Accreditation in the Smaller Community College Library

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Introduction

Does the accreditation process represent an evolutionary opportunity for realizing change in the library or has accreditation become an exercise in the art of sophistry? This session will present a case study experience of one community college library during a SACSCOC accreditation visitation cycle. The session will examine all aspects of the process, including the unexpected pitfalls and the surprising outcome.

The prospect of facing some aspect of a formal accreditation process is endemic to the academic experience. The accreditation review will happen. The question is, how will accreditation impact you and your library in your smaller academic setting? In 1955 the process of accreditation was thought of "as one of the important forces influencing favorably the development of the college library."[1] In 2016 according to the US Department of Education the "goal of accreditation is to ensure that institutions of higher education meet acceptable levels of quality."[2] While librarians may wish to cling to the concept of accreditation as representing a positive change agent in the development of libraries, under the scrutiny of changing accreditation standards nowadays it seems that 'favorable development' does not necessarily correlate with the notion of the newer terminology found in criteria such as 'acceptability'. In fact the definition of 'acceptability' itself appears to be more open to interpretation than at any time in the past when under the impetus of quantitative standards or even comparative standards. Nonetheless the central question during a recent ten year accreditation visitation at one college, was how do library staff reconcile the desire in seeking favorable development with a role which is defined as simply 'acceptable' by those more often than not occupying positions outside the library profession?

Background

This paper was prompted by the author's exposure to four dissimilar accreditation experiences over a 25 year period. The question became how might that experience in some small way help others when going under the magnifying lens of a reaffirmation of accreditation experience? In all four instances the smaller academic library was defined as one wherein there were never more than 3 MLS credentialed librarians on staff; and student headcount was between 1,500 and 5,000 students. The thinking is that the smaller academic library is distinctly different from larger libraries insofar as they share "stringent limits of budget, collection size, staff and often facilities.[3]

The first reaffirmation of accreditation experience referred to occurred nearly 25 years ago in 1992. The accrediting body at that time was the Southern Association of Colleges (SACS), which has since morphed into the Southern Association of Colleges Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). The library director was a newly minted MLS at a small community college in Kentucky. In this instance of reaffirmation, involvement of the library was limited to providing output numbers to administration in alignment with the ACRL quantitative standards in effect at that time. Otherwise the library was not involved in writing any significant portion of the self-study report. On the occasion of the site visit at least two different team members visited the library and spent a not inconsiderable amount of time examining the collections. In one case, the SACS visitor moved around in the

stacks and pulled books while making notes. An examination of the women's studies section was particularly time consuming. Another SACS visitor spent time examining what at the time was the newly acquired UMI ABI / INFORM cd-rom system. Otherwise it was pretty much business as usual for the library during the SACS visit. In retrospect the most notable aspect of the accreditation process in 1992 was the lack of college administration intervention. Within six months of the visit a brand new library and tutoring services building was under construction. As a result it was easy to associate reaffirmation with not only a positive experience, but with a desire to position the library in a central role in higher education.

The second experience occurred in 2005 at a small school in Kansas under the impetus of the North Central Association (NCA), which has since morphed into the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The reaffirmation process experience had changed, yet it still ended up nearly as rewarding as the experience in 1992. This time the librarians were more involved in the writing of the self-study report. For the very first time the phrase "smoke and mirrors" was introduced as a tacit strategy in approaching reaffirmation. While quantitative outputs were supplied by the library, the largest portion of the narrative in the self-study report was devoted to a discussion of qualitative standards. One expectation of the time was that the NCA would examine library involvement in information literacy or literacy instruction, however that expectation never materialized. Nonetheless prior to the on-site visit the library received all new carpeting, a new circulation desk, some new student comfort furnishing, and a large redesigned display area. In retrospect the focus on appearance which was relatively easy to arrange and pay for by administration may have been the epitome of a successful "smoke and mirrors" strategic approach to reaffirmation. The library remained isolated from the curriculum and information literacy instruction remained on an instructor reactive voluntary basis.

