Are you qualified to serve on the accreditation team?

Survey results of six accrediting agencies

by William N. Nelson

In accord with the ACRL Strategic Plan, the ACRL Standards and Accreditation Committee has begun to place equal focus on accreditation issues, as well as on the profession's standards and guidelines. What follows is one product of this effort.[1]

During December 1997 and January 1998, the six regional accrediting agencies were surveyed to determine the process employed for academic librarians to become peer evaluators on regional accrediting teams. Five questions were asked of each agency. Initial contact was by e-mail with a follow-up telephone call, as necessary. The expected result was for the committee to compile and disseminate the information so that persons with appropriate qualifications may apply to become peer evaluators.

Who are librarian evaluators?

Five of the six regional accrediting agencies always, or almost always, include a librarian as a member of every peer evaluation team. In rare cases, a librarian can qualify as a team member for the other regional accrediting agency.

The application process for becoming a librarian evaluator varies greatly, but most frequently the regional accrediting agency receives recommendations from librarians or institutional administrators. In some instances a formal recommendation by the institutional president or chief academic officer is required for consideration. Most of the agencies welcome nominations of experienced, well-qualified librarians. Selection to the evaluation team for a specific institution generally depends on a number of factors; typically the best-qualified person for that particular assignment is selected from a database of potential librarian evaluators.

Specific qualifications for an academic library peer evaluator vary among the regional accrediting agencies. Most require an MLS and extensive and appropriate knowledge and experience in libraries. The trend is definitely toward selection of individuals with multiple skills and the ability to view the institution as a whole.

A librarian evaluator is frequently expected to have broad-based knowledge in information technology and information literacy. The growing emphasis by the regional accrediting agencies on institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes is beginning to affect the selection of academic librarians for the peer evaluation teams.

About the author

William N. Nelson is library director at Augusta State University in Georgia; e-mail: wnelson@aug.edu

Survey results (Alphabetically, by agency)

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education

Area: DELAWARE, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, MARYLAND, NEW JERSEY, NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, PUERTO RICO, AND THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

1. Is a librarian a member of every peer evaluation (accrediting) team?

Yes.

2. Can a librarian qualify as a team member?

Yes.

3. What is the process for applying?

A qualified librarian may submit a letter of interest and a full curriculum vitae to the executive director of the commission. The applicant must be endorsed by the president or chief academic officer of his or her institution. Most often, librarian evaluators are nominated by the president or chief academic officer. Commission staff assemble teams in light of the current situation at each institution being reviewed, drawing potential evaluators from the commission's database, and ensure that the team members are acceptable to the institution.

4. What qualifications are required?

Evaluators designated with the responsibility for evaluating the library are individuals who are both trained and experienced as professional librarians. They may be currently holding such a position, or in another faculty or administrative position, or retired.

5. Are there qualifications that you especially seek in a team member?

Most team members come from colleges or universities in the Middle States region, which are similar to the institution being visited, but some may be from other regions. First-time evaluators are invited to attend a special workshop to prepare them for their visit.

Additional information

1. Web site URL: http://www.msache. org/.

2. For further information on evaluation teams, one may order a copy of the *Handbook for Evaluation Teams,* available through the order form on the Web site at http://www.msache.org/orderpub.html.

3. There is the possibility of gaining experience in accreditation by serving as an "Evaluation Team Associate." Further information on this program is available on the Web site at http://www.msache.org/poassoc.html.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

Area: CONNECTICUT, MAINE, MASSACHUSETTS, NEW HAMPSHIRE, RHODE ISLAND, AND VERMONT

1. Is a librarian a member of every peer evaluation (accrediting) team?

Yes, in general; sometimes an information technology person is used instead.

2. Can a librarian qualify as a team member?

Yes

3. What is the process for applying?

The invitation to librarians comes from the commission staff—usually the person has been recommended by a librarian who knows the commission's work or by another administrator who knows both the commission's work and the candidate.

4. What qualifications are required?

5. Are there qualifications that you especially seek in a team member?

In addition to the usual qualifications of librarianship, the commission looks for those who can view an institution as a whole, and can work as a member of a team under conditions of haste, as well as those who understand that it is the commission's standards, not those of another agency, that are being applied.

Additional information

1. Web site URL: http://www.mec.edu/neasc/cihe.htm.

2. The commission's *Standards for Accreditation* are online at http://www.mec.edu/neasc/stancihe.htm.

3. The accreditation process is described on the Web site at http://www.mec.edu/neasc/ciheacc.htm.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

Area: ARIZONA, ARKANSAS, COLORADO, ILLINOIS, INDIANA, IOWA, KANSAS, MICHIGAN, MINNESOTA, MISSOURI, NEBRASKA, NEW MEXICO, NORTH DAKOTA, OHIO, OKLAHOMA, SOUTH DAKOTA, WEST VIRGINIA, WISCONSIN, AND WYOMING

1. Is a librarian a member of every peer evaluation (accrediting) team?

No. The commission uses rather small teams, but will put a librarian on by request. The commission uses librarians when certain issues bring forward the matter of learning resources support (e.g., distance education, off campus education, etc.).

2. Can a librarian qualify as a team member?

Yes.

3. What is the process for applying?

Contact the organization for a form to complete, or you can recommend people and the commission will send application forms to them. Plans are underway for a Web site form.

