

# Librarians and Accreditation: A Survey of North Carolina Librarians

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In a 1977 article, Dudley Yates observed that "literature on institutional accreditation is sparse; literature on the specific subject of the library portion of accreditation is even more sparse."<sup>1</sup> This still held true in the spring of 1982 when doctoral students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Library Science explored accreditation and standards for academic libraries in a seminar conducted by Dean Edward G. Holley. Literature searches provided little basis upon which to judge the effectiveness of library evaluation in the accreditation process. As a means of gaining more information about the effects of accreditation upon libraries, a questionnaire was sent to the directors of North Carolina libraries that had recently participated in the Southern Association's accreditation process. This article will summarize the findings obtained from that questionnaire.

The Southern Association, like the other regional accrediting associations, utilizes a process which consists of a self-study conducted by the institution and a visit by an evaluating committee of qualified educators. Each member institution of the College Delegate Assembly must participate in the program periodically to maintain its accredited status. A newly accredited institution is expected to complete its reaffirmation five years after membership has been granted; thereafter it undertakes the self-study program once every ten years. After an institution has done at least one traditional self-study, it has the option of conducting a self-study in a nontraditional form.

Drawing upon the *Standards of the College Delegate Assembly*<sup>2</sup> and the *Manual for the Institutional Self-Study Program of the Commission on Colleges*,<sup>3</sup> a questionnaire was constructed which touched upon various aspects of the Southern Association's accreditation standard and processes, including the self-study, the committee visit, the committee report, and follow-up activities. The questionnaire was sent to the

library directors of level II (bachelor's degree), level III (bachelor's and master's degrees), and level IV (bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees) institutions in North Carolina which had reaffirmed their accreditation in 1977 (the year the current standards were implemented), 1978, 1979 or 1980. The target group included four public and ten private institutions ranging in enrollment size from 620 to 9,587 students;<sup>4</sup> all fourteen library directors responded to the questionnaire.

Only three of the fourteen respondents were not affiliated with their libraries at the time of the evaluation by the Southern Association. Seven were head librarians, and four were members of the library staff in a rank other than that of head librarian. Throughout the questionnaire, respondents who had participated in the evaluation process were given the option of answering "don't know" for appropriate questions. The questionnaire itself and aggregate responses appear as Appendix A.

Obviously, fourteen responses to a simple questionnaire can only begin to deal with issues related to a subject as complex as accreditation. Since the questionnaire was designed to facilitate quick responses, it did not explore problems in depth or reveal subtle differences of opinions or experiences. One respondent wrote that "many of the questions were hard to answer in a definite yes or no," and the number of people who added qualifiers such as "some," "partially," and "to a limited extent" to their answers confirms his statement. Given that this questionnaire is at best a rough instrument, it does, nevertheless, suggest areas of consensus and possible areas for future investigations.

## Findings

One of the most noteworthy findings of the survey is that this entire group of librarians from diverse institutions characterized the accreditation process as being at least somewhat beneficial for their libraries (Question 18). While it is encouraging to know that the directors perceive accreditation as being beneficial, it could certainly be

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questioned whether the benefits outweigh the cost of conducting the evaluation and whether the evaluations result in significant improvement in marginal institutions. The fact that only two librarians considered the process to be "greatly beneficial" suggests the process could be improved.

Of the self-study, the team visit, and the committee report, the respondents seemed most satisfied with the self-study phase. Twelve of the fourteen institutions conducted traditional self-studies, and most found the *Manual* to be a useful aid in preparing the library evaluation for the self-study. In almost all cases, the library was represented by a staff member on a committee charged with examining the library, and most indicated that the self-study identified the library's strengths and weaknesses and presented recommendations designed to remedy those weaknesses.

Only seven, however, felt that the self-study projected the library into the future and identified short- and long-range concerns. Since the Association describes projection into the future and identification of goals as being "essential" elements of an effective self-study,<sup>5</sup> this area evidently needs further attention. The situation could stem from a failure on the part of the Southern Association to communicate the importance of this objective, a failure on the part of the institution to deal with the issues, or a combination of both.

Most of the respondents considered the library evaluators to be well qualified and well prepared, but the ten who had been involved in the site visit split on the question of whether the evaluators had learned enough about the library to be able to evaluate its effectiveness. This might reflect the difficulty of trying to evaluate a library in a time period of two to three days. In spite of their reservations, though, nine respondents said that the evaluators had made some valuable suggestions or recommendations. The Association might want to examine whether more time, more efficient evaluating techniques and methods, and more training for library evaluators are needed to improve this aspect of the site visit.

Most of the directors saw at least the library section of the Committee Reports, the majority of which contained suggestions or recommendations pertaining to the library. In general, the respondents characterized these as being reasonable, practicable, and important, but they felt that the report was slightly more accurate in covering the library's weaknesses than its strengths. Only four said that the librarian/director was asked to comment on the Committee Report. (Five did not

know if the librarian's reactions had been solicited.) It is difficult to assess the significance of these responses without further information. In some instances, the administration might have chosen to ignore the library section of the report, while in others the nature of the report itself or examinations conducted during the self-study might have precluded further discussions.

