Most librarians today have at least some acquaintance with accreditation, if only because they possess a master’s degree that has been accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). Since academic librarians may be asked to participate in the accreditation process undertaken by their institutions, it is particularly important to understand the role of accreditation in American higher education, the various challenges it has faced, and the subsequent changes that have been set in place. Accreditation offers an opportunity for librarians to contribute to institutional self-assessment; current trends in accreditation also challenge librarians to examine the criteria by which they measure success.

Through accreditation, society ensures that the goods and services provided to its citizens meet standards of quality and are delivered with integrity. This process of voluntary self-regulation is unique to North America; in most other countries, national ministries of education perform the quality assurance function. Most states maintain some form of regulation of educational institutions (state boards of education, for example), but there is no central regulation of educational institutions at the national level. Through educational accreditation, professions, businesses, or other fields join with one another to exercise certain controls for the betterment of society at large. When this system of voluntary self-regulation focuses on institutions, it is known as accreditation; when it addresses the individual practitioner, it is called certification.

Credentialing of individuals may be either privately or publicly administered. When administered by a governmental agency, it is known as licensure. Although accreditation is private, non-governmental, and voluntary, it is often coupled with these other credentialing systems to provide a broad quality assurance system aimed at protecting the public, and increasingly, at defining the criteria by which quality is assessed.

Librarians are affected by accreditation because the provision and use of library materials and services affects the quality of the students’ educational experience.
institutions manage and support library resources reflects the priorities of the institution, the educational goals and methods of faculty, and the performance of students and graduates. Librarians need to understand accreditation and how it works, and to be familiar with the events that have influenced the structure of accreditation in recent years. The future of accreditation practice is also of interest, since the standards that are established and enforced may affect the proportion of the institutional resources that are available to libraries and the expectations for their performance. Furthermore, the current approach to accreditation emphasizes self-assessment and continuous improvement, providing useful management tools for librarians. When librarians understand how their participation in these processes can result in improvement for the library per se, in addition to their participation in the self-study of the parent institution, both the library and the institution benefit.

This article will describe the practice of accreditation in general, and will identify several issues and trends that occurred as a result of changes in political and social structures. It will also discuss some of the challenges facing accreditation today, and how the changes in higher education may affect both libraries and accreditation.

There are two types of accreditation in higher education: institutional and specialized (programmatic). Accreditation for entire institutions is administered through six regions within the United States: New England, Middle States, Southern, North Central, Western, and Northwest. Standards for institutional review are established by the accrediting agency in consultation with the academic community. Programmatic accreditation reviews programs that are aimed at the educational preparation of entry level professionals. Standards are generally set by the profession itself, based on knowledge and skills expected of beginning professionals. The standards often coordinate with expectations for licensure exams, although they may exceed these minimum standards. Specialized accreditation teams review courses of study within larger institutions, as well as in schools where professional preparation is the sole offering, such as medical and law schools that are not located within a larger parent institution.

Regardless of the target audience, all accreditation processes perform two primary functions: quality assurance and institutional improvement. When accreditation functions as a quality assurance mechanism, it serves many constituencies by attesting that an institution or program has met established standards. When accreditation focuses on institutional improvement, it uses peer review to stimulate and assist educational programs to move toward achieving self-determined goals. It is not surprising that people perceive the quality assurance or accountability function as wielding more influence, while at the same time functioning as a directive or a lowest common denominator. The continuous quality improvement function is seen as positive, but without authority; therefore, it tends to be viewed as discretionary and not required. This perception, although widespread, is unfortunate, because it leads to many missed opportunities for growth and improvement.

Many kinds of educational institutions and programs undergo accreditation: secondary schools, trade schools, correspondence and home study programs, as well as colleges and universities and the numerous specialized and professional programs found within them. Noneducational institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, and camps also participate in accreditation.
Brief History of Accreditation

Accreditation originated in the latter part of the nineteenth century when a group of secondary schools in the midwestern United States agreed to be visited by representatives of colleges and universities to certify that the graduates of the secondary schools would be admitted to postsecondary study at higher institutions. This early form of accreditation streamlined the admissions process for graduates from accredited high schools. If the local high school was accredited, graduates could be assured of admission to the university. A seldom-recognized but often appreciated benefit of accreditation is the ability to transfer academic credits between accredited institutions. Sadly, some students come to appreciate accreditation only when they find that credits earned at an unaccredited school or program will not transfer to another institution.

