September 2004

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Recommended Citation

Houbeck, Robert L. Jr. (2004) "Linking Students with Collections; or Getting Ready to Meet the Accreditation Train," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 8.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4389>

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Linking Students with Collections; or Getting Ready to Meet the Accreditation Train

by **Robert L. Houbeck, Jr.** (Director, Frances Willson Thompson Library, University of Michigan-Flint)

An unglamorous but important responsibility for which higher education administrators get paid is to make sure their institution, and programs within their institution, are accredited. Accreditation may seem a remote issue to collection development librarians and other *Against The Grain* readers. But it matters. A lot. Probation or failure to achieve re-accreditation would be a serious problem for nearly all higher education institutions, and fatal to the administrators responsible. Loss of accreditation cuts off students at that institution from eligibility for federal student aid.¹ It also undermines the integrity of degrees already granted, imperils student job prospects, depresses enrollment, and can lead to layoffs and program cutbacks. A lot rides on successful management of those five- and ten-year accreditation reviews.

In the United States, most colleges and universities voluntarily affiliate with one of six regional accrediting associations.² The **College of Charleston**, for example, where *ATG* is edited, receives its institutional accreditation through the **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools**. My institution, the **University of Michigan-Flint**, is accredited through the **North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission**. Your institution almost certainly keeps in motion, sometimes chugging, sometimes barreling along, individuals and committees charged with preparing for its next review.

Libraries are significant players in a university's overall accreditation review. An important job for every director is to make sure that librarians and staff understand the relevant accreditation criteria for the coming ordeal, and are engaging in sustained, effective, and documentable efforts to meet review criteria. It takes focus and teamwork to pass an accreditation exam.

When I was hired as library director at **UM-Flint**, for example, the institution had just undergone a review in which the library (through no fault of its previous director) had been cited as a "concern." "Concern" is polite accreditation jargon for "fix-this-problem-or-forget-getting-reaccredited." I knew well — and my provost reinforced — that, at our next institutional review, the first thing the new site-visit committee was going to do was read the previous report and ask what we — that means you, **Bob** — had done to resolve the problems they had identified. I taped the concerns portion of the report next to my computer as a standing reminder. I made sure that my library colleagues understood the areas in which we needed to show progress. We worked steadily over the next several years. We had support, and good

fortune. We passed. In fact, the **NCA** review team not only scratched us off its "concern" list, but moved us over to the "institutional strength" column. A happy byproduct is that I got to continue to be director.

Changing Criteria

But accreditation reviews are like freight trains — finish one and another is already on the track headed toward you. My university's next review, for example, is a scant six years off. Do you know when your university will next have its re-accreditation review? More importantly, do you know the criteria on which your library will be evaluated?

Since my university's last review the **North Central Association** has substantially revised its accreditation criteria. **Criterion 3, Core Component 3d**, draws my special attention. This general criterion reads innocently: "The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching." Well, duh, of course they do. Don't they?

The story, though, is not in the title, but in the text:

"The test for accreditation," the Commission elaborates, "is no longer ownership. Instead, it evaluates the organization's understanding of what resources are needed for effective learning and teaching and its creative ways of linking faculty and students to the resources and making sure they are used. Consequently, it is critical for colleges and universities to assess actual student use of equipment, materials, and media, collecting evidence that something worthwhile is happening to students because learning resources exist."³

Secure resources that are needed for effective learning and teaching; link users creatively with resources; make sure resources are used; collect evidence that the resources make a positive difference in student learning; assess. Heads up, **Bob**. These are some of the measures on which your library will be evaluated at the next **NCA** review.

Even if your institution is accredited by a body that continues to use more traditional input-oriented criteria, the new **NCA** standards are a harbinger. Under pressure, especially from legislators,⁴ the trend among accrediting bodies over the last decade has been away from input-measures toward a focus on "output," especially on the effectiveness of teaching on student learning. That is why, increasingly, library directors are asked by cash-anxious administrators as well as accrediting teams to explain why and how, in an age of **Google** and the Internet, library collections and librarians make a difference in learning and teaching.

