

# Stepping Up Your Game: Responding to Evolving Regional Accreditation Standards

*Lori Ricigliano*

Assessment of educational quality has always been and remains the heart of the accreditation process...

~South Carolina Higher Education Assessment,  
*Network Recommendations for Defining and Assessing Institutional Effectiveness.*

The library is the heart of the university.

~Attributed to Charles William Eliot, President of  
Harvard University

## Introduction

For over 100 years, American institutions of higher education have undergone a voluntary process of quality assurance and improvement through private, non-profit regional accrediting commissions: Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, and Western. Collectively they evaluate thousands of public and private degree-granting two and four-year colleges and universities. These processes certify an institution's eligibility for federal and state funds, promote the public's confidence in meeting established norms, and facilitate transfer credit between institutions.<sup>1</sup> While accrediting standards vary among the commissions, they typically involve an external review cycle that assesses an institution's compliance with the commission's criteria for academic quality and continuous improvement.

The traditional accreditation process begins with a sustained and rigorous self-study documenting the

institution's compliance with eligibility requirements. An institution's internal examination of its mission, goals, and objectives is supported by evidence of its current and prospective achievement. Additional documentation often includes data on students, financial resources, educational programs and services, governance and administration, admissions and student personnel services, resources, and organizational effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> The self-study process is complemented by an on-site visit verification by faculty and administrative peers who conduct an assessment of the institution's strengths and weaknesses through observations and interviews with selected institutional personnel. The evaluators submit a report with findings and recommendations to the regional commission, which makes a final determination of the institution's accrediting status. Between accreditation cycles, an institution may be required to file interim reports with the commission.

## Accreditation Reform

Until recently, the accreditation commissions conducted reviews of entire institutions in "relative obscurity."<sup>3</sup> Dramatic shifts in the higher education landscape have challenged the ways in which accrediting bodies define and evaluate educational quality. As Baker points out, "a judgment of quality in higher education was traditionally determined more by

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implicit perceptions of institutional reputation and characteristics than by explicit evidence of outcomes and achievements.”<sup>4</sup> However, the quality of colleges and universities has come under greater scrutiny as expectations of higher education continue to grow. “Government officials see higher education as a national resource. Employers view higher education institutions as producers of a commodity—student learning...Parents and students expect higher education to enhance students’ collegiate experience, as well as propel their career placement and earning potential.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, accreditation’s role in higher education quality assurance has met with increasing public and private sector skepticism. In 2006, the Spellings Commission, under the Bush administration, issued a report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* that was highly critical of accreditation.<sup>6</sup> The Obama administration continues to pressure the accreditation system for stricter controls and better oversight. Federal concerns center on issues of accountability, transparency and public reporting, compliance over consultation, efficacy, and self-regulation.<sup>7</sup>

Accreditation has always evolved over time to address critical issues facing higher education. Spurred by the recent accountability and assessment movement, regional accrediting commissions have reassessed their policies and procedures. While compliance standards remain an integral part of the process, there was a decided shift from evaluating traditional input and resource measures (finances, facilities, and faculty/staff credentials) to emphasizing student learning outcomes that are “defined, articulated, assessed, and used to guide institutional improvement.”<sup>8</sup> For example, at one time, regionally accredited institutions required libraries to have a specific number of volumes in its collection. Today, many require libraries to demonstrate clear linkages between performance and the overarching mission of the institution. In an interview, Ralph Wolff, President of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, commented, “We realized that, with regard to educational effectiveness, we needed to focus more on student and organizational learning and on learning results, not just assessment processes and activities.”<sup>9</sup> The regional accrediting agencies now want institutions to address questions like “What are students learning? What difference are you making in their lives? What evidence do you have that you’re

worth our investment?”<sup>10</sup> In assessing student learning, accreditors do not mandate specific measures, underscoring their belief that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work for every institution. There is, however, an expectation that an institution will use a variety of assessment tools to gather evidence. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges stipulates that institutions use a “systematic and broad-based approach” to measure student learning.<sup>11</sup> Information derived from multiple sources document educational achievement within the context of the institution as a whole.

The use of continuous assessment for educational programs reflects another change in the regional accreditation process. The traditional decennial cycle has been replaced with more frequent and systematic reviews. Institutions are undergoing more continuous evaluation by regional accrediting bodies, with an increase in the number of detailed reports and ongoing interaction. For example, The Higher Learning Commission offers an alternative re-accreditation process called the Academic Quality Improvement Project. It involves a series of self-evaluation reports addressing standards which are interconnected and build on each other over a seven year period.<sup>12</sup> New accreditation procedures are less prescriptive, allowing for greater flexibility and independence in framing the internal review. The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities revised its standards to include identification of core themes tied to the institution’s mission, with objectives and measurable indicators more closely related to planning, capacity, resources, and achievement. “Collectively, the core themes represent the institution’s interpretation of its mission and translation of that interpretation into practice.”<sup>13</sup> To cultivate authentic engagement, regional accreditation organizations encourage broad-based involvement among institutional stakeholders, recognizing that educational quality is a collective endeavor. The review should reflect the participation of faculty, students, staff, parents, and board members. In characterizing recent reforms in accreditation, Wolff states: “The transition has been nothing less than a complete transformation—from a regulatory, once-a-decade, compliance-oriented process to a reflective, evidence-driven, and learning-outcomes based one that is adapted to the plans, needs, and priorities of each institution and that provides multiple points of feedback.”<sup>14</sup>

