



AN INTRODUCTION TO LIBRARY SCHOOL ACCREDITATION IN NORTH AMERICA AND THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OFFICE OF ACCREDITATION

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Abstract

The American Library Association (ALA) Office of Accreditation (OA) accredits library education programs in the US and Canada through a system based on standards. Programs seeking accreditation use these standards to evaluate themselves. Then this self-study, along with other reports and a visit from OA representatives, is used by the OA in a process that takes roughly two years. If successful, the program becomes inculcated with self-evaluating measures constitutive of its ability to educate librarians and information professional and the final result is also a credential others can accept as a sign of quality. Programs seeking initial accreditation must perform to the same standards but another set of steps and a longer period of time allow such programs to work toward accreditation.

Keywords: *American Library Association, Accreditation, Accreditation Standards.*

Introduction

The American Library Association (ALA), through its Office of College Accreditation (OA), provides a process through which the quality of education for the library and information professionals in the US and Canada is assured. This vital process allows supervision of the education process across North America and thereby ensures the field is populated with qualified professionals. The process by which this is achieved responds to an interesting reality. The US and Canadian populations can in no way be regarded as homogeneous. In any large country regional, geographic and political differences are inevitable, but in the case of the US and Canada, the diversity of culture among people who have come from all over the globe adds to the underlying causes of variability. In addition strong political engagement with local communities has always meant that North American educational institutions strive to remain responsive to their immediate populations. One way to ensure uniformity across a profession in light of such variations might be through a national curriculum but the ALA ensures librarians are properly educated to high standards in the US with a different method. There is not a single curriculum or a single exam but a process based on standards. Institutions that want widely recognized accreditation to educate librarians examine themselves under a group of complex but flexible standards and thereby demonstrate they are qualified to educate librarians. Essentially the ALA accreditation process requires that institutions are primarily responsible for measuring themselves according to ALA standards through an ongoing process. In

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fact the first standard from the Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies emphasizes this continual state of self-evaluation.

A school's mission and program goals are pursued and its program objectives achieved, through implementation of an ongoing, broad-based, systemic planning process that involves the constituency that a program seeks to serve.

To this end the institution can muster all its resources, and various constituencies including faculty, students, staff, and the larger community, especially employers who will ultimately hire a program's graduates, as well as any others deemed vital to the institution, toward the goal of accreditation. It is key that the institution itself takes the most active and engaged role in this process because this means the institution must demonstrate its own validity to the profession. For example, once the central self-study report has been vetted by a thorough process there is an important visit from ALA representatives organized into an External Review Panel (ERP) who are themselves respected individuals in the field. During this visit the institution must demonstrate with ample evidence that it meets the standards as it itself has stated. Just as importantly it is a process meant to inculcate self-evaluation throughout the institution continuously over time and this is not just to ensure that future accreditation studies and visits will be found successful. Accreditation from the ALA should ensure that the accredited institution is ever vigilant about its own validity. That is a constant element throughout the many stages in the accreditation process including the final one. Ultimately the Committee on Accreditation (COA) examines all the evidence generated by this entire process for a final decision and that decision results in accreditation or other determinations that may allow redress or not. The ends result is that the institution can define itself within a rigorous framework that others outside of the institution can then see and verify.

Assessment according to standards is a common process in the US and when administered properly, it can work very well. At this stage it may be instructive to define accreditation in terms that are most relevant to the ALA. Below is a definition of accreditation as practiced by the OA found on the OA website itself at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/education/accreditedprograms/faq/index.cfm>

Q: What is accreditation?

A: Accreditation is a voluntary system of evaluation of higher education institutions and programs. It is a collegial process based on self-evaluation and peer-assessment for improvement of academic quality and public accountability. Accreditation assures that higher education institutions and their units, schools, or programs meet appropriate standards of quality and integrity. Accreditation is both a process and a condition. The process entails the assessment of educational quality and the continued enhancement of educational operations through the development and validation of standards. The condition provides a credential to the public-at-large indicating that an institution and / its programs have accepted and are fulfilling their commitment to educational quality.

The distinction between process and condition is vital. The condition or credential allows everyone to agree that such an institution is currently a valuable source where librarians and information workers can gain the skills, knowledge and experience they need, while

the ability to demonstrate adherence to a process of continual self-evaluation proves an institution remains committed to relevance in the ever evolving world of libraries and information. The result is that every accredited institution can remain uniquely attuned to its constituents as it both demonstrates and judges itself within a continuing process of self-evaluation that assures a high quality education for library and information professionals.