On the whole, this new emphasis on effectiveness is a good thing. Libraries can indeed make a positive difference in the immediate and long-term learning of students. We're educators. We want to make a difference. We can give good answers to these new questions.

But we need to start getting ready while the train is well out of town. By the time we hear the whistle, it will be too late. *ATG* readers — collection development, reference, and research instruction librarians, Webmasters, acquisitions librarians, even vendors and publishers — are well-positioned to help library directors, in the coming outcome-oriented reporting climate, to demonstrate the impact the library can play in learning and teaching. In the following, I suggest a few concrete ideas. But these are only sketches. On an issue like this one, a library director's job should be to start conversations, not end them. I look forward to your even better additions, observations, and corrections.

Implications and Strategies

Collection Adequacy: In a budget presentation I once asserted that our health science collection was inadequate to support our level of program. My chancellor, an ex-Marine, almost leapt over the table at me: "How do you know that?" I mumbled moronically, "Well, everybody tells me that." I was right, of course — I was acting on the informed judgment of faculty and librarians — but right, too, was my chancellor. We ought not to make decisions solely by anecdote, even informed anecdote. If we are asking for a measurable input — e.g., more cash — we should be able to describe a measurable gap that will be narrowed. I realized that I did not have baseline data on that gap between collection and programmatic need. I left determined to be ready at the next budget hearing with a quantifiable answer.

What did we do? Our collection development librarian, **Paul Streby**, working with his colleagues and with faculty, designed and executed a yearlong collection analysis project.⁵ At the end of the project, we were able to quantify, within a rough range and for 24 subject areas, the gap between our print and digital collection and our level of program. We could also express, in a quantifiable form, the gap between our annual collection level and what was needed to adequately sustain our level of program. And, yes, our health science collection was as needy as I had described.

If your library has collection analysis data, keep it updated. If you haven't, get it. Collection development librarians could collaborate with colleagues in acquisitions, systems, and circulation to explore the idea and draft a proposal. If you can't examine your entire collec-

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tion, design a pilot and study a portion. An analysis project gives a director a baseline from which to plan. One can estimate the cost of closing gaps, and illustrate impact of targeted funds. One can relate collection dollars to priorities. One can anticipate the impact of journal cancellations. It's an immensely useful tool, and a good demonstration of management seriousness to present to provosts and accreditation site visitors.

Collection analysis is a macro project. Here's a micro-level initiative. One year we had a small amount of one-time dollars for acquisitions. We had to distribute the funds to all academic departments. We divided the money according to a formula. We couldn't dictate how the departments spent the money. But we had been told, here and there, that some faculty had paper topics that they avoided assigning because library resources on that particular subject were thin. So we suggested to each chair that they invite their faculty to propose acquisitions that would fill such specific collection gaps. Tell us which monographs we should buy that would enable you to assign a topic fruitful for your students. Results were predictably spotty, but not barren. A library director would welcome reporting to an accreditation committee that faculty had spent funds on this kind of focused, student-centered initiative.

Journals: Journals are one of the two basic forms of academic communication. We all invest half or more of our acquisitions budgets on them, in print and digital formats. Yet what do students know about this academically fundamental genre? We acquire and assemble for them thousands of printed magazines and journals, rich aggregations of full-text digital titles, and digital indexes of the contents of both. Earnestly students search these indexes and print reams of citations. But usually what they are really looking for is not 200 articles but a place to start, the three central articles on a topic, the three best pro and three best con articles on an issue.

Talk about fertile, and pedagogically unexplored, territory for instruction.

Can students distinguish between a popular magazine, an academic journal, and a journal of commentary, policy, and opinion? Do they know the core journals in their academic major? Can they distinguish between *The Nation* and *National Review*? What are refereed journals? Who publishes these things? Who edits them? What are editorial boards? What are professional associations and "think-tanks" which often are associated with journals? What's available on their Websites? What's linked from them?

The genre of journals, including the related world of Websites and blogs, is a rich area for library instruction, at a general and discipline-specific level. Journals are a kind of door, or at least a window, into the world of academic and professional conversation. Instruction in the area of journals lends itself well to targeted handouts and Web pages. Journals are also a topic

on which collection development and research instruction librarians can collaborate with instructional faculty, to integrate journals and specialized periodical indexes into classroom assignments.