Eight institutions implemented changes in the library as a result of the accreditation process, and five did not. (One did not respond to this question.) An interesting subject for a future study would be an analysis of the types and magnitude of these changes and a determination of whether they would have been implemented without impetus from the accreditation process.

### The Accreditation Process

The final section of the questionnaire asked the respondents to express their opinions about certain aspects of the accreditation process. Several would like the accreditation standards to have separate sets of criteria for different types of institutions; more quantitative measures in the areas of collection size, staff size, budget size, and building size; and the requirement of faculty status for professional librarians. Only four said the standards should place more emphasis upon outcomes assessment (such as documenting the effects of the library upon students).

This last response presents a dilemma for the Southern Association, since its proposed *Criteria for Accreditation* states that each institution must "demonstrate its continuing concern for student educational achievement through a planned program of outcomes assessment."<sup>6</sup> Because the accreditation process depends to a great extent upon how the institution approaches the self-study, those involved will have to understand the reasons for incorporating outcomes assessment and be committed to tackling the difficult problem of developing effectiveness measures.

If the College Delegate Assembly approves the proposed criteria at its December 1983 meeting in New Orleans, librarians will be asked to show how their libraries affect students. Possible effectiveness measures suggested by the respondents included the number of graduates going to graduate and professional schools, the reactions of students to the library, and increases in bibliographic skills and effective learning as a result of library experience. One person said he would be in favor of outcomes assessment if a workable instrument were developed, but that he had never

seen one. Among his suggestions for outcomes assessment were effects of library research on term papers and other written projects, the ability and willingness of students to use the library as an information resource, and the efficiency of the library in supplying information that students need. Two other respondents indicated that more work needs to be done in developing opinion polls and statistics on library use. These responses reflect the need for cooperation among the association, administration, faculty, librarians, and other components of the educational structure in devising effective measures for outcomes assessment and the need for more discussions of the issues involved in the professional literature of educators and librarians.

Ten people chose to answer the final question: "What changes would you like to see in the standards themselves and/or the accreditation process?" The responses displayed a wide range of concerns, although a few areas elicited multiple comments. Two respondents re-emphasized that they would like more quantitative standards, with one observing that the present standards "read somewhat like moral prescriptions." Several touched upon aspects related to the evaluation team. One respondent felt that the teams should have more trained librarians and that evaluators should be from schools of the same size, kind (public or private), and degree programs. Another suggested that the evaluators should "learn more about the library, possibly through a more in-depth site visitation than usually takes place."

Two people expressed concern about the library's collection, with one asking for "more emphasis on the quality of the collection," and the other urging "greater interaction of library with academic programs and evaluation of collection in relation to academic programs." One person wanted to "stick to the basics" established in the *Manual* and to "avoid the extraordinary and non-traditional approaches." Another believed the *Manual* could be improved by making it "more specific about projections, and about following an established format for writing the chapter — such as placing all recommendations at end of chapter as well as in body of text."

One final comment on the value of the accreditation process is worth quoting in its entirety, for it conveys the conflicts that can arise between the practical and the ideal in trying to evaluate an institution.

The accreditation program in theory has an honorable objective. I am sure most institutions do an honest job of reporting facts about their programs. However, because everyone has a stake in the institution's future

(their own salary checks!), perhaps our reports do not reflect all of our known shortcomings. Too, because of fear of reprisals some complaints might not be aired (for example: tenure and promotion procedures, administrative inadequacies, etc.)

One rather strong point for accreditation self-studies (as reflected in your questions above) is that it forces us to lay down our daily chores and make long-range plans — especially useful if the institution's administrators are not especially strong in planning for the future!

## Conclusion

The responses to the questionnaire reflect some of the many difficulties involved in evaluating the library as part of the accreditation process. One senses that these librarians are more comfortable with the standards which are promulgated by the professional associations — standards which are differentiated by type of library and which are more detailed and concrete than those of the accrediting associations. But the fact that fourteen librarians were willing to take the time to respond to an unofficial questionnaire on accreditation indicates the existence of interest in the subject. More of this interest needs to be tapped so that the accrediting process can produce even greater benefits for libraries.

## References

1. Dudley V. Yates, "The Impact of Regional Accrediting Agencies upon Libraries in Postsecondary Education," *Southeastern Librarian* 27 (Spring 1977):22.
2. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, *Standards of the College Delegate Assembly* (Atlanta: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1977).
3. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, *Manual for the Institutional Self-Study Program of the Commission on Colleges* (Atlanta: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1977).
4. University of North Carolina, Planning Division of the General Administration, *Statistical Abstract of Higher Education in North Carolina, 1980-81*, Research Report 1-81 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, August 1981), 9-11.
5. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, *Manual*, 4.
6. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, *Criteria for Accreditation [Proposed]* (Atlanta: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, (1982), 12.

