

**Every
Librarian
a Leader**

Accreditation: Opportunities for library leadership

By Stephanie Rogers Bangert and Bonnie Gratch

20 ways to get involved in your library's self-study process

Accreditation in higher education is a process of institutional self-study and evaluation. The structure of the accreditation review is guided by a set of standards written and endorsed by academic peers. These standards, variable across the seven regional accrediting agencies in the United States, attempt to establish criteria or benchmarks considered basic to quality education. Although the definition of quality education is often elusive and difficult to articulate, the accreditation review sets into motion institutional review regarding mission, integrity, learning goals and outcomes, teaching effectiveness, and commitment to improvement.

As has been noted by Ralph Wolff, associate executive director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and others, the role of librarians in the formal accreditation review is minimal. Librarian participation is somewhat evident during the writing of the institutional self-study, specifically the response to the standard regarding library and learning resources, and also evident during the site visit when a team evaluator (often a librarian) visits the library and interviews staff. There are, however, additional opportunities in which academic librarians can participate in the accreditation review.

Contrary to the commonly held perception that accreditation-related activities are the purview of administration, librarians within all units of an organization have the potential for contributing to the institutional self-study. Particularly at a time when the descriptive and com-

pliance nature of accreditation is under criticism—by both accreditation agencies and colleges and universities—librarian collaboration with classroom faculty, integrative approaches to collection development and educational technology planning, and design of library instruction to complement classroom learning outcomes can strengthen the “culture of evidence” sought by accreditation bodies such as the WASC.

Leadership through initiative and action

There are concrete ways that academic librarians can involve themselves in the process, products, and final outcomes of a campus accreditation review. Whether preparing for a major ten-year review or for a special follow-up site visit, librarians have planning, writing, communication, and organization skills that can contribute positively to the content and substance of their institution's self-study. The most significant indicators of librarian involvement in accreditation are interest and initiative. Expressing an interest to the library director or dean, the chief academic officer, the internal accreditation liaison, or the chair of the academic senate, curriculum, or library committee can usually guarantee you a role in preparation for your campus' next accreditation review.

Some librarians might ask the question: why would I want to take on an additional responsibility or assignment? A powerful motivator for involvement in the accreditation process and review is in the affirmation of the meaning and integrity of what academic librarians contribute to student learning. Despite decades of thoughtful organization, planning, structure, and exemplary “customer first” public services, rigorous self-assessment and improvement within

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library organizations are not as common as our predisposition might otherwise indicate. So, while librarian administrators and their colleagues get high marks for identifying long-range goals, developing effective implementation programs, and exhibiting staying power for annual budget negotiations, the nagging truth is that most of us have not, for ourselves (let alone for our campuses), answered key questions with resolve and specificity.

Focusing attention on the importance of librarians

How have library programs contributed to critical thinking skills and lifelong learning for students after graduation day? What difference do reference interactions, library instruction sessions, or the careful crafting of electronic and print collections make in the lives of our students? How do we contribute directly to the mission of the institution? Identifying questions such as these and attempting to find their answers with improved assessment techniques and commitment to shared analysis of program

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outcomes can become a more effective way of communicating to the campus the reasons why librarians are critical co-educators.

In fact, classroom faculty and administrators often do not believe that librarians help shape curriculum, teach students, possess knowledge skills that complement classroom content, and may contribute to student retention. To improve visibility and credibility outside the library, even where librarians have faculty status, library professionals can assert practical and political influence for increased innovation, collaboration, and resource allocation by becoming active and involved in milestone moments in the current events of their institutions. Certainly, the accreditation review is one such milestone in the life and culture of a college or university, whether viewed as a positive or negative experience. Through visible and active accredita-

tion preparation, documentation, and committee work on the part of librarians, members of the campus community become familiar with and, hopefully, convinced that their institution is enriched by the contributions of librarians. If librarians are not at the table when the university or college is exploring the success of learning outcomes, evaluating teaching effectiveness, and attempting to define quality education during the self-evaluation process, it is no wonder library programming is so often unknown, misunderstood, or overlooked. Like the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child,” librarians need to illustrate to administration that it takes a whole college or university—including librarians—to educate a student.

