

# The Regional Accrediting Associations And the Standards for College Libraries

By F. TAYLOR JONES

THERE ARE six regional accrediting agencies in the United States. Each works within a defined area; each is responsible for several hundred institutions; and each is independent of the others. They have no connection with the federal government or any state government. They represent all facets of higher education—not particular types or points of view. Each association is free to do things in its own way; the tie among them is one of fraternity rather than federation.

This is the way we think it should be, for it permits a quicker and more effective marshalling of each section's own forces to meet its educational problems. It enables each to move at its own pace, never forced or held back by the others. There is a general objective which is firmly held by them all: to strengthen, improve, and extend higher education. The means by which they try to do it, and their rates of progress, may differ. Yet the differences among these independent associations are superficial. They are separate denominations, so to speak, but with a common apostolate. Out of it there does grow a common attitude toward such matters as ALA's Standards for College Libraries.

To understand that attitude one must realize that regional accreditation is a very different thing today from what it was a generation ago. It used to be referred to as standardization, and quite accurately so. It was brought into being by a need, both public and professional, to establish and enforce some common denominators in education. It dealt with minimum "standards" (put the word in

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*Mr. Jones, is the Executive Secretary of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. This address was delivered at the meeting of ACRL's College Library Section in Montreal, June 21, 1960.*

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quotes, for it is historic) in such matters as faculty qualifications, student preparation, and libraries—the conditions and resources which seemed closely related to effective instruction. Accreditation was intended to certify that a college had at least these minimum resources and was observing certain agreed rules for *there* use; therefore other institutions, especially graduate schools, could assume that its students were acceptable for admission.

The "standards" forty years ago were largely quantitative. They had to be; it takes time to work out qualitative criteria and learn how to handle them. Quantitative requirements are *enforcible*. In its early days accreditation was not far from a policing operation.

But American higher education continued to diversify, which made standardization less and less relevant. With increasing experience the associations discovered how to shift their emphasis from quantitative inspection to qualitative evaluation. Also something else happened, not altogether unforeseen: it became apparent that the process leading to accreditation had immensely beneficial effects on the institution concerned.

This marked the beginning of a new era. The modern concept of accreditation was born with the realization that its by-

product, that is, the useful effect it had on the institution itself, was more important than its ostensible object, the granting of accreditation. The process had larger possibilities. It could be deliberately used as a catalyst to speed up a college's or university's development. It did so by offering each one in turn a view of itself through the eyes of interested, informed colleagues; against a wide background of experience and heightened by the immediacy of personal contact.

Regional accreditation in the United States is universally accepted by our colleges and universities because they themselves created it, control it, have used it for strictly educational ends, and rigorously guard it against manipulation by special interests. They have made it a powerful instrument for institutional improvement. This is why they see to it that each member institution's accreditation is systematically reviewed from time to time. In the great majority of cases reaffirmation can be taken for granted. Well established institutions are not dependent upon accreditation. What they want is the total review and focusing of effort which the accreditation process affords them without forcing them into any preconceived or uniform molds.

The process does not force them into set patterns because each regional association works out its own criteria, forging them slowly in experience and keeping them flexible in character and application because the membership is so diversified. The regionals will not enforce, and will rarely endorse, any other agency's point of view, although they will unabashedly appropriate and adapt for their own use whatever they see elsewhere and find good.

This friendly piracy is well understood and encouraged among us all. Of course we cooperate in other ways too. Since 1953 the Middle States Association has had formal agreements with all the approved specialized accrediting agencies, includ-

ing ALA under which our evaluation activities are always pooled when an institution holds or wants accreditation by both organizations. The other regional associations operate somewhat similarly. It is a natural development; our interests coincide. We hold that you cannot fully understand or assess any one part of an educational institution without reference to all its other facts. There is an intricate and important relationship among them all; the whole is, or should be, greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore the general accrediting associations are equally concerned with every specialized school of a university, and the professional agencies must take into account the health of the entire institution. We join forces in our assessment, to the obvious advantage of all concerned, especially the institution's.

We do it as colleagues and consultants, though, not as policemen. The frame of reference in every instance is the institution's, not ours. In the modern concept of accreditation there are only three fundamental questions to ask:

1. Are this institution's objectives clearly defined, appropriate, and controlling in its development?
2. Has it established the conditions under which it can achieve its objectives?
3. Is it in fact achieving them?

This is the full circle. Accreditation is not standardization; it means something different for every institution. It means that if you know clearly what an accredited institution intends to do for its students, you can assume that its performance matches its claims.

The emphasis has shifted, you see, from means to results.

Yet we must still pay a good deal of attention to the means by which the results are to be attained, because the chief ends for which colleges exist are not measurable. But we are no longer so

doctrinaire about the means; we keep them in their place. We do not delude ourselves that we know all the answers.