## APPENDIX A Survey

- Name of institution .....
- Your name .....
- Your position or title .....
1. Were you the Librarian/Director when the institution with which you are now associated was evaluated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools?  
Yes, 7; No, 7  
If "no," were you a member of the library staff in rank other than Librarian/Director?  
Yes, 4; No, 3
  2. Did your institution conduct a traditional or a nontraditional self-study?  
traditional, 12; nontraditional, 2



3. Did your institution form committees to examine the various facets of the institution's operations?  
Yes, 14; No, 0  
If "yes," was a separate committee formed to deal with the library?  
Yes, 13; No, 0; Don't know, 1  
If "yes," was the Librarian/Director a member of this committee?  
Yes, 10; No, 3  
If "no," did a member of the library staff in a rank other than Librarian/Director serve on the committee?  
Yes, 2; No, 1
4. Does your institution offer graduate programs?  
Yes, 7; No, 7  
If "yes," did the self-study cover the library in its treatment of Standard Ten (Graduate Program)?  
Yes, 4; No, 3 (two of these programs started after the evaluation)
5. Was the *Manual for the Institutional Self-Study Program* a useful aid in preparing the library evaluation for the self-study?  
Yes, 13; No, 0; Don't know, 1  
If "no," please comment:
6. Do you feel that the self-study identified the library's strengths and weaknesses?  
Yes, 12 (three qualified their answers: "partially," "some," "to some extent")
7. Do you feel that the self-study presented recommendations designed to remedy weaknesses identified by the self-study?  
Yes, 12 (four qualified their answers: "partially," "some," "to some extent," "limited"); No, 2
8. Do you feel that the self-study projected the library into the future and identified short- and long-range concerns?  
Yes, 7; No, 6; Don't know, 1
9. Do you feel that the library evaluation(s) possessed the qualifications (such as knowledge, experience, background in a comparable institution) to be able to evaluate your library?  
Yes, 9 (one respondent had two evaluators: one qualified, and one not); No, 0; Don't know, 5
10. Did the library evaluator(s) demonstrate familiarity with the library section of your institution's self-study?  
Yes, 10; No, 0; Don't know, 4
11. Do you feel that the evaluator(s) learned enough about the library to be able to evaluate its effectiveness?  
Yes, 5; No, 5; Don't know, 4
12. Did the library evaluator(s) make any valuable suggestions or recommendations?  
Yes, 9; No, 2; Don't know, 2; Blank, 1
13. Did the Librarian/Director receive a copy of the complete Committee Report?  
Yes, 8; No, 3; Don't know, 3  
If "no," did the Librarian/Director receive only the library section of the complete Committee Report?  
Yes, 2; No, 1  
If "no," what, if anything, did the Librarian/Director receive from the administration of the institution in regard to the Committee Report?  
Nothing. Copy made available in Dean's Office
14. Do you feel that the Committee Report accurately covered the library's strengths?  
Yes, 7; No, 5; Don't know, 2  
the library's weakness?  
Yes, 9; No, 4; Don't know, 1
15. Did the Committee Report contain suggestions and/or recommendations pertaining to the library?  
Yes, 11; No, 1; Don't know, 1  
If "yes," would you characterize the suggestions and/or recommendations on the whole as being  
reasonable? Yes, 11; No, 0  
practicable? Yes, 9; No, 0; Blank, 2  
important? Yes, 8; No, 2; Blank, 1
16. Was the Librarian/Director asked to comment upon the library section of the Committee Report?  
Yes, 4; No, 5; Don't know, 5
17. Were any changes implemented in the library as a result of the accreditation process?  
Yes, 8; No, 5; Blank, 1
18. Overall, how would you characterize the effects of the accreditation process upon the library?  
Greatly beneficial, 2  
Somewhat beneficial, 12  
Somewhat detrimental, 0  
Greatly detrimental, 0  
No effect, 0
19. Should the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools develop a classification system of different types of colleges and universities for accrediting purposes?  
Yes, 9 (one stated that the Association should allow for difference without being rigid); No, 3; No opinion, 1; Blank, 1
20. Should the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools develop separate sets of criteria to accredit different types of institutions?  
Yes, 9 (one stated that the Association should allow for difference without being rigid); No, 3; No opinion, 1; Blank, 1
21. Should the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools introduce quantitative measures into Standard Six (Library)?  
Yes, 9; No, 4; No opinion, 0; Blank, 1  
If "yes," in which of the following areas:  
size of collection, 7  
size of staff, 8  
size of budget, 8  
size of building, 6  
Other(s): One suggested ranges; Another felt any quantitative measures should be reviewed frequently.
22. Should Standard Six (Library) require faculty status for professional librarians?  
Yes, 9; No, 4; No opinion, 1
23. Should Standard Six (Library) place more emphasis upon outcomes assessment (such as documenting the effects of the library upon students)?  
Yes, 4; No, 5; No opinion, 4; Blank, 1  
If "yes," what types of outcomes assessment would you suggest? (See article.)
24. What changes would you like to see in the standards themselves and/or the accreditation process? (See article.)