Leading is easier than you think: Twenty ways to make a difference

Academic librarians often have experience and perspective in many areas of campus life beyond the library. It is useful, therefore, to know what areas of the college or university are under review in order to determine how you might contribute. For example, in the WASC handbook, *Standards for Accreditation*, the following areas are identified as required elements for review: institutional integrity; institutional purposes, planning, and effectiveness; governance and administration (including role of faculty); educational programs; faculty and staff; library, computing, and other information and learning resources; student services and the co-curricular learning environment; physical resources; and financial resources.

Twenty practical ways that librarians can make a difference in the preparation of the institutional self-assessment and contribute to the ongoing campus academic review and revision process are categorized below. To identify an effective avenue for leadership, consider a match of individual interests and skills according to your personal strengths in writing, interpersonal communication, speaking, or planning.

Institutional purposes, planning, effectiveness

1) Participate in campus or academic strategic planning by serving on a committee, attending open hearings, or preparing written responses to draft documents;

2) emphasize institutional mission in discussion and policy development as part of regular activity in both external (curriculum and library) and internal (reference, instruction, collection development) meetings;

3) use professional development time to develop skills in the area of assessment and evaluation (schools of nursing and education are particularly experienced in frequent accreditation reviews and assessment techniques);

4) define and develop a process of program review for your academic assignment which involves faculty and student participation;

5) ask the campus faculty development officer to include librarians in workshops on teaching effectiveness; or, if you are able, offer to co-organize such a workshop to model librarian-faculty collaboration.

Governance and administration

6) Collaborate with the library director or dean in establishing a regents- or trustees-level advisory committee on information resources;

7) participate in fundraising or celebratory events sponsored by the campus development office to increase visibility of the library in campus life;

8) seek a committee appointment or nomination for the academic senate, or campuswide initiatives involved with technology planning, development, and fundraising, or student affairs.

Educational programs

9) Seek involvement and endorsement of library research/information literacy objectives through the library and/or curriculum committee, as well as from interactions with faculty collection development liaisons;

10) co-develop program review assessment strategies with other academic units, working first with those departments that are likewise committed to internal review; request inclusion of library research goals in the regular process of curriculum review and approval;

11) collect course syllabi and analyze the degree to which academic programs require research and library usage; report on and publicize the annual reports of the library instruction coordinator which document for the campus the extent to which library research/information literacy assignments are included across the curriculum;

12) initiate meetings with departmental faculty in your role as librarian/collection development selector to propose revisions to curricular design where library instruction and electronic resource training can be built into course requirements;

13) obtain appointments on campus and department curriculum committees.

Faculty and students

14) Offer regular training workshops on new technologies for faculty and students;

15) organize faculty and student focus groups on a regular basis to provide assessment data regarding services, collections, technology, and library facility programming;

16) help organize and create a Teaching, Learning, and Technology Roundtable sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education—a collaborative group of faculty, librarians, computing staff, and academic administrators who help define the role of technology in improved teaching effectiveness.

Library, computing, and other information and learning resources

17) Write sections of library planning documents so that articulation of the learning and teaching function of the library is adequately described; provide evidence of assessment to demonstrate integration of library learning goals with those of academic programs;

18) chair the library committee to which requests for input into the institutional accreditation review are anticipated; volunteer to the library director or dean to assist in internal organization of the library's self-study; write summary briefing papers for classroom faculty colleagues who are preparing a departmental self-study in which library research and information literacy are components in the educational program;

19) meet and work with internal institutional accreditation liaisons to review past analysis and documentation regarding the self-study and site visits, for educational programs and the library, in particular;

20) regularly use all campus communication outlets to publicize the library's role and involvement in teaching; collection development for print, media, and electronic resources; and organization and access to information.

Conclusion

Librarians have a definite role in redefining educational outcomes, and new ways of learning and teaching. The twenty initiatives described above suggest greater opportunities for academic librarians to assert institutional leadership and influence. Choose an initiative that works for you and make a difference! ■

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