In 2010 the third reaffirmation experience occurred at a small two campus community college system in Wyoming. The NCA process had changed dramatically. The NCA had introduced a self-policing means of accreditation called AQUIP. The idea was to allow the institution to devise its own series of action plans with internally developed outcomes under the guise of continuous quality improvement. The institution enthusiastically embraced AQUIP. The first action plan became early intervention in the desire for student retention. While early intervention is a laudable goal it neither infringed upon library operations nor did it have any serious budgetary implications. While some outputs were shared, the library was neither scrutinized nor visited nor was any immediate change introduced other than the elimination of a library related full-time position. Judging strictly from these experiences, accreditation was beginning to be no longer thought of as a positive change agent in the development of the smaller academic library.

Expectations

But these few past experiences should probably not be counted upon as being representative of what to expect in the future. If nothing else, the previous experiences merely affirm the evolving nature of the accreditation process. In 1949 Guy Lyle wrote in his textbook *The Administration of the College Library*, "The reaffirmation of accreditation process experience could be seen as influencing favorably library development."[4] Injecting favorable development into higher education is the stated intent of accreditation. The reason for the ACRL standards also is to ensure favorable development. From 1959 to 1999 ACRL standards were largely based on the collection of quantitative data to meet minimum fixed standards.[5] ACRL standards have become much less prescriptive since then. Since 2000 libraries have become more outcomes driven which is dependent upon inputs rather than outputs.[6] Outcomes are student learning focused while outputs simply record activity. And then in 2011 frameworks were introduced into the standards. This evolution in academic library standards has not been without its travails. As a result, Suskie cautions us that standards have become "relatively imprecise" and are therefore more difficult to apply.[7]

Optimism over the role of accreditation is still evident in the literature, but it may be diminishing. In 2006 the Commission on the Future of Higher Education still envisioned accreditation as a critical mechanism to "serve as a catalyst, not a barrier to educational innovation"[8] Ronald Leach writing in 1992 believed accreditation can be an important process in improving communication and planning on campus; thus, it is worthwhile for librarians to spend time trying to understand and influence that process as it affects academic libraries.[9] On the other hand there are some authors who indicate that perhaps accreditation isn't arduous enough. Given that "literacy of college graduates is declining" shouldn't the rigor of and the value of accreditation intensify?[10] The literature also seems to be a predictor of those areas that accreditation might focus on most such as distance education, information literacy, collaboration, innovation, evidence based outcomes assessment and quality improvement. So, optimistically in 2015 accreditation was initially approached as offering a potential exploitive opportunity for positive change. It was hoped that the best strategy to adopt in the face of uncertainty would be once again to effect an air of business as usual.

Case Study

In 2013 formal preparations first began for the upcoming ten-year cycle SACSCOC visit scheduled for November of 2015 at a small community college in deep east Texas. The college enrollment was over 5,000. The college has one main campus and four outlying centers. Over 70% of entering freshman were testing into developmental education. There were 2.75 librarians and 2.6 classified staff in the library. There were no librarian involved information literacy nor literacy components required in the curriculum. Circulation of the physical collection was at an all-time low. Requests for in-class librarian assisted information literacy instruction was at an all-time low. Overall usage of online resources was holding steady over the previous few years. At the time of the 2015 accreditation visit the library was operating with 40% less staff and with 35% less operating budget per student enrolled than the library had 10 years ago during the previous reaffirmation visit. It was initially hoped by library staff that the accreditation visit might help to address some of the issues raised by these numbers.

As it turned out the reality of the experience proved to be far different than anticipated. As preparation got underway for the writing of the self-study report it quickly became clear that it would be the college administration who would define the parameters of the exercise, to include the meaning of such vague terms as *acceptable* and *appropriate* which are prominently used in the SACSCOC standards. College administration stressed a desire to imitate other recent successful self-study models. Success would be the lack of write-ups after the fact by the accrediting body. The authors of the self-study report were repeatedly cautioned to not use any language or data that might be construed as appearing negative. By this definition professional standards and criteria which could all too easily be construed as representing a negative picture would be eschewed in favor of more mollifying language. In all the librarians spent roughly 155 workhours on the reaffirmation effort. About 79% of that time was spent on writing or repeatedly re-writing, responding to consultant questions in written form and responding to the SACSCOC focused report in written form.