Start your brainstorming with *Magazines for Libraries*.⁶ A traditional print reference work, both librarians and students will find it essential for pulling together descriptive and critical opinion on a wide range of popular, academic and opinion journals, including Web "serials." We need to find ways to open up for students the rich resources we have assembled in our journal collections and help them understand the world of journals. Every initiative, where practical, should include one or more methods for assessing the impact of our efforts on teaching and learning.

Reference Works: Our reference collections, print and digital, are filled with resources that can help students write stronger papers, prepare more informed presentations, better understand their major fields of study. We have "the product"; how do we more consciously link our students to it?

Think for a moment about traditional print reference works. Many of these are not available in an online format. Web-focused students are not likely to encounter them on their own. Yet many can be extraordinarily useful to students — if someone tells them about them. We need to identify a few key works and start opening them up.

Do you remember the first time you opened *Constance Winchell's Guide to Reference Books*?⁷ **Wally Bonk** introduced it to us in a reference bibliography class. My reaction was probably typical: "Where have you been all my life? How much time could I have saved, as an undergrad and as a history graduate student, had someone told me about you!" Now in its 12th edition, edited by **Robert Balay**, it remains invaluable. And, at \$275, a bargain. We ought to put it on a pedestal at our reference desk. In classes I teach — in History, Honors, and American Culture — I review it in detail with my students. Even many faculty do not know about it. We need to do some evangelizing.

Guide to Reference Books is also useful because its very layout describes the topography of reference works: guides, handbooks, bibliographies, dictionaries, encyclopedias, biographical sources, atlases, chronologies. Nobody is born knowing that generations of reflection are articulated in these genres. No **Google** search will give students such a picture of the concrete organization of knowledge. We ought to tell them.

We can do this telling in a variety of ways, many of which lend themselves to collaboration among librarian specialties: collection development, reference, research instruction, Webpage construction. Teams of librarians, in some cases working with interested instructional faculty, might develop a reference awareness program. They could readily produce printed handouts, Web pages, self-paced exercises, class presentations, reference-book-of-the-week displays.

Since many librarians are also published scholars, they might design presentations to il-

lustrate the ways they have integrated reference and databases tools into their research. In this way, they can show students real-time links to resources.

Once the juices start to flow, other general and specialized reference works that we should open up will become obvious. A few of the less expensive works students might even consider buying for their home libraries, or as holiday gifts (see, I said there'd be a hook for the publisher/vendor wing of **ATG**). Reference works, for example, that deal with sports, such as the *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues* (\$25); reviews of musical recordings, such as the *Penguin Guide to Compact Discs* (\$25); natural science and environmental handbooks and field guides, such as *Field Guide to North American Trees* (\$33) or *Edible Wild Plants* (\$6); entertainment, such as the *Film Encyclopedia* (\$30); handbooks for authors, such as the *Writer's Handbook* (\$30, so more suitable as a gift; includes encouraging essays); for the scholarly, the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (\$67) and the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (\$80). **Border's** doesn't stock such works because they *don't* sell. And how many of us have bought books because we first encountered them in a library? We should up the odds that our students will make similar encounters.

Activity Measures and Assessment: After the information technology Website, on the **University of Michigan's Ann Arbor** and **Flint** campuses, the library Website is, in any month, the most visited. When we total up digital visits with gate counts, and with circulation, interlibrary loan, reference, and research instruction statistics, we can demonstrate that we are busier than ever before. As a profession, we have not yet settled on uniform ways of counting digital use. The **Association of Research Libraries** recognizes that need and is working on the challenge.⁸ It is a critical gap in management data. We need, for example, to be able to evaluate the use and usefulness of expensive databases. We also need to be able to demonstrate comparative growth in activity.

Collection development librarians, working with their colleagues in circulation, systems, interlibrary loan, reference, as well as with vendors and publishers, need to think about how to match digital use with student learning. What can we learn from the digital data that we do have?

Collection development librarians and their colleagues also need to imaginatively integrate book circulation data and in-library print journal use data with digital use data, and compare that picture with acquisitions. