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Becoming Embedded by Supporting Departmental Accreditation

One Librarian's Experience

In June 2023, I was approached by two faculty members in the American University Math and Statistics Department about adding Data Science to my list of supported subjects on our website and creating a research guide about library resources. This simple ask is how I learned that the Math and Statistics Department was officially adding a Data Science bachelor's degree option and that accreditors were coming in the fall of 2023. Beginning with easy conversations around what the department was looking for and what they needed, I was able to work with faculty throughout the summer to add new resources to our collection, develop relationships with a department I rarely interact with, and convince the accreditation team (both internal and external reviewers) that library involvement with accreditation is important for student learning and success.

There are case studies[1,2] in the academic literature about how librarians have supported university-wide accreditation activities or reaccreditation in the US and abroad, but there is a lack of information about how librarians can support a single department in gaining accreditation for a new program, such as a BS in Data Science. In this article, I will share my experience in the hope that it may help others in supporting departments in similar situations.

Programmatic Accreditation Processes

Accreditation is the process by which academic institutions are credentialed and given recognition by a governing body. For example, a valid master's in library science degree is obtained from a library school that is accredited by the American Library Association. In some university-wide accreditations, also called institutional accreditations, library services and materials are evaluated because they affect the quality of students' educational experiences and reflect the priorities of the institution.[3] Less detail is put into programmatic accreditation, also called specialized accreditation. Programmatic accreditation aims to evaluate the "educational preparation of entry level professionals"[4] by using standards set by the profession.

The process for accreditation often occurs over two main phases: an internal self-assessment and an external peer review. The internal self-assessment begins with the institution or department evaluating itself, its services, and the support the entire institution provides for students. Self-assessments can include a variety of categories, but typically they will involve planning and creating goals for the future, as well as evaluating how the institution or department has

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accomplished goals from previous self-assessments. The external peer review is conducted by a group of evaluators from other institutions, usually during a campus visit when they assess the quality of the curriculum, facilities, faculty, administrative structures, and more. After the visit, the external reviewers submit a report to the institution detailing current strengths and weaknesses, an accreditation decision, and changes the accrediting body wants to see in the future.

The specific accreditation body for our assessment was the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), specifically its Applied and Natural Sciences Commission (ANSC). ABET's ANSC has general and program criteria. There are eight different general criteria: Students, Program Educational Objectives, Student Outcomes, Continuous Improvement, Curriculum, Faculty, Facilities, and Institutional Support. These criteria apply to all accreditation seekers. ABET recognizes 10 distinct categories for the specific programs being evaluated. In this case, the Math and Statistics Department followed the Data Science, Data Analytics, and Similarly Named Programs criteria. Each of the 10 program criteria has different requirements that provide specific requirements that clarify how each discipline should interpret the general criteria. The program criteria for Data Science, Data Analytics, and Similarly Named Programs are separated into two main groups, Curriculum and Faculty, with most of the focus on curriculum.[5]

Librarians can support accreditation activities in a variety of ways. During institutional-level reviews, librarians need to provide input and feedback on the self-evaluation process. There are several ways for librarians to get involved in the accreditation process. The most common way is to serve on a committee at either the institutional or departmental level. Additionally, librarians will often provide information on library collections and services or write letters to the external evaluation board as a part of the self-assessment. During the accreditation visit, they may also offer tours or presentations. For program-level accreditation, it is more common for a librarian to write a letter or provide a brief presentation to the evaluators.[6] Librarians are poised to provide unique insights into the informatics infrastructure of a university and demonstrate all the additional research and instructional supports that students and faculty have access to. Having librarian inclusion on these committees elevates the work we do and has the added benefit of further embedding subject liaisons or people in similar roles with the departments and disciplines they serve.

The Ask and Early Involvement

When the departmental self-evaluation committee approached me about supporting their accreditation process, I agreed to create a research guide and offered to purchase new titles and support their accreditation process in any way I could, most likely by writing a letter or offering a library tour.

While we have plenty of resources on computer science, my library's collection on resources for data science was scant. As I built the research guide for data science students, I sent faculty members in the department an Excel spreadsheet to fill out with any necessary or desired titles. I worked with our acquisitions team to set aside some funds for building the new collection and create a new budget line going forward for data science acquisitions. Because the data science faculty listed only a few titles, I asked a colleague who is the program director for Geospatial Research Support to recommend some titles and asked our ProQuest representative to create a curated collection of titles that would be considered part

of a "core" for us. Curated collections are a service that ProQuest provides. The suggested collection was based on titles we were missing and excluded coding books.

