

"Standards for college libraries": Foundations

By Diane C. Parker

An inside look at the evolution of the standards

The 1995 edition of the "Standards for College Libraries" was approved at the ALA Midwinter meeting in Philadelphia, and the final version was published in the April 1995 issue of *C&RL News*. The actual process of revising the 1986 standards started in April 1992 at the ACRL conference in Salt Lake City. That's when the first hearings were held. Early on in the process it became abundantly clear that members of the profession wanted the new version of the standards to continue the quantitative approach taken in the earlier editions. However, a quantitative standard naturally raises important questions: "What are the standards based on? What is their foundation?" This article provides a brief answer to those questions with references to further readings.

Evaluation of academic libraries is a twentieth-century phenomenon, beginning with the efforts of regional accrediting bodies to include the library as a component of institutional evaluation. Requirements for libraries were minimal and generally described qualities rather than quantities needed. The inclination of accrediting bodies to stay away from quantitative measures continues to the present, as can be seen in a review compiled and reported by Coleman and Jarred in 1994.¹ Within the profession itself, there was reliance on the "expert testimony" of a small number of persons respected in our field. Dissatisfied with these approaches, librarians in the 1940s began to call for measures which were more quantitative and for a process that allowed broad-based input into

what the standards should be. The 1959 standards incorporated quantitative measures, and the 1975 and 1986 versions expanded upon them.

Standard 2, Formula A, Collections. This formula was modest in scope in the 1959 version; it was derived solely from enrollment. In the 1975 version, the committee used the research of Clapp and Jordan to add several other factors.² The 1986 and 1995 committees made some adjustments to this standard. The 1995 committee views Formula A as stable for those libraries that still want to support their clientele primarily from collections held locally. However, many libraries are relying more on electronic resources, and this trend will need to be watched closely.

Standard 4, Formula B, Librarians. This formula describes the number of librarians (not staff) that a library needs. The formula is driven substantially by the size of a library's collection. In the 1959 version of the standards the formula for number of librarians was set at a minimum of three. This was expanded in the 1975 version "under membership pressure."³ For the most part, development of the standards has been a public process within the association, and members do influence their development and direction. So, part of the foundation of the standards is public pressure from our own profession. In 1982 Kaser said that "unlike Formulas A and C, Formula B rests on a somewhat shaky foundation, and will probably be the first to fall in the face of rigorous research" (Kaser, p.12).

Standard 6, Formula C, Facilities. This is the standard found in surveys of library directors to be the most reliable, and it tends to be confirmed by standards produced by various

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state agencies. However, it also is under attack from university planners who wonder why any library facility is needed when the virtual library is here. A study carried out at Cornell University and reported in a 1993 article indicates that new library buildings still will be needed, at least for a decade into the 21st century.⁴ In terms of electronic texts, the virtual library is arriving slowly at most campuses.

Standard 8, Budget. The 1995 version of the standards stipulates that the library's annual authorized expenditures shall be at least six percent of the total institutional expenditure for educational and general purposes. This standard has evolved over time. In the 1959 standards it was 5%, a little higher than most libraries had, but a goal to strive toward. In 1975 the figure was changed to 6%, but left in the commentary section of the standard. In 1986 it was moved into the standard itself. During hearings for the 1995 edition, the debate ranged from criticizing 6% as an unrealistic goal to supporting it as the funding we need to make the changes libraries are experiencing. A cursory look at recent IPEDS (Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System) data indicates that most institutions presently do not meet the 6% goal. Also, some have argued that the method of calculating an educational and general purposes budget is in itself too variable between institutions. A source of much controversy, this standard needs further study. However, research is needed before this section of the standards can be revised.