## Implications for Libraries

While accreditation standards have traditionally recognized, library resources and professional services, every regional association now recognizes the importance of information literacy learning outcomes as fundamental criteria for institutional eligibility. Four of them make explicit references to information literacy. For example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education asserts that “many aspects of information literacy are essential components of general education,” including critical thinking and evaluation.<sup>15</sup> Other commissions refer to instruction in the use of the library and information resources. As Thompson points out, this “new paradigm requires librarians and faculty to adopt a broader sense of the role of information literacy skills in higher education.”<sup>16</sup> This shared responsibility calls for librarians and faculty to work collaboratively to develop a range of learning experiences where information literacy competencies are practiced within the context of clearly articulated goals at the program and course level. The measurement of these skills will require “more holistic methods of assessment, such as portfolios or other types of course-integrated assessment.”<sup>17</sup> Accrediting standards increasingly recognize the relationship between mission-centered information service and resource programs to a quality learning environment that undergirds a successful academic enterprise. Libraries are expected to collect data that measures the impact of resources and services on institutional outcomes. They must shift from a traditional internal orientation of inputs to one that is externally focused. With this new emphasis, it would be more appropriate, for example, to note that, “Ten percent of the student access to business resources is attributable to company researching for interview preparation rather than saying, ‘Library users downloaded 5,000 articles today.’”<sup>18</sup> Evidence of student achievement may also be derived from other sources. The institution’s data repository and archive are potential sources of information that libraries can use to make explicit connections with teaching and learning. Statistics on admissions, retention, graduation, and faculty publications are some examples. The results of institution-wide surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data Systems (IPEDS) may also prove useful tools.<sup>19</sup> Since the emphasis in accreditation standards is mission-centric, compara-

tive data with peer colleges and universities may be less helpful in demonstrating the library’s impact on its institution’s academic performance.

Moreover, it is imperative to look beyond the standards that focus exclusively on library compliance. References to programs, support services, and general university resources also imply expectations of academic libraries.<sup>20</sup> A thorough review of accreditation documentation will reveal relevant areas where the libraries can make thoughtful contributions that are aligned with the institution’s mission and purposes.

## What Libraries Can Do

Within most institution, the participation of academic libraries in the accreditation process has varied over the years.<sup>21</sup> Their role has been evident in the institution’s self-study response to library accreditation standards which may have also included interaction with the site team evaluators. However, the time has come to “fundamentally rethink and restructure the involvement of libraries and librarians in the accreditation process.”<sup>22</sup> There are many exciting opportunities to assert new library leadership in its institution’s regional accreditation review of quality assurance and improvement. Here are some examples.

- Link library planning documents to the institutional mission. Employ language found in campus documentation to explicitly demonstrate how the library’s goals are in alignment with those of the university.<sup>23</sup>
- Refocus library assessment efforts from inputs and process to student learning outcomes. Collect evidence that goes beyond description to substantive and thoughtful analysis.<sup>24</sup> The American Library Association’s *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*<sup>25</sup> provides measures of outputs in the context of the institution’s mission.
- Leverage existing institutional data sources to make connections with library contributions to student learning. Enrollment, retention, and graduation rates are some examples.<sup>26</sup> Partner with your campus institutional research unit to include library questions in existing assessment tools, such as first year, senior, and alumni surveys.
- Report library assessment efforts in teaching and learning to the campus community. In-

form stakeholders of survey results and share data in meaningful ways that address how the library contributes to institutional effectiveness.

- Offer to assist with an academic department's accreditation program review. Liaison librarians can demonstrate to faculty how services and collections support the curriculum. They can also work with faculty to integrate information literacy data and assist with identifying student learning outcomes using the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*.<sup>27</sup>
- Critically review the previous institutional self-study and evaluate the visiting team's accreditation report to determine to how the library might have made a contribution. View your analysis as a prospective opportunity.
- Volunteer to serve on the institution's self-study steering committee. Librarians can be a valuable resource to the team. As noted by Bangert and Gratch, "librarians have planning, writing, communication, and organization skills that can contribute positively to the content and substance of their institution's self-study."<sup>28</sup> If an appointment is not feasible, librarians may still contribute to the internal review during an open comment period. They may also provide additional information to support the committee's work on an ad hoc basis.
- Commit to continuous learning about assessment and accreditation. Academic librarians need to develop greater skills and knowledge in these areas so they can make meaningful contributions to the institution's self-study.<sup>29</sup>
- Work with regional accrediting organizations to "inform and influence" future changes in standards that consciously link the role of the library with an institution's educational outcomes.<sup>30</sup>
- Apply to become a peer evaluator on a regional accreditation team. While qualifications vary among organizations, "multiple competencies and system wide thinking" are preferred.<sup>31</sup>
- Communicate research and experiences to a wider audience. Publish articles and present conference papers about library assessment efforts in venues outside the library profession.<sup>32</sup>

- Broaden data collection to include the library's "value-in-use assessment" which makes correlations between services and institutional efficacy.<sup>33</sup>
- Expand the vision of the library to encompass a "total information environment" thus increasing its connection with the academic enterprise.<sup>34</sup> Libraries are embracing this new role as they become involved with institutional repositories, copyright, records management, archives, and scholarly communication.

Additional recommendations that have potential linkages with regional accreditation are found in the ACRL report, *The Value of Academic Libraries*.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Accreditation is a key motivating force in higher education assessment. It provides an opportunity for an institution to engage in a sustained process of self-examination and informs continuous quality improvement. By stepping up their game, academic librarians can make the most of this opportunity by demonstrating ways in which the library contributes to the institution's mission and goals. Moving from the margins to the center of the accreditation process can revitalize the library's value, reposition it as an active player in campus initiatives, and ensure that the library remains at the heart of the university.

## Notes

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