As the system of professions began to emerge in the U.S., professional schools and programs of study also sought accreditation. This kind of accreditation, however, is aimed at accomplishing a somewhat different end. Its purpose is to ensure that the schools that purport to educate students to practice a profession are indeed providing educational preparation that will enable them to pass the licensure examinations. This system of specialized or programmatic accreditation also serves the profession itself because it gives the profession say in the process for setting the standards that are used. Ideally, the setting of standards engages both the academic and the professional communities in an enlightened dialogue that serves the public interest. However, it can be problematic if one party seeks to dominate or control the dialogue to further its own ends.

As procedures for institutional accreditation and specialized accreditation developed, the accreditors, the schools, and the professional programs realized that the accreditation process provided an opportunity for self-improvement. The process of self study—articulating a mission and setting goals and objectives for achievement—and the visit of the evaluators provided the candidate for accreditation with an excellent source of consultative assistance at a reasonable cost. And, because accreditation is granted for a specific period of years, the institution or program has an incentive to continue to meet the standards and is required to give periodic reports to demonstrate continued compliance.

Despite their positive contributions, quality assurance programs such as accreditation and certification are vulnerable to charges of being restrictive or discriminatory. Although their stated intent is to foster improvement and to affirm the ability to meet minimum standards, both certification and accreditation have been accused of stifling innovation. To address these concerns, accrediting organizations subject themselves to processes of self-regulation. Standards for the appropriate conduct of accreditation have been promulgated both in the private and governmental sectors, and accreditors undergo periodic self-assessment and peer review.

Librarians’ participation in accreditation varies. There is currently no freestanding accreditation of libraries, although there has been discussion of accrediting public libraries. Standards for public libraries, community college, college, and university libraries exist, and are promulgated by professional library associations. The process of setting standards is most effective when it is a collaborative undertaking, because it fosters dissemination of standards and adoption by accrediting agencies. When standards are established, and when they are subsequently reviewed and revised, there is an opportunity to advocate for the importance of libraries. The experience of the Association
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for College and Research Libraries, a division of the ALA, described later in this article, illustrates academic library community’s response to the challenge of rethinking standards in an evolving educational environment.

Standards for specialized libraries in both institutional and programmatic accreditation have often been set without input from librarians, but fortunately this is changing. Gail Daly discusses the challenges faced by law librarians in ensuring that standards for law libraries are in keeping with the changing role of the library. 3 The Medical Library Association advocated strongly for hospital libraries when the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals revised its standards in 1995. This contrasts sharply with standards for libraries that are in place for the Liaison Committee for Medical Education of the American Medical Association, which exemplify standards where librarians have had little input. Educational associations such as the AAMC (American Association of Medical Colleges) have shown greater receptivity to librarian input. See, for example, AAMC’s various commissioned reports, such as the GPEP and the Matheson reports, which reflect an awareness of the contemporary issues surrounding library service to professional. 4

Setting standards, however, is only one part of a multifaceted process consisting of self-study, on-site review, public decision, and ongoing monitoring. Because libraries frequently derive their mission from the parent institution, and because there is no separate accreditation for them, libraries are usually evaluated in the context of the parent institution. Most accreditation standards address the role of the library in the educational process, and librarians are usually asked to author the section of the self-study that deals with library issues. Librarians’ participation in setting standards, as well as their contributions to the accreditation review process on campuses, are evolving. The current increase in off-campus instruction and virtual universities has underscored the need for thoughtful and informed librarian participation in both the setting of standards and the review process on both the institutional and programmatic levels. One way that this is being accomplished is collaboration with the various organizations administering accreditation. In order to be effective in this environment, librarians must understand that these organizations have undergone significant change in the past decade, stimulating new approaches to accreditation while at the same time questioning the value and purpose of accreditation.

