadvantage so we need to implement a variety of steps to address this. A discussion at the board meeting will help to highlight the best solutions.
Provide a different way for those who do not find it easy to speak for whatever reason by offering a chat or clicker or another way to agree/disagree without having to speak directly	
Could a hand raise function be added or request for time via the chat that is seen by all? Sometimes the electronic delay causes issues in getting a point out to the group.	
Some in-person networking would help board members build relationships and get better acquainted so everyone felt comfortable sharing feedback and discussing all issues [There was also a second very similar comment about relationship building between board members.]	While in-person networking isn't possible during the pandemic, there may be other ways board members can strengthen their relationships in the meantime.
It's more a function of some people gathering in a room while others are video conferencing, but it can be difficult to find an "appropriate" time to comment or question. If we adopted a more standard approach to taking questions it might be easier. For example, presenter finishes and says "what questions or comments do you have?" and possibly using the raise hand feature and being called on would make it more equitable.	

Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
It is a bit harder to participate virtually, particularly in a hybrid environment. The group that is together in person have an easier time with a conversation while those participating virtually feel disconnected. A conscious effort of inclusion would ameliorate this to some degree.	

Board Reports – Financial Report

Eleven of the twelve board members who responded to the question about the board financial report agreed that it was "clear" and "easy to understand." There were also at least seven written comments praising in some way the actual presentation of the report at the board meeting.

Respondents made the following suggestions re the financial report:

Board Member Suggestions	Suggested Follow-up
Would recommend a handout in orientation breaking down the report and what the different categories are by definition and purpose. It took a while and some questions to others about the reports to gain better insight.	RAILS will include information in our annual orientation session for board members breaking down the different categories in the financial report.
New members might need a briefing about what the different parts of the financial report mean, what they cover, what expenses are covered where, etc.	RAILS will include this information in our annual board orientation session
Perhaps a written narrative summary in the packet	RAILS will include summary information in the financial report

Board Reports – Executive Director's Report

Eleven board members indicated that the Executive Director's report was "very important." There were no suggestions for changing the report and several positive comments. Judging from some of the comments, including references to links and getting helpful information on "all of the valuable work" RAILS does every month, it appears that some respondents consider the "This Month at RAILS" report to be part of the Executive Directors Report.

Suggested Follow-up: No major changes planned for this report at this time.

Board Reports – This Month at RAILS Report

The "This Month at RAILS" report is attached to the Executive Director's report in the monthly board packet. Ten survey respondents indicated that this report was "very important," and two said it was "slightly important." As mentioned above, there may be some confusion about the difference between this report and the Executive Director's report. One respondent said they were unsure what this report was.

There were several positive comments about the report, including comments about the formatting being easy to review, the effective communication about the work of RAILS staff, and the report providing board members with additional talking points about the importance of RAILS to use when visiting other libraries, etc.

Suggested Follow-up: No major changes planned for this report at this time.

Board Reports – Strategic Plan Progress Reports

In the past, RAILS produced a very comprehensive six-month or annual report highlighting specific activities to accomplish the goals and objectives in the RAILS Strategic Plan.

Several options were presented for changing the report, and board members responded to these different options this way:

Response	Number	Percent
Make the reports shorter	2	20%

Response	Number	Percent
Include less text	1	10%
Include more data in the reports using charts, graphs, dashboards, etc.	4	40%
Make the reports more visually appealing by adding photographs, pictures, etc.	2	20%
Highlight a few activities for each strategic plan goal rather than listing all activities for that goal	6	60%
Issue separate reports for each strategic plan goal periodically, rather than compiling one report covering all goals	5	50%
Issue separate reports for different RAILS product or service categories periodically – such as e-resources, continuing education, etc.	4	40%

There was also a written comment saying that "there is a lot of text and it can be difficult to get through the entire document."

Suggested Follow-up: RAILS proposes discontinuing the annual or six-month strategic plan progress report, and providing special reports throughout the year on major service categories, special projects, etc.

The February report on RAILS LLSAPs (shared online catalogs) is one example of the format these reports might take. Other topical areas could include RAILS continuing education, delivery, discounts/group purchases, and the RAILS e-book grant to name a few.

Board members can still find detailed information on activities designed to accomplish each of our strategic plan goals in the "This Month at RAILS" reports and the annual report submitted to the Illinois State Library (and shared with the RAILS Board).