FIGURE 1
Work Hours Spent

- Focused Report 15
- Meetings 20
- Visit 12
- Self-Study Report 33
- Rewrites 75
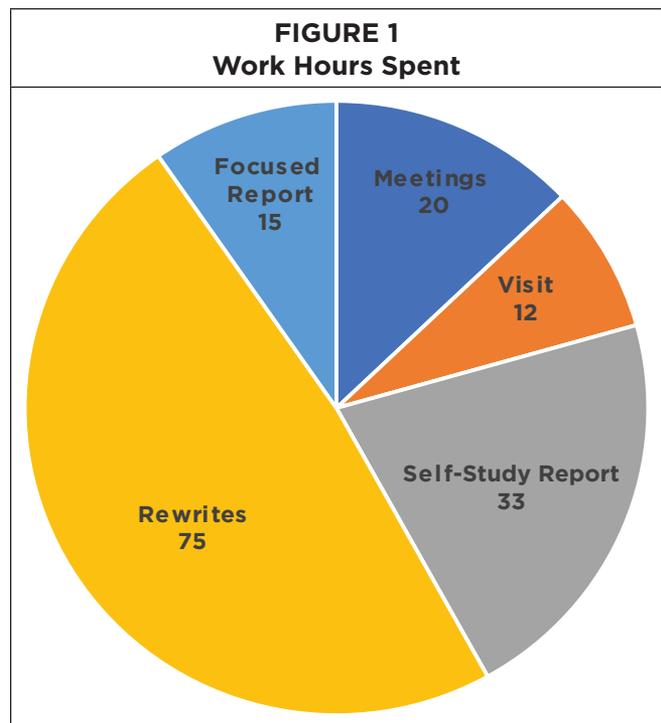
The Process

Generally speaking there were four distinct components or steps to the reaffirmation process encountered, there was 1) the Compliance Certification Report (Self-Study); 2) the Focused Report response; 3) the on-site visit; and, 4) the outcome response. In the case under consideration the Compliance Certification Report or self-study report was the most critical element of the entire process. It is in the self-study report where the first impression of the library is offered to all those outside of the library who would scrutinize library operations. And of course as we all know first impressions are always critical to any judgments or actions that follow. The library might be involved, to a lesser or greater degree, in all four components of the accreditation process, but the Compliance Certification Report commanded most of the attention.

Logic suggests that library staff should be heavily involved in the writing of those sections of the Compliance Certification Report most relevant to library operations, although in practice experience demonstrates this to not always be true. In this case library personnel were indeed invited by administration to write those library applicable portions of the report. However it was the college administration that would interpret accreditation criteria and set the tone and direction for the writing and editing of all reports. Ostensibly administration would thereby ensure continuity and avoid any seeming contradictions across all of the institutional reports submitted.

In the SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation there are four comprehensive standards directly related to library services, they are: 1) Standard 2.9 which has to do with the provision of "adequate library collections and services"; 2) Standard 3.8.1 which focuses on the existence and access to "appropriate facilities & resources"; 3) Standard 3.8.2 which focuses on "access to instruction"; and, 4) Standard 3.8.3 which focuses on the provision of a "sufficient number of qualified staff."[11]

College administration issued a number of directives concerning the library's written response to the standards. For example, the report was not to include any personal identifying data, the report was to closely emulate three models of schools which had successfully passed accreditation, the responses would be a joint or team effort, and all responses would provide positive information only. As it happened, identifying personal data was reinserted into the report later because SACSCOC specifically asked for it, the proffered models provided by administration resembled the library under consideration in only a very few particulars. For instance, all of the models represented much larger institutions with larger budgets. While initially a team was formed to write the report, later in the process during the many re-writes under pressure of looming deadlines the writing devolved around just one person, the team response became impractical.

Lessons

Early on college administration hired a consultant from a superficially similar school who, on paper, had extensive experience as an accreditation team member to advise and make editing suggestions in the draft versions of the written reports. The consultant did ask questions as was expected, but a number of the questions were irrelevant. For example, the consultant asked why there was no mention made regarding formal agreements with other libraries for reciprocal borrowing privileges. The question was asked even though information was provided in the report indicating membership in a state-wide consortia which specifies joint borrowing privileges across nearly all the libraries in the state. Perhaps in another age or another place such a question would be relevant. In this instance there was simply no need for individual formal library to library agreements.