The Accreditation Review

Most accrediting standards and practices require assessment to occur on an ongoing basis and to involve both internal and external constituents. Self-assessment involves planning, goal setting, and measurement against goals and objectives set internally. External evaluation is conducted by peers using an agreed-upon set of standards. The former is known as self-study, while the latter is known as peer review. The accreditation review entails both self and peer assessment of how well standards are being met. When an educational institution seeks to attain accredited status, it indicates that the leadership has established a clear direction or mission, and that it examines regularly the ways it seeks to accomplish that mission. The library should participate fully in this process, both at the overall institutional level and internally within the library itself. The degree
of fit between the library’s mission and that of the parent organization is a key component in its overall effectiveness. For example, the mission of a library at a teaching institution will differ substantially from the mission of a library that serves a national research community. The mission also differs according to its environment—urban or rural, for example—or its subject focus. The mission, goals, and objectives are openly stated and made available to prospective students, employers, and other educators. Thus, the program demonstrates its commitment to be held accountable for its educational activities, and assists prospective students in selecting an appropriate educational program.

Accreditation also includes evaluation by peers. Peer evaluation gives persons competent to judge the educational merit and professional relevance of the program an opportunity to examine and assess the quality of the curriculum, the facilities, the faculty, the students, and the administrative structure. This kind of evaluation usually involves firsthand examination of materials through a visit to the campus where the program is located, followed by a report provided to the educational institution. The participation of librarians on review teams is essential to ensure that the library is evaluated by knowledgeable peers. Librarian members of review teams are also responsible for evaluation of other components of the educational environment, however, so that knowledge of library materials and operations alone is not usually sufficient for appointment to an accreditation team.

**Organization and Regulation of the Accrediting Process**

Accreditation has always been voluntary and self-regulating, private and nongovernmental. Agencies administering accreditation programs have, for some time, joined together to share common concerns, to conduct research, to provide professional development, and to represent the interests of accreditation to a larger audience. They have sought to establish standards of good practice against which the accreditation activities of agencies are reviewed. This form of self-regulation, known as recognition, occurs in both the private and governmental sectors.

Since 1938, a number of organizations have served this purpose, most recently through the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) and its successor CORPA (Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation). Founded in 1975, COPA developed standards for accreditors that were intended to ensure that the autonomy of the educational institution was not compromised, that accreditation in a particular field met a societal need, and that the interests of the public were protected by the accreditation process. COPA also monitored the number of accrediting agencies and discouraged proliferation of accrediting agencies by recognizing only one accrediting agency in any given field. This practice was intended to reduce the possibility for public confusion: agencies with similar names might accredit in the same field using different standards and procedures. It also addressed the concerns of universities over the growing number of accrediting agencies. (The number of specialized accrediting agencies vary from sixty to one hundred, depending on definition and who is doing the counting. There are an unknown number of unrecognized ones.)

For nearly two decades, COPA sought to bring together various constituents and partners in accreditation: institutional accreditors, specialized accreditors, and college
and university presidents. In 1993, a variety of external pressures caused COPA to split into several parts. The regional institutional accreditors joined with a group of presidents to form the National Policy Board on Institutional Accreditation (NPB), whose stated aim was to restore “the purposes and role of accreditation as the principal means of protecting voluntary self-regulation and promoting institutional quality.” In a widely disseminated white paper, the NPB proposed changes in accreditation that would secure it as a tool for institutional independence and protection of the public interest. Structures for peer review and professional development were omitted in favor of increased representation from chief officers of academic institutions (presidents) and the public at large. While the NPB focused on institutional accreditation, specialized accreditors formed the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) in August 1993. ASPA has represented the interests of specialized accreditation in national forums and has developed a Member Code of Good Practice for Accreditors. The recognition function previously performed by COPA was carried on by CORPA, but no research or professional development activities occurred.

A series of meetings and discussion forums held in 1994 and 1995 resulted in a proposal for a Council on Higher Education Accreditation that was circulated for comment by college and university chief executives in fall 1995. In March 1996, a proposal to create CHEA was disseminated for ratification to 2990 college and university presidents, constituting the first national referendum on accreditation in the history of higher education. Almost all the votes received were affirmative; slightly more than half the institutions responded. The Board of Directors held its first meeting in July 1996. CHEA continues many of the functions previously conducted by COPA, but it is accountable to member institutions rather than to accrediting bodies or presidential associations. Its mission states that “the Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families, colleges and universities, sponsoring bodies, governments, and employers by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accreditation bodies and will coordinate and work to advance self-regulation through accreditation.” Its responsibilities are to:

- Recognize sound and effective higher education accrediting bodies;
- Coordinate research, debate, and processes that improve accreditation;
- Serve as a national advocate for voluntary self-regulation through accreditation;
- Mediate disputes and foster communication between and among accrediting bodies and the higher education community; and
- Work to preserve the quality and diversity of colleges and universities.