RAILS Reports – Service of the Month Reports

At each board meeting, RAILS staff report on a RAILS program area or service that we feel it is important for the board to learn more about for their own knowledge and so they can share this information with other RAILS members/trustees. Survey respondents were asked to rate the slate of topics for FY 2021.

The only topic 100% of the 11 respondents who answered this question considered very important was: Measuring the impact of RAILS programs/services on members – RAILS evaluation projects, new measurement/ evaluation strategies implemented at RAILS, etc.

Other topics a majority of respondents rated as "very important" include:

- How RAILS engages staff from libraries of all types – 9 respondents considered this topic "very important"
- The new L2 – benefits to RAILS and RAILS member libraries – 8 "very important" responses
- Update on RAILS EDI initiatives – 8 "very important" responses
- RAILS discounts and group purchases – 8 "very important" responses
- RAILS e-resources for all types of libraries – 7 "very important" responses

Other suggestions for service of the month topics included LLSAPs, delivery, RAILS' presence at conferences, and professional development. There was also a suggestion to hear from "boots on the ground library workers more, especially when evaluating impact. Not just directors and administrators."

Suggested Follow-up: We are happy to add these topics in the future, and welcome more suggestions in the future.
. We will also continue to feature topics we think board members may be asked about or topics we believe it is important for board members to talk to other RAILS members about.

RAILS Reports – Board Development Reports

Eleven board members responded to the question the about importance of topics covered by the FY 2021 board development reports. At least half of respondents thought all of these topics were very important. All respondents considered one of the topics to be very important: Advocating for systems and libraries – opportunities for RAILS Board members to advocate, talking points.

There were three suggestions for additional topics:

- Inviting special libraries to share their resources – if board development topics are open for member libraries to speak
- Interaction between RAILS, AISLE, IHLS, and ILA, including a report on the "low-hanging" fruit, long term goals of the collaboration, and how board members can contribute to the success of these endeavors
- State library actions, impact to all library types, funding projections, challenges

Suggested Follow-up: As with the service of the month reports, RAILS will strongly consider these additional suggestions, the topics board members rated highly, as well as those we believe it is important for board members to know about. We will also ask the State Library to contribute a regular report on the issues identified.

RAILS Programs/Services

Familiarity with RAILS Programs/Services

Board members were asked how familiar they were with different RAILS programs/services. Eleven board members answered this question. The following is the number of responses for each category of familiarity.

Program/Service	# Very Familiar Responses	Slightly Familiar	Unfamiliar
RAILS E-News	10	1	
Member Updates	10	1	
Delivery	9	2	
My Library Is… Campaign	9	2	
Elders of the Internet video	8	2	1
Continuing Education	7	4	
L2	7	4	
Pulse pages on RAILS website	7	3	1
eRead Illinois	6	5	
Online roundtables	6	4	1
Online mailing lists	6	3	2
Explore More Illinois	5	6	
Sparks podcast	5	5	1
Find More Illinois	4	7	
BiblioBoard	4	6	1
Zoom accounts for networking groups	4	4	3
Trustee Training	4	7	

Program/Service	# Very Familiar Responses	Slightly Familiar	Unfamiliar
FOIA/OMA Hotline	4	4	3
Discounts	3	8	
Directors University	3	6	2
Catalog support grants	2	5	4
inkie.org	2	8	1

Suggested Follow-up: RAILS wants to ensure that all of our board members are as familiar as possible with all of our programs/services, so they will be able to talk about them to other member library staff and trustees. For those topics a majority of board members are either slightly or not familiar with, we will:

- Feature those topics in our Service of the Month reports as appropriate
- While all of these topics are periodically referenced in the "This Month at RAILS report", rather than just giving the latest news on the topic, we can also give a sentence or two explanation of the product/service
- Feature some of these topics in the special reports designed to replace the Strategic Plan Progress reports as described above

Sharing Information about RAILS Programs/Services

Board members were also asked if they had talked to a staff member or trustee from a RAILS library about a RAILS program/service in the last six months; 100% of the respondents to this question replied "yes."

Respondents were also asked if they had shared something learned at a RAILS Board meeting with someone from their library or another RAILS library. Again, 100% of the respondents to this question replied "yes."

Suggested Follow-up: RAILS will continue to provide board members with information about our programs/services that they can use when sharing information about RAILS.