Have data reported nationally ever been used in development of the Standards? Yes, the 1975 committee used them for development of the "letter grades" in Formulas A-C. The committee reviewed HEGIS (Higher Education General Information Survey) data to develop letter grades which libraries could use to measure their success in meeting the standards. This was a "forced bell curve" approach, deliberately used to define outliers at both ends of the spectrum. The committee realized that some libraries would meet the requirements too easily, some would find them unrealistic, but most would find them a goal to strive for. Hence, national data were used, not to define a norm, but to provide "a continuing stimulus to seek improvement" (Kaser, p. 12). In 1981 Ray Carpenter pointed out that very few libraries actually could meet the challenge.⁵

Is there utility to the standards? More than one committee has looked at this question. Na-

tional surveys of library directors have been conducted, and the answer in general is yes, the standards have been useful. The latest of these studies was reported by Walch in 1993.⁶

What then is the basis, the foundation, of the quantitative parts of our standards?

There are a combination of factors. They include expert opinion, the weight of aggregate experience from the profession, the collective opinion from association members, national data from HEGIS/IPEDS, research, confirmation by state agencies, and confirmation of the utility of the standards by library administrators who must apply them. In addition to the standards, many libraries use peer comparisons to help evaluate their performance. In any case, as the study by Coleman and Jarred shows, libraries that meet the standards can also meet the requirements of the regional accrediting agencies.

Whatever changes are made in the future, the ACRL College Libraries Section's (CLS) Standards Committee believes it is important to base them as much as possible on research. We know that this is a time of vast change for libraries. In fact, the foundations of academic librarianship are themselves shifting. For example, we have relied for decades on the notion that services are supported mainly by collections owned locally. Now libraries are incorporating more reliance on external resources. In this climate it is the task of the CLS Standards Committee to keep the profession in touch with the best we know of current practice and to incorporate the best of what we are learning into future revisions. Given the current pace of change, revision of the standards has become an ongoing process.

Even as the 1995 edition went to press, the Standards Committee started work on the next edition. Two areas need follow-up attention now. The first is Formula B which is used to determine number of librarians. The second, from Standard 8.1, is the stipulation that the library's annual authorized expenditures shall be at least 6% of the total institutional expenditure for educational and general purposes. Both topics were the source of much discussion during committee meetings and hearings, but at this time there is no sound basis for revision. Further research is needed. In March the Standards Committee submitted two requests for ACRL initiative funds to support research on those topics. Further revision of those sections of the standards will depend on the outcome of the investigations.

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but can influence it. Moreover, focusing on success in graduate school leads to an appropriate vision easily compressed into a simple statement: "Distinctive quality in resources and services to empower students for advanced learning." Obviously, this vision would have its major impact on the bibliographic instruction program. Focusing on making sure that students graduate with the best possible bibliographic skills they can acquire can improve both the overall success of the library and the college in this example. An ability to utilize information resources effectively is essential to success in graduate school. It should be fairly easy to see from this that clear vision, competently expressed, lends focus to library operations, improves success rates, and plays an important role in determining quality.

Note

1. Larry H. Litten and Alfred E. Hall, "In the Eyes of Our Beholders," *Journal of Higher Education* 60 (May/June 1989): 302-24. ■

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Notes

1. Paul Coleman, and Ada D. Jarred, "Regional Association Criteria and the Standards for College Libraries: The Informal Role of Quantitative Input Measures for Libraries in Accreditation," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 20 (November 1994): 273-84.

2. Verner W. Clapp, and Robert T. Jordan, "Quantitative Criteria for Adequacy of Academic Library Collections," *College & Research Libraries* 26 (September 1965): 371-80.

3. David Kaser, "Standards for College Libraries," *Library Trends* 31 (Summer 1983): 7-19.

4. Michael Matier, and C. Clinton Sidle, "What Size Libraries for 2010?" *Planning for Higher Education* 21 (Summer 1993): 9-15.

5. Ray L. Carpenter, "College Libraries: A Comparative Analysis in Terms of the ACRL Standards," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (January 1981): 7-18.

6. David B. Walch, "The 1986 College Library Standards: Application and Utilization," *College & Research Libraries* 54 (May 1993): 217-26.

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Brown, Helen M. "College Library Standards" *Library Trends* 21 (October 1972): 204-218.
 "Standards for College Libraries, 1995 edition." *C&RL News* 56 (April 1995): 245-57. ■

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