

How practical are the ACRL “Standards for College Libraries”?

Applying standards in the academic library

by Robert W. Fernekes and William N. Nelson

Two decades ago, the higher education regional accrediting associations began to consider outcomes assessment as the preferred method of self-evaluation for the higher education institutions they accredit. One example of this trend was the new emphasis on “institutional effectiveness” by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC), which first appeared in the 1986 version of their “Criteria for Accreditation.” The expectation of SACS-COC was that each year colleges and universities would become more adept at this method of self-evaluation and that every institution was expected to be fully compliant within a ten-year evaluation cycle.

The 1986 edition of the ACRL “Standards for College Libraries” relied almost exclusively on inputs, outputs, and formulas to create arbitrary baseline figures. There was heated debate over the 1995 edition, with a vocal majority of members expressing preference for the same approach as in 1986. This sentiment prevailed over a minority of members who favored incorporating outcomes into the standards. Those who drafted those standards did recognize, and incorporate into the introduction of the 1995 edition, a number of developing trends. Recognition of these trends in turn lead to the formation of the ACRL Task

Force for Academic Library Outcomes Assessment in 1996, and its 1998 report mandated that all future ACRL standards incorporate outcomes assessment.

The 2000 standards

This decision helped to shape the new edition of the “Standards for College Libraries,” which was formally approved in January 2000. This was the first ACRL standard to incorporate outcomes assessment, but it was not adopted without controversy. During hearings and public review of the draft document, a number of librarians decried the loss of baseline quantitative measures. The committee thoroughly investigated the subject, but could not find a valid basis for the earlier quantitative measures. To address this concern, the committee incorporated peer comparisons using ratios to provide a valid means of incorporating some quantitative measures.

The 2000 edition of the “Standards for College Libraries” has been accepted by college librarians and has been favorably viewed by the University Libraries Section and Community and Junior College Libraries Section. In January 2002, the ACRL Board voted to create a College and Research Libraries Standards Task Force to adapt these standards “for use as a document and process that would apply across

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all types of academic libraries. . . .” A movement is presently underway to develop a single ACRL standard for all types of academic libraries, using the “Standards for College Libraries” as its basis.

What’s in the standards

The 2000 edition of the “Standards for College Libraries” addresses 12 different aspects of academic libraries and provides a list of relevant questions to be used in evaluating library effectiveness and quality. It provides some basic definitions, then introduces peer comparison. There is also an informative section on planning, assessment, and outcomes assessment.

The first three of the twelve sections of the standards are grouped together as planning, assessment, and outcomes assessment. Practical application of this group can be accomplished by using a matrix to link the library mission and goals with assessment measures and by using the results of the assessment. National statistical data can be used for peer comparison to provide some quantitative data.

For the next four sections (services, instruction, resources, and access), the qualitative measures of user satisfaction and service quality are employed. For quantitative measures, internal trend analysis and peer comparison are used. Outcomes performance indicators will focus on the desired educational outcomes and the impact of library services.

For staff and facilities, the questions in the standards are used for 1) reviewing program and service needs in relation to staff expertise and the capacity, condition, and telecommunication infrastructure of library facilities; 2) providing appropriate staff development and relating program and service needs to campus-wide outcomes; 3) conducting longitudinal analysis of staffing and library condition and comparison with peers.

The communications and cooperation, administration, and budget sections all have assessment elements in common. All three areas involve basic standards compliance issues, i.e., the library is either doing them or not. In assessing these elements the evaluator should, at a minimum, answer the questions from the stan-

Want to learn more about implementing the “Standards for College Libraries”?

Take the Midwinter workshop

The authors of this article, Bob Fernekes and Bill Nelson, will be leading a full-day workshop, “Creating a Continuous Assessment Environment in Academic Libraries,” on January 24, 2003, prior to the Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. With them, you will work through the “Standards for College Libraries” (2000 edition) using the instrument *Standards and Assessment for Academic Libraries: A Workbook* (ACRL, 2002).

Learn about the new concepts of the standards, discover how the individual sections of the standards are part of overall institution and library planning, and find out how to incorporate performance indicators and outcomes assessment measures to assess the impact of librarians and libraries on student learning.

The workbook provides practical information throughout with checklists, forms, examples, and library assessment tools and techniques.

Standards workbook now available through ACRL Publications

If you can’t attend the Midwinter workshop, or want to get a head start, *Standards and Assessment for Academic Libraries: A Workbook* is now available from ACRL. Using the new standards has meant looking at library operations in new ways. This workbook is designed to assist library professionals in academic libraries of all sizes, both public and private, in applying the new ACRL “Standards for College Libraries.” It provides questions, worksheets, suggested resources, and sources of comparative data for evaluating performance in academic libraries. A concept map illustrates the essential relationships among the institutional mission, the library, and the user. Each section also includes a methodology, including checklists and tips, for responding to evaluation questions.

For more information, visit <http://www.ala.org/acrl/newatacrl.html>, or order by going to <http://www.ala.org/acrl/pubsform.html>.

dards. The library should ensure compliance with specific accreditation requirements, both regional and specialized, as appropriate for the institution. Peer comparison can be used to demonstrate the level of compliance in these areas.

The current CLS committee has supported the efforts of two of its members who have presented a number of seminars and workshops around the country and developed an accompanying workbook to provide examples of practical applications of the standards.¹

How practical are the standards?

Since the "Standards for College Libraries" are now considered to be important to all types of academic libraries, regardless of size, it is necessary to examine the practical application of these standards. In incorporating outcomes assessment into all new standards, ACRL is on the right track. As the first such document, the "Standards for College Libraries" are practical and serve as a useful tool for library evaluation.

Governors State University Library was the first library to evaluate themselves using the new standards,² and the most recent is Butler University Libraries.³ Several other academic libraries are in the process of applying the standards. The availability of practical guidance for application of the new standards should assist a number of these institutions to complete this assessment.

The standards may soon have another practical use: aiding the preparation for a regional accreditation visit. As the regional standards become less prescriptive, this national academic library standard could provide the preferred

basis for library self-assessment. The regional accreditation associations are moving toward less prescriptive standards and this allows for more subjective interpretation on the part of the institution and the regional association review committee. This seems to be an ideal situation in which to apply a nationally approved professional standard to the process of self-evaluation of the academic library. Once the evaluation is completed, it can also serve as the basis for the library portion of specialized accrediting agency standards.

Thus, one could conclude that the ACRL "Standards for College Libraries" are indeed practical because:

- 1) they meet the expectations by regional and specialized accrediting associations that require outcomes assessment;
- 2) they are applicable to all sizes of academic libraries, and are being used as the template or basis for creation of a single standard for all academic libraries;
- 3) they have been successfully applied by several academic libraries; and
- 4) they provide a nationally approved professional standard for comprehensive assessment of academic libraries.

Notes

1. Robert W. Fernekes and William N. Nelson. *Standards and Assessment for Academic Libraries: A Workbook* (ACRL, 2002).

2. Governors State University's document is available at <http://www.govst.edu/library/assess.htm>.

3. The Butler University Libraries' document is available at <http://www.butler.edu/library/selfstudy.pdf>. ■

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