

Who uses ACRL standards?

Gauging the use of “Standards for libraries in higher education”

by William N. Nelson and Robert W. Fernekes

ACRIL has issued standards since 1959 (“Standards for college libraries”) and guidelines since 1968 (“Guide to methods of library evaluation”) for academic libraries. It is important to determine whether these documents are being used, by whom, and in what ways. Surveys have provided usage information regarding earlier ACRL standards documents (see sidebar on page 360). However, there seems to be little such information for the latest documents.

The first ACRL standards to incorporate outcomes assessment (as mandated by the Board of Directors in 1998) were the “Standards for college libraries” (2000 edition).¹ This document has been successfully applied to both university and college libraries. It has special significance for all academic libraries since it is the basis for the ACRL “Standards for libraries in higher education,”² which superseded the separate type of library standards promulgated by three ACRL sections: Community and Junior College Libraries Section (CJCLS), College Libraries Section (CLS), and University Libraries Section (ULS). The newer standards document received final approval in June 2004.

After CLS successfully incorporated outcomes assessment in the 2000 edition, the standards committees of the other two sections continued their efforts to do the same. It soon became clear from their deliberations that the best course of action was to appropriately modify the 2000 edition of the CLS standards rather than create different sets of standards. The practicality of such an approach was confirmed when two university libraries (Marquette and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) successfully applied the “Standards for college libraries” (2000 edition). Results of their efforts are summarized in entries 5 and 6 of the sidebar on page 362.

Changing the direction of the standards

The “Standards for libraries in higher education” address the same 12 topics as the 2000 standards: planning, assessment, outcomes assessment, services, instruction, resources, access, staff, facilities, communication and cooperation, administration, and budget. The preface of the document describes how the new standards differ from earlier library standards:

These standards differ from earlier ACRL library standards in four significant respects.

1. They are intended to apply to all types of libraries in higher education, from technical institutes to research universities.
2. The standards and key principles are designed as a tool to help libraries establish individual goals within the context of their institutional goals.
3. They focus on documenting the library’s contribution to institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes.
4. The standards provide suggested points of comparison for peer and longitudinal comparison, and encourage the development of other measures. Some measures of quality and quantity are used in this document, as well as questions to provide guidance for assessing each element of library operations and the provision of library services.³

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Surveys on usage of ACRL standards

Standards for College Libraries (1975 edition)

1) David Kaser, "Standards for College Libraries," *Library Trends*, 1982, 31 (1), 7–19.

2) Larry Hardesty and Stella Bentley, "The Use and Effectiveness of the 1975 'Standards for College Libraries': A Survey of College Library Directors," in *Options for the '80s, Proceedings of the ACRL Second National Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, September 20–October 3, 1981*; ACRL: Chicago, 1981.

Standards for College Libraries (1986 edition)

David B. Walch, "The 1986 College Library Standards: Application and Utilization" Survey of 215 Academic Libraries," *College & Research Libraries*, 1993, 54 (3), 217–26.

Standards for University Libraries (1979 edition) Beverly Lynch, "University Library Standards," *Library Trends* 1982, 31 (1), 33–47.

The new document should soon be a high priority on the ACRL research agenda, since documenting its use will demonstrate the role of the library in institutional effectiveness and outcomes assessment. To this end, some preliminary information on the use of its very similar predecessor, "Standards for college libraries" (2000 edition), may provide valuable input for future research.

Application and use of the standards

The following discussion is not based on a research study, but does provide some valuable insights into the application and use of the ACRL "Standards for college libraries." The primary sources of the information are queries in March 2002, January 2003, and February 2004 to four ACRL academic library national electronic discussion lists (collib-l, cjc-l, uls-l, ACRL-FRM) regarding use of these standards. In the course of making numerous presentations about these standards, the authors also gathered additional examples (see sidebar on page 361).