4. What qualifications are required?

The commission tends to seek multiple skills in site visitors. Therefore a librarian with academic credentials and/or experience will be highly valued. This is less important as the commission identifies visitors for major universities—the teams grow as the size of the institution to be visited grows. Obviously the commission seeks someone with appropriate professional credentials for a librarian.

If the applicant can show some significant related experiences, that will be highly valued, too (e.g., working in special relationships with faculty in applying technology or developing curricula, noted for pioneering work in developing learning resource support for distance education programs, etc.).

5. Are there qualifications that you especially seek in a team member?

The commission tries to identify people capable of being "generalists"—not only experts in a specific professional field, but capable of evaluating other aspects of an institution of higher education as well.

Additional information

1. Web site URL: http://www.ncacihe.org/.

2. Expectations of a consultant-evaluator are found on the Web site at http://www.ncacihe.org/peer/peer/ceexp.cfm.

3. An e-mail form is found on the Web site for queries about the commission; a consultant-evaluator form can be requested here at http://www.ncacihe.org/cerequest.cfm.

4. Commission publications may also be ordered from the site at http://www.ncacihe.org/publications.cfm.

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Colleges

Area: ALASKA, IDAHO, MONTANA, NEVADA, OREGON, UTAH, AND WASHINGTON

1. Is a librarian a member of every peer evaluation (accrediting) team?

Yes. Most frequently it is a librarian, but can be someone else with expertise in library and information technology resources.

2. Can a librarian qualify as a team member?

Yes.

3. What is the process for applying?

The commission regularly seeks new potential evaluators through mailings to member institutions. Interested persons are encouraged to reply to these solicitations. Potential evaluators are entered into a databank, which is used to make assignments for upcoming peer evaluation teams. In making assignments, the commission endeavors to closely match the evaluators with a size and type of institution most like their own. The commission is always looking for good library candidates for peer evaluator and will accept recommendations from colleagues.

4. What qualifications are required?

There is not a set list of qualifications, rather the commission seeks persons with extensive and appropriate knowledge and experience in libraries.

5. Are there qualifications that you especially seek in a team member?

For librarian evaluators, the commission seeks persons with a broad-based knowledge in information technology. The best candidate is one who has knowledge of the needs of the students relative to information technology and also of what tools or strategies an institution needs to support these needs.

Additional information

The commission plans to develop a Web site in 1998.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges

Area: ALABAMA, FLORIDA, GEORGIA, KENTUCKY, LOUISIANA, MISSISSIPPI, NORTH CAROLINA, SOUTH CAROLINA, TENNESSEE, TEXAS, AND VIRGINIA

1. Is a librarian a member of every peer evaluation (accrediting) team? Yes.

2. Can a librarian qualify as a team member?

Yes.

3. What is the process for applying?

The commission accepts nomination by the institutional president, a staff member, or colleague.

4. What qualifications are required?

5. Are there qualifications that you especially seek in a team member?

The usual requirement is an MLS and experience at the degree level of the institution under review.

Additional information

1. Web site URL: http://www.sacs.org/.
2. The commission's *1996 Criteria for Accreditation* is found on the Web site at http://www.sacs.org/pub/coc/cri70.htm.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities

Area: CALIFORNIA, HAWAII, AMERICAN SAMOA, GUAM, AND TRUST TERRITORIES OF THE PACIFIC

1. Is a librarian a member of every peer evaluation (accrediting) team?

Yes. Every comprehensive evaluation team typically has a librarian. The association is, however, looking into making the teams smaller, in which case a librarian may not be on every future comprehensive evaluation team.

2. Can a librarian qualify as a team member? Yes.

3. What is the process for applying?

Most librarians are nominated by an institution or by other librarians. Commission members observe librarians during a visit and also inquire about qualified librarians.

4. What qualifications are required?

Extensive experience as a librarian and at least an MLS degree are required; significant years in library administration and demonstrated judgement and vision are expected. The commission is currently trying to move the process toward a greater emphasis on student learning and other outcomes. The commission is therefore interested in librarians who are capable of conceiving the library as a significant center for student learning, integration of technology into the learning process, and information literacy issues. The commission is interested in evaluators who are capable of going beyond the traditional program— review of library staff, hold-

ings, budget, and buildings—toward a much more learning-centered approach that can be made part of a broader team effort to assess the institutional learning community.

5. Are there qualifications that you especially seek in a team member?

Increasingly the commission is looking for people who can: 1) move beyond the library and engage the faculty; 2) address information literacy and learning goals for the library; and 3) address technology issues on an institutional scale. The commission is assessing whether they should have a librarian on all comprehensive visits; the answer will be determined by the extent to which they can get the kind of people identified above.

Additional information

1. The commission usually works with librarians within the region, so it welcomes new nominations and especially desires strong candidates. For visits to larger institutions, the commission goes outside the region, especially to Arizona, Oregon, and Washington.
2. Web site URL: http://wascweb.org/senior/wascsr.htm.
3. Commission publications available online from the Web site include *Principles and Guidelines for Developing Policy and Data Portfolios to Support Special Topics Self-Studies* at http://www.wascweb.org/senior/POLS.HTM (requires Adobe Acrobat reader).

Note

1. For another committee initiative see: William N. Nelson, "Leadership Beyond the Library: Accrediting Teams," *C&RL News*, 58 (June 1997): 410–12, 426. ■