The Federal Role in the Regulation of the Accrediting Process

The U.S. Secretary of Education has also recognized accrediting agencies since 1952. As higher education expanded following World War II, the federal government sought a way to ensure that student loan funds were being disbursed to bona fide educational institutions that could warrant that graduates received the education and training that was promised. The accreditation process seemed to aim at a similar objective, and so the Secretary of Education established a list of accrediting agencies whose accreditation could be consulted as a criterion of quality when dispensing student loan funds.
Beginning in the 1980s, however, student loan defaults became a source of congressional concern. The idea was put forth that the accreditation process could be used as a means of making institutions more accountable for the repayment. When the Higher Education Act (HEA) was re-authorized in 1992, Congress proposed to increase state oversight of higher education by creating State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs). SPREs would work with accrediting agencies to monitor student loan funds administered by institutions of higher education. The newly created National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) was to be responsible for enforcing the new provisions of the HEA 1992 regulations. Despite the lack of a budget appropriation for SPREs, NACIQI began operations in 1994.

The accreditation community perceived these actions as a challenge to the integrity of accreditation and as a threat to the private, voluntary system of peer review in higher education. One result of the change was that many accrediting agencies that operated in the professions no longer fell within the scope of the Secretary of Education’s recognition. The ALA’s Committee on Accreditation, for example, was among them. Others include the Council on Social Work Education, the National Architecture Accrediting Board, the Computing Services Accrediting Board, and AACSB: The International Association for Management Education. Many accrediting agencies welcomed this change, since it removed them from having to take an adversarial posture toward institutions of higher education, rather than retaining a collegial relationship.

At the same time, the higher education community sought to re-establish accreditation as a meaningful form of voluntary self-regulation. Perceiving that the high default rate stemmed in part from the large number of defaults among some non-degree-granting schools, the higher education community sought to dissociate itself from these institutions. One way to do this was to dissolve COPA, which recognized accreditation of postsecondary educational programs, a broader mandate than one confined to higher education alone. One result of this action was to provide a clearer and more focused voice on Capitol Hill, just in time for the 1997 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. The importance of this presence is obvious when one reads the daily newspaper; public understanding and support for academe hit a low point in the mid 1990s.

Higher education has fought to retain control over its regulation—redefining its relationship to accrediting organizations, especially specialized accreditation, and to federal and state government. At the same time, it recognizes that the public’s demand for accountability has not diminished. Ironically, the criticism and rancor that led to the demise of COPA have inspired the formation of a coalition that connects accountability and the accreditation process in new ways. It is by understanding and contributing to these new directions that librarians can have the greatest impact on higher education in the future.

Accreditation, Accountability and Academic Libraries

Despite the criticisms of accreditation that have appeared in the higher education press, such as those leveled by William R. Dill and colleagues, the need for quality assurance in education and professional practice is as strong today as it was a century ago, when the system of accreditation began. Indeed, the technological and social changes now underway emphasize the need for innovative and reliable methods for establishing
quality in education and for protecting the public against fraudulent and worthless educational programs. The creation of national standards facilitates professional mobility. Today’s workers engage in several career changes involving lifelong learning and professional preparation. Contemporary learners browse and select courses from among a variety of institutions, increasing the importance of having a systematic process of transferring credits. And, as the world becomes ever smaller, American students often study abroad, and international students seek recognition of educational achievement and reciprocity of professional credentials worldwide. The delivery of instruction in time- and location-independent modes also challenges the old accreditation structures and calls for new approaches to quality assurance. Standards and processes of accreditation that are being re-examined and refined.

Technology has prompted librarians to reconsider the basis and rationale for virtually every traditional process and standard. It is only natural that new models for the evaluation of libraries are needed. The changes in the role, value, and organizational structure of accreditation provide an opportunity for the library community to develop new ways to demonstrate their importance and worth. A first step is to acquire a clear understanding of the goals and process of accreditation and assessment; a second is to establish standards compatible with these goals; and a third is the ability to implement assessment to demonstrate conformity to standards.