The consultant also asked repeatedly about the level of library services provided to distance learners and specifically at the off-campus centers. The consultant who was coming from a school with a number of separate campuses may have been confusing the SACSCOC definition of a 'center' with that of a 'campus'. Under SACSCOC at a campus the institution under scrutiny would be required to have a physical library presence with full

services on site, a center does not require any physical library presence. The school in question only has centers and no campuses, so there is really only one library. The consultant also questioned other language in the report. It was mentioned that all students 'regardless of location' have access to all online materials and services. Despite this wording the consultant wanted to know what library services were provided to distance learners. The wording 'regardless of location' was apparently not considered sufficient to allow all enrolled students access to library online services. The report was revised to specify service to both 'all students' and to 'distance learners'. The lesson learned is while there may undoubtedly be some great consultants out there, hiring a consultant may not always be a good option particularly when the consultant has evidently not done their homework, is unfamiliar with current standards, is unfamiliar with library operations, and if injected late in the process can even be obstructive in meeting deadlines.

While the writing of the self-study report originally seemed to be fairly straightforward, even given administrative strictures, many other lessons were revealed as the librarians were asked repeatedly to clarify or expand upon portions of the report. Frustration was rampant. For example as previously mentioned, in contradiction to the college administrative directive to leave out all personal information, the Focused Report specifically asked for the resumes, names, titles and summary job descriptions that had originally deliberately been left out. Naturally SACSCOC directives always took precedence over college administration directives. The lesson learned was that directions from above can be confusing yet were always to be followed even if re-writing at some stage was inevitable as a result.

In an effort to adhere to another college administrative directive to avoid censure at all costs and avoid any hint of negativity, careful wording of the report became of paramount importance in trying to walk that fine line between offering the facts or indulging in fiction. For example, the sentence, "the services of the Library are a complimentary element in providing sufficient resources & support," was used to describe the library's overall role at the college. Note the word 'complimentary' on the face of it appears positive but it hides the fact that the library is no longer the principal source for student research at the college. Content modules in a number of programs like Nursing have been purchased to work directly with the college's content management system (Blackboard) which precludes any need for the library in completing coursework. Also, the trend, particularly by younger instructors, is to accept Internet sources as providing sufficient resources for the completion of assignments. Naturally neither of these trends were mentioned in the report. The truth was told, but was all of the truth told?

At another point in the re-write process, college administration returned an edited version of the staffing portion of the report that included an additional library staff member from an off campus site. Surprise. True, by any measure offered the library was understaffed. In a comparison to peer institutions of similar size the library in question came in at the bottom in terms of the number of staff by students enrolled. The fact that this comparative measure made it into the final report was itself a surprise and was ultimately questioned by SACSCOC in the focused report. However for college administration to add a staff person who was not and never had been known to be a library staff person was disconcerting at best, particularly since it would be the librarians who would be held accountable if discrepancies were found. The explanation was that it was thought that this person must at some point have worked with the few books located at that site. Discovery revealed the job description of the person in question did not include the word library anywhere, in fact the person proved to be an advisor and teacher of first year experience classes and when questioned, the site supervisor was entirely unaware that the person in question was in any manner a librarian. Despite all the evidence to the contrary the library was told categorically to include this off-site person on the library staff listing. However, in the final rendition of the report the off-site advisor/first-year experience instructor was not included on the library staff list. The lesson

here is ambiguous, do you accept the college administration's version or do you ignore that and just report the facts? In this case a chance was taken to go with the facts. Hopefully no one else will be faced with this particular type of dilemma. The fact that the librarian was not called out in this instance means that either college administration accepted the final version or that college administration did not re-read that portion of the report—a very real possibility given the extent of the number of documents under scrutiny combined with the pressure of fast approaching deadlines. Or perhaps the lesson is to expect the unexpected.