Generally, the potential users can be divided into four groups based on the information gathered:

- 1) Those libraries that have assessed their library using the standards.
- 2) Those that plan to use the standards, or are in the process of doing so.
- 3) Those that dismiss the standards as useless for their purposes of assessment and/or

have a preference for the strictly quantitative approach of earlier standards.

4) Those libraries that incorporate outcomes assessment as part of a larger assessment and improvement plan, thereby embracing the most significant element of the standards.

In the first group are libraries that have completed their library assessment using the standards; five are known to have posted the results on their Web pages (see sidebar on page 361). Several libraries in the first group have fully applied a single section of the standards; one of these is known to have posted the results to the Web.

The second group contains the vast majority of those who responded to one of the inquiries. Some have begun application and plan to complete it; for others progress is slower for various reasons ranging from budget shortages to staffing issues.

There are several who reported that they see no value in the standards and would not consider using them. Some in this group insist that the superceded, quantitative standards are much more valuable for their purposes, and several continue to use all or part of the earlier editions.

Finally, there are those whose efforts are not specifically geared toward using these standards, but who are true early leaders in the library assessment movement, effectively assessing the accomplishment of student learning objectives. Many are engaged in assessing

student learning as a function of their information literacy and bibliographic instruction programs. Two initiatives involving libraries of all sizes and types include the Texas Information Literacy Tutorial (TILT) and Project for the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS). Others in their self-assessment accreditation reports have identified outcomes assessment in conjunction with information literacy as part of the library's or institution's quality enhancement or quality improvement plan. Libraries not fully engaged in assessing student learning may garner institutional support for such a program when it is written as a quality enhancement or improvement plan for the institution's self-evaluation. Strong justification for this approach is found in the ACRL standards, as well as regional accreditation standards.

For those libraries not using the standards, there are many questions regarding a practical

way to apply them. Since the new "Standards for libraries in higher education" are so similar to the "Standards for college libraries," the authors have listed some examples of libraries using the latter, written an explanatory note for each, and provided the URLs for those that have posted their results. Libraries of various sizes are represented: community colleges (four), large universities (two), and colleges and smaller universities (fifteen).

Notes

1. ACRL "Standards for college libraries: The final version, approved January 2000," *C&RL News* 61 (March 2000): 175–82.

2. ACRL "Standards for libraries in higher education: The final approved standards," *C&RL News* 65 (October 2004): 534–43. Also available at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardslibraries.htm.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 534.

Academic libraries using the "Standards for college libraries" (2000 edition) and "Standards for libraries in higher education"

1) Governors State University (University Park, IL). [January 2000]

Governors State University was the first to apply the complete "Standards for college libraries" (2000 edition) and make them available on the Web. The library director at that time was a member of the CLS Standards Committee, which wrote the standards. They used the final draft and had the document ready in January 2000, the month in which the standards were officially approved. All eight librarians took part in the process, with different areas assigned to each, and one librarian responsible for compilation of the final document. They plan to use that report as a baseline and repeat the process every few years, with 2003 being the first repeat. The library now has designated a coordinator of assessment, who is responsible for implementing the Standards and providing follow-up for the entire process. Improvement of the library is expected with each repeated cycle. www.govst.edu/gsu_library/t_gsu_library.asp?id=1201—PDF file available here. The original html file is still available here: [/webserve.govst.edu/library/assess.htm](http://webserve.govst.edu/library/assess.htm).

2) Butler University Libraries (Indianapolis, IN). [May 2002]

Using the framework of the ACRL "Standards for college libraries" (2000 edition), this self-study was completed in 2002, in preparation for a 2002–03 institutional review by the North Central Association. The "Accreditation Self-Study" report was posted on the Web, but was recently removed by institutional policy because of the age the document. The accreditation visit was in March 2003, and the library passed with very high marks. An electronic copy can be obtained by contacting Lewis Miller, dean of libraries, at lmiller@butler.edu.