The turmoil in the world of accreditation in the early and mid-nineties has stimulated standards revision among almost all accrediting agencies in order to address the criticism that standards are built too much around inputs to educational operations, too little around what students learn and graduates can do. Although there is no accrediting body for libraries independent of the parent institution, library associations frequently have input into standards; among academic libraries, the Association of College and Research Libraries has for many years promulgated standards that can be used by accreditation teams to assess libraries. Only recently have these standards begun to reflect the shift from quantitative, input-based standards to outcomes-based standards. This approach is particularly challenging for librarians, because libraries have typically and traditionally operated on an input model. Nevertheless, academic librarians have engaged the issue and are working to develop new standards and new models for evaluation. The recent ACRL Task Force on Academic Library Outcomes Assessment Report has had demonstrable effect on the Standards for College Libraries, which were approved in January 2000. The Standards for University Library Performance and the Standards for Community, Junior, and Technical College Learning Resources Programs, due for revision in 2002 and 2000 respectively, are likely to reflect an even greater commitment to outcomes assessment.

Clearly, librarians can establish standards that are outcomes-based. Working within the framework of outcomes assessment is not a trivial undertaking. As Ralph A.Wolff points out, the outcomes model called for by accreditation, has the potential to “transform” the library. He cites four organizing principles—resources, research, students, and learning—around which to create an assessment model for libraries. One of the most well developed examples of outcomes assessment in libraries is the effect of the library on student learning as demonstrated by information literacy.
The task of implementing assessment requires an understanding not only of the planning process—articulating a mission and determining goals and objectives—but also a commitment to what is often called “a culture of evidence.” Having a working knowledge of such basic evaluation techniques as user surveys, focus groups, interviews, sampling, citation patterns, and bibliometrics is necessary for a library to operate in such a culture. These techniques may be either quantitative or qualitative, but their application must be driven by the mission of the institution itself. They must be examined in terms of reliability (they produce consistent results regardless of who is administering them) and internal validity (they measure what is intended). This requires a skill set that librarians must acquire either at the master’s degree or later on, in the workplace. It also requires the ability to make the shift in thinking that is suggested in Wolff’s thought-provoking essay.

Librarians can also contribute to the accreditation activities that take place on campus. Librarians who participate in accreditation activities, both in the campus preparation for accreditation and as members of the site visit team, have the opportunity to view the role of the library in the context of the overall institutional mission and goals. Otherwise, they will be perceived as a lobby group whose position is suspect.

Librarians can also make a significant contribution at the national level by developing and reporting useful quality indicators. To the extent that the library community can stay in a dialogue with the various sectors in accreditation and higher education, the measures or indicators that are developed will have applicability and recognized strength among the various organizations that support libraries and fund them. In other words, regardless of whether there can be developed a “national gold standard” that everyone recognizes as “the excellent library,” a significant accomplishment will have taken place. Each library, regardless of its location or context or size, can strive toward excellence. While it is unlikely that a specific profile of excellence can be developed, it should be possible to develop a set of indicators by asking questions such as:

- Does the library survey its constituents on a regular basis?
- Does the library examine what proportion of its user base interacts with the library in a given time period?
- Does the library assess the effect of its instructional program on students’ learning?
- Does the library monitor and examine users’ success in obtaining needed materials?
- Does the library explore users’ understanding of the role of the library in their teaching, learning, and research?
- How does the library ensure that students who are part of the learning community have access to appropriate materials at a location remote from the campus?

Since assessment is institution-specific, it is not easy or appropriate to generalize across institutions. Each library must undertake its own assessment process, within the context of its parent institution. A good introduction to library evaluation is F.W. Lancaster’s book If You Want to Evaluate Your Library... This constitutes one of the major paradigm shifts brought about by the changes within higher education and accreditation. Such steps are essential if librarians are to establish the centrality of the library in the assessment of quality in higher education.
Summary

The restructuring of the role and responsibility for quality assurance in higher education that took place during the 1990s produced new organizations, new standards, and new processes. Librarians have taken this restructuring as an opportunity to review and revise standards for libraries and to participate in the accreditation process of their parent institutions. This has implications for the ways in which libraries demonstrate their worth and importance to society. New knowledge and skills may be required if academic librarians are to fulfill their role and use this opportunity. In today’s environment, accreditation is seen to be the external validation of an internal quality assurance process. This is the challenge that awaits the academic library community.

The author is Dean, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Dominican University. She served as Director of the Office for Accreditation of the American Library Association from 1992-1997, during which time she participated in many of the events described in this article.

Notes

11. F.W. Lancaster, If You Want to Evaluate Your Library...2nd ed. (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1993).