ACRL suggests that regional accreditation organizations were increasingly including student learning outcomes for information literacy in their standards and other documents.[12] It was anticipated that one of the areas SACSCOC might examine in detail was involvement in information literacy efforts. This is a college that had just recently, without librarian input, discontinued the inclusion of librarians in all first year student orientation classes. This action had a devastating effect on the number of formal in-class librarian involved information literacy sessions. Still, all credit-bearing classes at the college are mandated to include elements of a critical thinking rubric which mirrors many of the ACRL derived rubrics used in assessing the student's ability to locate, evaluate and use information. The supposition is that regular teaching faculty have the responsibility of teaching information literacy. Librarians can still be involved in teaching information literacy in the classroom at the request of the instructor. The number of librarian involved classes dwindled to less than 15 per year. However contrary to what ACRL seems to suggest, in writing this portion of the self-study report it was noted that SACSCOC does not actually mandate information literacy instruction. The wording of the standard is that the institution must provide 'access' to instruction. Of course 'access' is not the same thing as engaging in instruction. So it was emphasized in the report that 'access' is provided to all students regardless of location. The fact that very few instructors take advantage of the access provided was not acknowledged. Also a diversionary tactic was used in the report to suggest that, because of the critical thinking rubric, teaching faculty were responsible for information literacy instruction and its assessment rather than librarians. The lesson was that the definition of the wording included in the standards such as the words 'access' or 'adequate' or 'appropriate' must be carefully defined and responded to. Avoid volunteering information not asked for. Diverting attention elsewhere in this case was also successful. In the event, SACSCOC seemed to not even look at information literacy either in the focused report or during the visit.

Normally SACSCOC does not require a Librarian on the visitation team but in this case one was included because of the questions raised by the focused report. Beforehand it was thought that the inclusion of a librarian on the visitation team could only be a good thing as it would provide a more knowledgeable perspective on the library. While the visiting librarian proved affable and sympathetic nothing tangible in the way of change was engendered by the visit. In hindsight the recommendation of various faculty and staff across campus who were known library supporters as groups the visitation team should meet with may not have been entirely wise. All visits with such groups proved very positive toward the library. Perhaps the inclusion of non-users or non-supporters in the groups may have provided the visiting team with a better holistic view of the positioning of the library at the college. From the perspective of the library, the SACSCOC visit turned out to be almost perfunctory. Nevertheless one lesson taken from the visit was, that while it didn't help in this case, having a librarian on the visitation team doesn't hurt either.

Summary

The college focus was on appearance. The use of the phrase smoke-and-mirrors was frowned upon but the phrase did become a familiar part of the unapproved vernacular surrounding accreditation. While positive change might normally be desired, any change would undoubtedly exert undue pressure on an already fragile

budget. The focus on censure avoidance rather than on opportunity is perhaps understandable. Regardless of the intent of accreditation, another compelling reason the college administrative sought approval at all costs was because approval would secure continued federal financial aid access.

The fabrication of an 'acceptable' Compliance Certification Report basically became the be-all and the end-all of the entire exercise for the library. Maneuvering successfully through the minefield of consultant and administrative directives required the utmost delicacy and an unforeseen amount of time. Success at every turn depended almost entirely on careful wording, on not volunteering information, on a willingness to comply as much as possible with at times contradictory directives and on only sharing the facts—even if it meant not sharing all of the facts nor all of the particulars. Inclusion of professional standards were never called for and largely ignored. Experience suggests that smaller schools paid more attention to library standards at a time when overall budgets were generally more robust than they are now. Perhaps smoke-and-mirrors is the only viable alternative for some institutions at a time when the "accreditation processes have become more onerous and the aftereffects…more serious?"[13] The threat of censure becomes the focus of the institution rather than seeking improvement opportunities.

Questions were raised, but were always successfully fended off. Lessons may have been learned but any opportunity for positive change was lost. The biggest surprise of all was that, while the college was 'written up' in several areas by the accreditation agency, the library itself passed with flying colors or without any actionable suggestions for improvement. Could reaffirmation for the library in this case be called a success? From the perspective of the college the answer is certainly yes. However, if accreditation is considered as a potential opportunity to realize positive change in the library, than reaffirmation in this case was a dismal failure. Naturally every situation is different and every accreditation experience will be different.

Notes

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