3) University of Wisconsin–Parkside (Kenosha, WI). [November 2002]

In preparing for a North Central Association accreditation team visit in February 2003, the UW-Parkside Library spent several months preparing a self-study based on the 2000 edition of the standards. This self-study exercise was a direct result of a workshop designed to provide practical application of these standards. The Web document can be found at www.uwp.edu/departments/library/services/selfstudy.htm.

4) Amherst College (Amherst, MA). [November 2002]

The Amherst College Library was inspired to undertake facilities assessment activities beginning in 2000, when the new ACRL “Standards for college libraries” were promulgated and approved. The college was shortly facing the five-year self-study cycle for reaccreditation. This was an opportunity to examine the mission of the library in the context of the college’s self-study and contribute to the college-wide assessment. More broadly, this was also an opportunity to try out the new ACRL standards and share what the Amherst College Library learned with their professional community. This example of an assessment using a section of the standards is found at www.amherst.edu/library/assessment/facilities/.

5) Marquette University (Milwaukee, WI). [May 2002]

Marquette used the ACRL “Standards for college libraries” (2000 edition) as the basis for a library review to supplement the self-study narrative prepared for an impending North Central Association accreditation visit in 2004. Marquette agreed to test the applicability of the standards to university libraries for the ACRL ULS Standards and Guidelines Review Committee, and concluded that all the major elements are indeed applicable to these academic libraries. This library assessment is a contribution to the evolving national effort of academic libraries throughout the country to conduct self-studies using outcomes assessment and peer comparisons.

6) Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). (Indianapolis, IN). [June 2002] IUPUI University Library used the ACRL “Standards for college libraries” to review their library as part of the preparation for the campus’ North Central Association accreditation visit. They created a Web site for the review materials and plan to add some additional links to charts, etc. They expect to review and update the document annually. The document can be found at www.ulib.iupui.edu/portfolio/nca.html.

7) Southern Utah University (Cedar City, UT). [May 2001]

The library has used the standards to do a summary assessment of the library. Statistical comparisons were made with ten peers each in two different groups. The assessment document is found at www.suu.edu/general/ir/library.html.

8) Bridgewater State College (Bridgewater, MA). [September 2002]

In preparation for the self-study for their NEASC accreditation visit in fall 2002, Bridgewater State College library used the 2000 CLS standards to assess elements, such as physical space, interlibrary borrowing, and the library collection, among others. Not all of the analysis that was done based on the standards was included in the final product (www.bridgew.edu/NEASC/standard7.pdf), but the standards were consulted extensively in determining how best to evaluate the library.

9) Brenau University (Gainesville, GA). [2003]

Brenau is using the “Standards for college libraries” to develop a library “culture of assessment.” They completed an institutional self-study in the recent past and are beginning to develop a consistent and comprehensive record of library assessment to support the next self-study effort. They have already developed an extensive working document based on the standards and have developed an assessment calendar.

10) Columbus Technical College (Columbus, GA). [2004]

Columbus Technical College library prepared for a SACS accreditation visit by using the standards for guidance. They compared the library with five peer libraries using selected points of comparison. They used benchmarking points, reviewed best practices, and identified their own areas of success and areas for needed improvement. Emphasizing student learning outcomes, they reviewed appropriate planning and assessment tools to ensure that library assessment was included in the library's evaluation procedure.

11) Kansas City Metro Community College (Kansas City, MO). [2004]

The five campuses of Kansas City Metro Community College used the standards while preparing for a program evaluation. The standards provided ideas of how to improve, expand, or amend their assessment efforts. They have begun applying some of the concepts for benchmarking and assessment. The application of key elements of the standards greatly contributed to the preparation of their program evaluation report.

12) University of Alaska Southeast (Juneau, AK). [2004]

The University of Alaska Southeast is in the process of incorporating the "Standards for college libraries" into an evaluation and planning document, which will encompass all aspects of library services and facilities. The planning document is based on the standards and will be used to guide development of formal "faculty workload statements" for the coming year. The workload statement encompasses each faculty member's goals and objectives for the next year and is required by the institution. They are also using the planning document to ensure that the library has appropriate assessment data for all sections of the standards in preparation for a regional accreditation review in 2009.