An Interest in ALA Accreditation from Three Perspectives

This article arises out of three basic autobiographical elements. First I'm a full professor in a Library Education department that is in pre-candidacy for ALA accreditation. The Department of Library, Information & Media Studies (LIMS), in the College of Education at Chicago State University is currently recognized by the state of Illinois as a provider of library education but is only in pre-candidacy for ALA accreditation. Since its inception, the department has focused on the education of school librarians for elementary and secondary education settings within the state of Illinois and though the department can and has placed librarians into non-school settings, it can only do so without the recognition conferred by the ALA. A degree not recognized by the ALA seriously limits students and their placement in the field. Because of this limitation, and because the department is in a large metropolitan area with a great need for many types of librarians, the department has decided to seek ALA accreditation. We offer an affordable education for librarians and if we can gain accreditation from the ALA, we will be able to help our community, indeed the many communities found in the Chicago region more fully, as well as the information institutions that serve them. In fact, we believe it will also help the profession at large by bringing a large urban population to the field who might otherwise find it difficult to join the profession. My participation in pre-candidacy status at Chicago State University has given me some insight into the ALA accreditation process but that is not the only source of my understanding regarding ALA accreditation.

The second autobiographical element that has led to this article is my work for the OA. I have worked for this office and continue to work for them as an ERP member at three separate institutions. Essentially this work involves a site visit to the library education entity seeking accreditation or reaccreditation after a careful review of the institution's self-study. Each ERP member is primarily responsible for one ALA standard with a secondary responsibility to vet another ERP member's work on a different standard. Together the ERP team evaluates the veracity of the institution's entire self-study by making sure the program under review meets the intent and full measure of the ALA accreditation standards. The team first reads the self-study report to plan for a visit. Then during the visit the team examines the evidence that supports the institution's claim for meeting the standards. Finally the team writes its own report and this report plays a part in the larger, lengthy process of review that constitutes ALA accreditation. I will write more on these stages of this process later in the article.

The third autobiographical element that has led to this article arises from my work for Fulbright as lecturer during the fall of 2005 at Aligarh Muslim University Aligarh, India, In that brief time, I became acquainted with India's library education system. As a result I

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thought there may be some interest within South Asia regarding a system of library education that functions quite differently from the one found in India, a system based on a national curriculum and a national test. In the US and Canada the ALA functions as a non-governmental body that has stature as the premiere organization which both affiliates and represents librarians and information professionals. It works with both private and public institutions in two of the world's large multi-cultural democracies. I hope an examination of the North American accreditation process and credential can offer some insights into how such a different process functions. My purpose is not to prescribe how library education should function, instead I hope to give others an insight into how this process of accreditation works, possibly in the hope of inspiring dialog on the nature and value of self-evaluation regarding library education.

The Process of Accreditation: Timeline and Steps

The clearest resource for understanding the accreditation process can be found in a PDF file called, ALA Accreditation Cycle Timeline Synopsis. This two page document offers in table form, the basic schedule for the accreditation process. Before I summarize this process it is important to know the tables found in this document do not outline the stages of pre-candidacy alluded to above, but this is an issue I will return to in another section. The steps in the candidacy process are numbered from 0 to 39 and grouped into mostly related activities that should occur by a specific date. This organization breaks down a long, roughly two year process into manageable tasks that often must be performed in sequence. For example steps zero to three are in one table and these steps are concerned with a program's application, notification, and acknowledgement that the process will begin. Furthermore these steps are to be completed two years before the ERP site visit. Similarly the next table of steps is numbered from four through seven, and these steps are to occur 18 months before the site visit. This group lists the actions that go toward selecting the ERP chair and defining the chair's working relationship with both the OA and the program seeking accreditation or reaccreditation. The next set of steps, numbers 8 through 16 occur one year before the visit. At this time a plan for the visit is created and finalized even as the rest of the ERP is selected and prepared for their duties. Steps 17 through 19 occur four months before the visit and address the completion of the program presentation. Then six weeks before the visit in steps 20 through 22, the ERP gets the program presentation while the individual ERP members are assigned specific duties and make travel arrangements. Four weeks before the visit, in steps 23 and 24, the ERP finalizes their respective duties while step 25 is the visit itself. Then within three weeks of the visit, in steps 26 and 27, the panel writes their report and gets reimbursed for travel expenses. In step 28 the program seeking accreditation or reaccreditation has one week to correct the ERP report. One week later, in step 29, the final ERP report is submitted to the OA director. At this point, in the sixth week after the visit, for steps 30-32, the evaluation of the ERP's performance must be completed even as the final ERP report is shared with the entire ERP. From this stage, the schedule of activities and events is timed around the COA meeting where the program presentation, the visit, and the ERP report will be evaluated and a decision on accreditation will be reached. One month before the COA meets, in steps 33 and 34, the COA receives the program presentation, the ERP report and the program's response which allows them to create and notify interested parties of

the upcoming COA meeting agenda. The meeting of the COA is step 35. Within two weeks of the meeting, the COA's decision is shared with the program and the ALA in steps 36 and 37. The last steps, 38 and 39, unfold over the next two weeks when first both the CEO of the institution seeking accreditation and the ERP are informed of the COA's decision, and then later, the general public.