The evaluation process as the regionals conduct it now has two phases: a searching self-analysis by an institution's own faculty and staff, and a parallel study by an outside group. Faculties and visiting committees alike yearn for solid guidelines. They need concise, sharp descriptions of good practice; neither theoretical discussions nor ex cathedra pronouncements—just clear explication of the principles on which good programs are built and of the characteristics which appear to accompany excellence.

But the literature is diffuse, scattered, and elusive. Much of it is statistical, and much of it lacks perspective and general applicability.

What can we do? We can create a new literature of our own, and we can encourage others to do so and help them to disseminate the result.

We have done both. All the regional associations are publishing, slow and difficult though the task is. We are all deeply interested in the efforts of professional societies to produce short, clear analyses of the anatomy of excellence. We call attention to them in our own publications. We are quite prepared to steal from them, and are delighted when you steal from ours. We expect our evaluators to be familiar with them. We want our institutions to have and use them.

But we will not officially endorse statements of professional societies, in the Middle States area at least, and we do not want their standards and criteria cited in Middle States evaluation reports as if they did have our endorsement.

In the first place we have no right to endorse them. The regional associations express only their own members' convictions. We are expected to help form our members' views too, of course, but that is delicate business—you remember the definition of a professor as a man who thinks otherwise. We will get no-

where at all except by the slow process of distilling the best of our own experience into a form in which they can all scrutinize, test, and approve.

Furthermore our views are eclectic. We are not prepared to recognize any single authority or to commit ourselves permanently to any one doctrine or document, including our own. In fact we are not convinced that there are single answers to many of the significant questions in higher education. We have grave doubts about some of the current positions upheld by our specialized colleagues: about the American Bar Association's insistence on the autonomy of the law library, for example; or the American Medical Association's tendency to separate the medical school from the university; or some of the American Chemical Society's prescriptions; or the American Association of University Professors' proclivity to assume that the instructor is right; or ALA's pronouncement on the size of college libraries. We in the regionals are very pragmatic.

What *will* we do, in respect of documents like the new ALA Standards?

We will work enthusiastically with you in their production, so far as such help is invited and appropriate. We bask in no reflected glory in the publication of the ALA Standards, but various of our officers and members did have the privilege of criticizing them in their formative stages, was true also of the Junior College Library Standards.

In the Middle States Association we have also published a document of our own on libraries, as some of you know. In fact ours antedated yours and is quoted in it. Neither one detracts from the usefulness of the other. The two are quite different. Essentially, ours is an attempt to help faculty members and administrators ask the right questions. Yours gives them some ideas as to what the answers may be. Ours is concerned with what a library ought to do; yours with what it should be. These are not

antagonistic approaches. They are complementary.

The second thing we will do is to advertize your excellent ALA Standards, and the similar publications of other professional societies when they are as clear, as well prepared, and as succinct as yours are and do no violence to our own principles.

Third, we will seek people who are thoroughly familiar with the materials of the specialized agencies to be members of our evaluation teams. We have been doing this in the Middle States area for many years, to our great satisfaction. We do not want these people to cite the professional societies' findings and positions as criteria of judgment in Middle States evaluation reports, as I have already noted, for doing so seems to commit us to them in a way in which we dislike in principle to be committed. But we want our evaluators to draw upon every bit of their specialized experience and information, from whatever source.

Fourth, we will recommend suitable people from the specialized agencies as institutional consultants when administrators or faculties or trustees need outside advice. This happens frequently. Some of you in this room have greatly improved the quality of library service in such consultative capacities.

To return to our original topic, how will the ALA Standards be implemented by the regional associations?

They won't. We will neither underwrite nor enforce them. But they will have tremendous influence all the same—in fact they already do—which we will aid and abet. Their significance in the formation of high expectations for libraries and clear thinking about library services will depend on the soundness with which the ALA document has been conceived and the skill with which it has been expressed. Because Felix Hirsch and his committee have done a consummate job in both respects, there is no question that this publication will be a major factor in the development of the the college, university, and professional school libraries in the next decade. For our part, we will continually call attention to it, for serious study and practical implementation by our faculties and administrators, without ever suggesting to them that the good of the order or the salvation of individual souls depends on what the ALA alone says. We want you to be heard, debated, adapted, partly accepted and partly rejected, in the wholesome way of our free society, to the end that we all may learn more about the nature of excellence in higher education and more clearly approximate its dimensions.

## Distribution of the CRL Index

A five-year cumulative index of *CRL*, volumes XVI-XX, which has been prepared by Richard Schimmelpfeng, of Washington University Library, St. Louis, Mo., will be published later in July. A copy is being mailed to each of ACRL's institutional members and to every subscriber to *CRL* who is not a member of ACRL. A copy will be mailed free of charge to any member of ACRL requesting it before September 1.