13) South Arkansas Community College (El Dorado, AR). [2004]

The South Arkansas Community College library has used the standards to develop a strategic plan. They have developed a library self-study report, completed an evaluation plan, and revised the library strategic plan—all in preparation for an accreditation visit.

14) Community and Technical College Libraries (CTCL), is a section of the Canadian Association of College and University Libraries. One of the section's most recent initiatives is a review of the ACRL "Standards for college libraries" (2000 edition), as they could potentially apply to Canadian community and technical college libraries.

15) Providence College and Seminary (Otterburne, Manitoba).

Providence College and Seminary has used the standards in preparing a report for their institution as they are applying for membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

16) Hutchinson Community College (Hutchinson, KS). [2004–05]

Hutchinson Community College in the beginning stages of using the standards to meet the needs of the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) for North Central Association accreditation.

The library of Hutchinson Community College is working towards using the ACRL "Standards for libraries in higher education" to produce input for using the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), through North Central Association (NCA), for accreditation purposes. The NCA standards, like the ACRL standards, use a qualitative approach. The AQIP infuses the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities by providing an alternative process through which an already-accredited institution can maintain its accreditation from NCA. The library is now identifying how to address the ACRL standards, and the methodologies for doing so, in

order to improve library practices. They expect to then tie those to the actions the college is developing as AQIP action projects.

17) Gustavus Adolphus College (St. Peter, MN). [2004]

They used the standards while doing a self study in preparation for an external review and upcoming college-wide NCA accreditation visit. The NCA reviewers commended the library for having a strong assessment program. They continue to conduct assessment of student learning on an annual basis, using different measures. They also annually assess portions of the collection and make comparisons to holdings of libraries in similar institutions; these collection assessments coincide with departmental external reviews.

18) Southwest Baptist University (Bolivar, MO). [2004]

At Southwest Baptist University the library uses the ACRL standards as the benchmark for the level of services, access, collections, staffing, etc. that they strive to meet and maintain. The standards give them the ability to document the minimum level of services they should provide to students, faculty, and staff. The library has conducted a review this year as part of the university's requirement that, on a five-year rotation, each academic program complete an academic unit review to assess the program's strengths and weaknesses. In this review, the library identified areas where they met or exceeded the standards; they were also able to determine several areas that need improvement.

19) American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) and Association of Academic Health Science Libraries (AAHSL). [2003–04]

The AAMC/AAHSL Outcomes Assessment Committee and ad hoc Library Standards Task Force have reviewed these ACRL standards extensively as an exemplary model from which to develop outcomes assessment measures for academic health sciences libraries.

20) Central Bible College (Springfield, MO). [2004]

Central Bible College is using the standards to do a thorough evaluation of the library. They are making good progress in completing this task. They expect to use the standards to see how well their library measures up to ACRL standards, to identify and improve areas of weakness, and for purposes of accreditation compliance.

21) Denison University (Granville, OH). [2004]

Denison University Library's Planning Committee was charged to work on ACRL academic library assessment issues and standards. The committee established a timeline for assessment of the various areas of an academic library, as enumerated in the ACRL "Standards for libraries in higher education." The area of service was selected as a prototype and the annual library staff retreat was devoted to working on the services assessment document. Next the Planning Committee will begin working on assessment documents for the areas of instruction and staff.

22) Tufts University (Medford, MA).

Tufts used the "Standards for college libraries" in preparing for their recent NEASC accreditation visit and found it to be very helpful.

23) Virginia Wesleyan College (Norfolk, VA).

Virginia Wesleyan has used the ACRL standards and found them particularly useful for the library part of the process of preparing for SACS accreditation. *W*