This narrative version of the roughly two year process of accreditation shows how the process is broken down into logical, relatively straightforward stages that build on one another. It is a process that can be readily managed, and though it may seem arduous, the process is carefully established so that it doesn't become too onerous through a bottleneck or too daunting through unforeseen or difficult to understand stages or steps.

Pre-Candidacy and Candidacy

Any program that seeks to gain ALA accreditation for the first time must go through pre-candidacy and candidacy. These two initial stages for a non-accredited program are quite interesting for a seeming contradiction. Pre-candidacy and candidacy status allow for variable levels of readiness regarding accreditation, even though the standards used to measure programs in these stages and many key reports are exactly the same as they are for an accredited program seeking reaccreditation. The reason for this is simple. All ALA accredited programs must ultimately perform to the same standards so the only difference can be the amount time allowed for a non-accredited program seeking initial accreditation to prove it has met the standards.

A great number of resources for pre-candidacy can be found at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/education/accreditedprograms/resourcesforprogramadministrators/how/index.cfm>

First on this page is the document entitled, Initial ALA Accreditation Step One: Precandidacy Application. It states: "A report on the status of the program and a plan for achieving candidacy status are the two most critical elements of a pre-candidacy application." This statement is fairly easy to understand. Essentially the first document records the starting point of the program while the second document indicates how changes from this starting point will result in an ALA accredited program. Five very straightforward supporting documents will be submitted with the application and suggested sections of the application itself can be found at this site: http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/education/accreditedprograms/resourcesforprogramadministrators/Initial%20Accreditation%20Information/sections_%20precan_application.pdf If a program applies for pre-candidacy successfully, it enters pre-candidacy, a stage characterized by preparation and periodic reports that document this preparation. Pre-candidacy can be a longer process than the two year process for accreditation as it often entails expanding a program's reach particularly in terms of curriculum, faculty, students, and its overall mission. In addition, a program in pre-candidacy will almost certainly change as it puts into place systematic self-evaluation processes in line with the accreditation attempt. The pre-candidacy application is successfully completed when the program reaches the end of a timeline it has itself set with the OA that also includes specific targeted changes, many of which might include

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such things as the number of faculty and their standing in terms of the field as well as in regard to their role in education, a curriculum of sufficient breadth and consistency, an administration both sufficiently staffed and capable of meeting all administrative needs, facilities that support a program's goals and objectives, etc. Such goals grow out of the ALA standards and the institution itself. The timeline and stages set to reach such self-defined goals are similarly developed by the institution itself with guidance from the OA. Once a program succeeds in pre-candidacy it achieves candidacy, and then the schedule for accreditation described in the section, *The Process of Accreditation: Timeline and Steps*, comes into play. Stated more simply, a program in candidacy will now follow the same process as those programs seeking reaccreditation. As a result, the stage of pre-candidacy is not only crucial for growth that will ideally result in an ALA accredited program but it is a stage that takes into account the gap between accredited and non-accredited programs.

Pre-candidacy is expected to take two years. During this time annual reports are expected and then near the end of this time, a candidacy application will be filed. If candidacy occurs, then the two year countdown towards accreditation begins but extensions to the pre-candidacy period are also possible.

If candidacy is not granted, the program may remain in pre-candidacy another year, the end of which it may be granted a one three-year extension. If a program remains in pre-candidacy for six years without progressing to candidacy, it will no longer be considered a pre-candidate and must wait two years before reapplying for pre-candidacy. (Initial ALA Accreditation Step One, 2)

Ultimately the pre-candidacy period should be characterized by a program changing itself towards a self-assessing entity that adheres to ALA standards, and just to clarify, this period cannot last more than 6 years.

The Decisions

There are a number of decisions that can be made for a program seeking accreditation. A program seeking accreditation or an initial accreditation can receive accreditation, a conditional accreditation or be denied accreditation. Each decision carries certain expectations. Accreditation is not just a stage that a program reaches even if it does recognize the condition of the program in question. Rather accreditation is a sign the program has developed a serious method of continual self-evaluation in light of ALA standards. As a result accreditation is evidence that continual, widespread and systemic evaluation is a part of the accredited program. For a program with conditional accreditation the same ALA standards apply but the program has been informed of certain areas that must be addressed. As a result, a decision granting conditional accreditation will augment a program's existing, standards-inspired, self evaluation systems with a call to look at specific areas that require renewed attention, development or changes. Such a determination will also result in a timeline during which time these shortcomings must be remedied.

Conclusion

While there are other issues that could be addressed in this article I wanted to keep this introduction to the process of ALA accreditation fairly simple and straightforward for an audience presumed outside the system. I hope it explains the main steps to accreditation and goes some way toward demystifying the process. Most of the materials on which I've based this article are freely available on the OA website, and I encourage any reader to see for themselves that this process, though it might fill some with concern or even fear, is a process that is open for any interested party to understand.

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