Rethinking the librarian's role on accrediting teams

By Ralph A. Wolff

A view from an accreditation official

For years librarians have commonly been a part of evaluation teams sponsored by regional accrediting associations which are responsible for accrediting an entire institution. How well does regional accreditation evaluate the effectiveness of libraries? How well do librarians function within the context of regional accreditation? This is my answer to both questions: There is plenty of room for improvement. The time has come to critique the role that librarians play on accreditation teams and discuss ways in which librarians can be more effective in asking a different and wider range of questions, and can be more fully integrated into the overall functioning of visiting teams. The opinions that follow are personal and do not necessarily represent those of the commission I serve.

From hundreds of institutional self-studies and visiting team reports, a picture emerges that is very different from our traditional assumptions of the role and importance of the library in the life of an academic institution. While we might like to believe that the library serves as the intellectual center of a college or university, too often a library is viewed as a place to study rather than a rich intellectual resource crucial to a student's education. Rarely does an institutional self-study or visiting team report address the role the library *really* plays in the life of students and faculty.

An institutional self-study typically includes a full chapter on library and learning resources. Yet it is heavily—if not exclusively—directed to *descriptions* of holdings, bibliographic and other services, staffing, facilities, budgets, and operational issues. Little evidence is typically available in a self-study about actual library use by students and faculty, or of student and faculty perceptions about the library. Library evaluators often do not challenge libraries to develop meaningful evidence of library effectiveness. Instead, they use resource indicators to determine quality and effectiveness. In this regard, neither accrediting associations nor library evaluators are challenging libraries enough.

Library reviews typically look at *aggregate* holdings. Yet during institutional reviews we have found whole disciplines that view library support as nonessential. Remarkably, deans of professional schools at a number of institutions have indicated that students really need rely *only* on textbooks and faculty handouts to meet curricular objectives. What of our implicit assumption that *higher* education involves the study of more than textbooks, and should include exposure to the current and historical literature of the field? Are there really some disciplines that do not need library support? Librarians evaluating library services should reach beneath the veneer of aggregate holdings to assess the role and effectiveness of the library for all schools and programs. This is an issue that should be discussed with institutions but is currently not addressed either in the self-study or visit process. Perhaps this is partly a case of unclear expectations. A librarian serving on a team may believe that other team members representing different academic disciplines will address library resources in their fields, whereas these evaluators assume that the librarian will address such issues. Much more attention must be placed on the effectiveness of the library for different programs and schools, especially those with a strong professional or technical orientation.

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Librarians serving on evaluation teams tend to focus most of their time within the library, meeting almost exclusively with the library staff. This creates a narrow perspective about the library and yields little information about how the library is perceived by those outside. As a result, library evaluators often become severely isolated from other team members and from the work of the rest of the team. This phenomenon often parallels the isolation of librarians from their faculty colleagues on a campus. Accrediting agencies should work to break down this isolation by rethinking whom the library evaluator interviews during a visit and how the library evaluator functions in relation to other team members.

A number of institutions have developed programs to serve adult students on and off campus, yet rarely is the same scrutiny given to library support for off-campus students as those on campus. Institutions often fail to provide even basic library instruction or support to off-campus students, expecting students to rely on the collections of other institutions. My experience has been that this leads to a condition of "out of sight, out of mind," with faculty ultimately diluting course requirements to limit the need for library research. Often reference and bibliographic services are not readily available through other institutions. Library evaluators with little experience of off-campus program issues tend to focus only on resources and services to on-campus students, and contribute to institutions abdicating responsibilities for off-campus library services.

The advent of new technologies for the library has created the potential for the transformation of the library. The possibilities are exciting. At some point in the near future, online access to bibliographic—if not full-text—resources will be a necessity for students in some disciplines. Institutions serious about creating "lifelong learning skills" so frequently a part of institutional mission statements may need to consider the role of library and information literacy as a means of fulfilling this goal. These new technologies also give rise to reconceptualizing the role the library can play within the institution. No longer will libraries be passive resources; they have the potential to become a dynamic part of the learning process. Yet both librarians and faculty often are not well-equipped to embrace these new roles and functions. We see too little evidence of the library being integrated into curriculum development strategies, academic planning efforts, or even the increasing and commendable efforts to improve faculty teaching effectiveness. Far greater leadership will need to be displayed by accreditation teams in suggesting new approaches for addressing the implications of technology.

While we might like to believe that the library serves as the intellectual center of a college or university, too often a library is viewed as a place to study rather than a rich intellectual resource crucial to a student's education.

In conclusion, librarians are vitally important to the accreditation process and to improving our institutions. But these critical issues should be discussed, and new ideas should be developed that challenge libraries to gather meaningful evidence of library effectiveness and encourage integration of the library into the academic quality debate within institutions. ∎