

Medium-sized Academic Libraries Discussion Group
ALA Midwinter Meeting, January, 2008

Discussion Topic: What Do We Do When the Accreditors Come? Using the ACRL Standards to assist with Accreditation reviews

The meeting was called to order by John Pollitz, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire.

The 2004 version of the ACRL standards represents a shift of emphasis from quantitative to qualitative standards. The ACRL standards carry a date of 2004, but in fact they are seven years old now, because they were created in 2000. The standards are therefore due for a revision. One possibility would be to conduct a review and to again approve the existing standards, although this would be unlikely. The accreditation groups of primary concern to many academic libraries are the eight regional accrediting bodies, including the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the New England Association of Colleges and Schools, among others. It was noted that the Southeastern Library Association web site includes a document that provides assistance with the SACS review for libraries.

One library reported that they prepared for their reaccreditation by inviting Maureen Sullivan to review their accreditation materials. They addressed all the items included in the North Central accreditation documentation, and they built in a continuous process of review.

The ACRL standards provide a list of input measures that can be used for comparison with peer libraries. Rather than relying on ACRL standards when creating the reaccreditation document, it is important to focus on the regional accrediting bodies' questions. The ACRL standards include measures such as verifying that the institution has "appropriate" collections or facilities. Participants in the discussion group noted that they had selected groups of from four to ten peer libraries. Sometimes the peer libraries were suggested by the office of institutional research, and sometimes the libraries select peers based on the schools having the same type or size of programs. Some libraries compared themselves with peer groups that included both the institutional research peers and the program peers. These schools' ratios would be presented individually, rather than being reported as an average.

It was suggested that the focus of the reaccreditation response should be on the accrediting body's questions, not on comparisons with other libraries' ratios. The accrediting groups are examining the ability of the library to meet the needs of the students, and also on comparing what the library is doing with its mission. Every institution is different, and every library is different. The plans and programs have to be doable and have to be affordable – that's the bottom line.

A library reported that they employ user surveys, focus groups, and interviews with faculty to determine the success of student learning outcomes. They track the faculty

opinion over time to see how they are doing. Their surveys and other instruments were created for them by Formative Evaluation Research Associates. The cost was substantive. It was suggested that libraries might want to conduct both LibQUAL and individual surveys. The individual surveys can provide more detailed information on the level of success in meeting the needs of users.

One library described using a survey instrument given to them by another library. Their library's composite score on the survey was a 90% level of satisfaction for faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. The librarian doubted that this score was a true representation of the state of the library and speculated that the way the questions were asked might have influenced the outcome of the survey.

Another participant stated that their library was very process oriented and action oriented when developing survey questions. They asked staff the following questions:

What? What questions do you want to ask users about what we are doing?

So what? So, what does this mean?

Now what? How can we address these concerns?

Several librarians agreed that the regional accreditation groups do not want libraries to rely to ACRL standards as they prepare for reaccreditation. The regional accreditation bodies expect libraries to focus on their requirements; these are the only standards that count for the purpose of their reaccreditation. A participant commented that he has gone on seven accreditation visits, and he confirmed that the review teams don't care about ACRL – their charge is to focus on their own standards.

It was noted that in the past, libraries found it helpful to be able to point to the ACRL recommendation that a library's budget should be 6% of the university budget; however, these quantitative standards are no longer in use. Several people commented that few libraries ever reached this level of funding – it was more an aspirational goal than a practical guideline.

The group agreed that the accrediting bodies in areas such as nursing and chemistry (American Chemical Society) can be very specific in stating which materials need to be held by libraries.

One librarian reported that her university appointed a team of twenty people, including a library representative, to work on the reaccreditation study. They developed benchmark data to show what the university was trying to do. They deliberately avoided using the data for a political purpose. The data they gathered helped the library become better informed about who they were and what they were accomplishing.

A participant stated that the last regional reaccreditation study at his institution had pointed out that the library was understaffed. The report helped his library gain needed positions.

Another librarian observed that the reaccreditation team is there to validate the library's statements of need. It is expected that a library will identify its shortcomings, however, it should state how it plans to address the problems. Admitting the challenges and areas for improvement will not prevent a library from being reaccredited. The idea of progress and remediation is central to the process. You don't have to have finished the remediation work, you just have to demonstrate that there is a plan in place to fix it, and you need to have actually started to fix it. It's not a good idea to omit the mention of deficiencies, because faculty may point out the problems during the accreditation team visit. The review team of the accrediting body has access to everyone on campus, from the president to the janitor, and can ask them to validate or comment on the library's effectiveness.

A participant noted that he worked at a school that contracted to provide a smaller university with library services, providing everything from materials to reference staff. This arrangement was approved by the regional accrediting body. The arrangement was also very beneficial to the university that provided the library services, because they needed the additional funds, and the payment was substantial—though far less than the cost of creating a library and running it.

It was noted that the SACS web site is very useful, and it may contain a manual that will assist schools in preparing reports.

A participant asked how a library can demonstrate that library intervention makes a difference to students. How can we be sure we have a positive affect on student learning outcomes? It was suggested that we should ask the faculty via interviews or other means.

At some universities, students are required to develop electronic portfolios, and these can demonstrate student learning. Libraries may also want to regularly interview faculty in departments that require capstone courses or research reports, and ask faculty how library intervention affects student learning. Some departments conduct a senior assessment/survey. Libraries might ask to have library questions added to the survey.

Respectfully submitted,

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