In August 2023, I met with faculty in the Math and Statistics Department and stakeholders in the data science degree program to solicit feedback on the research guide and discuss purchase requests. Most purchase requests were either Open Access titles that did not need to be purchased or were already owned by the library and available through the O'Reilly Media database. This was an important meeting to learn about what faculty valued, while also educating them about what the library offers and the best practices of an online research guide. For example, we discussed how a research guide is best as a starting place for researchers new to the discipline. Compromises on the difference between having a "list of all the resources" and a "starting place for beginning researchers" were reached. The research guide ultimately included some of the specific resources faculty members requested, as well as links to databases the library subscribes to for literature searching and accessing data, information on data management and version control, and books on responsible data science practices.

The Site Visit

The onsite visit was planned for October 2023, and I was given 30 minutes to meet with one member of the accreditation team. While I love talking about the library and all the services we provide, I struggled to figure out what I should talk about and what the accreditors cared about. I was not given much information about how the visit would work or what specifically they were looking for, but I did receive a fact sheet written for all internal participants. This fact sheet was a summary of the self-evaluation and explained the criteria that the evaluating body would use during their visit. Based on the criteria, I decided the library fit under their "Institutional Support" category. The presentation covered three major categories:[7]

- The library by the numbers
  - Our budget
  - Number of staff and faculty
  - Number of items owned and shared with the consortium
  - Number of databases we subscribe to
- Support services the library provides
  - Research assistance with subject specialists
  - Information literacy instruction sessions in classes at all levels of instruction
  - Technology, such as media and GIS subscriptions
  - An institutional repository
  - Plans for more services
- Resources specific to data science
  - Databases
  - New fund and monograph collection
  - Data Science research guide

The presentation was surprisingly informal and conversational. I met with an evaluator from a large state institution who was relatively unaware of his library's resources. I organized my presentation around the theme "Library as Institutional Support" because that was where I assumed the library would fit within the criteria. While presenting, I learned

that the accreditors placed the library in the "Facilities" category of the accreditation criteria. This provided an opportunity to talk about the library as more than a space. The accreditor I worked with was impressed with the amount of support the library provides and was engaged with the presentation. He was also impressed by the new research guide and was glad students would have that resource to support their studies and research. The presentation helped provide a holistic view of the academic institution and all the support students and faculty receive to best learn and grow.

Conclusion and Next Steps

My time working with the accreditation team was short, but it was a fantastic opportunity to embed myself in a department that rarely sees itself as using library resources or services. My interactions also solidified my role as a liaison to the department. As a result, I have begun receiving more reference requests via email, typically from students who were directed to me by their professors. Professionally, developing a new collection and learning about a new discipline was a valuable summer activity. Giving a short in-person presentation to the accreditation team was an enjoyable experience to highlight the library, explain what librarians do, and advocate for including more library interaction in the final evaluation. If I were to support another accreditation process, I would be more confident in what value I bring to the accreditation process and would be comfortable offering assistance to the accreditation team.

The new major was successfully accredited and is one of the first data science programs to be accredited in the country. Hopefully, interacting with the accreditation body will encourage them to consider the library and librarians in their future evaluations. Moving forward, the library will continue to develop a strong data science collection and further refine the research guide, as well as continue to build connections with faculty and students.

I would recommend others to get involved with their departments' accreditation if possible. An email as simple as addressing your role at the institution and how you can support the accreditation process goes a long way in convincing accreditation team members to include you in their work. Offering a service such as creating a research guide, writing a section of the self-assessment, or meeting with external reviewers will help to provide value for the accreditation team and future students. ✍

Notes

1. Natalie Tagge, "Leveraging Accreditation to Integrate Sustainable Information Literacy Instruction into the Medical School Curriculum," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 106, no. 3 (July 2018): 377-82, https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2018.276.

2. Shafeek Fazal, "Library Strategic Planning for Middle States Accreditation: A 10-Year Road to Success," *Journal of Library Administration* 56, no. 1 (November 2015): 27-40, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1105027.

3. Prudence W. Dalrymple, "Understanding Accreditation: The Librarian's Role in Educational Evaluation," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 1, no. 1 (2001): 23-32.

4. Dalrymple, "Understanding Accreditation," 23-32.

5. "Criteria for Accrediting Applied and Natural Science Programs, 2023-2024," ABET, last modified February 9, 2023, https://www.abet.org/accreditation/accreditation-criteria/criteria-for-accrediting-applied-and-natural-science-programs-2023-2024/.

6. Tom Schmiedel, "Library Support for Accreditation: A Guide to Online Resources," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 2 (February 2017): 96-100, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.78.2.9624.

7. Clarissa Ihssen, "Institutional Support-Library Resources" (presentation, 2023). https://doi.org/10.57912/25582734. Or "a [or the] Sciences Libarian"?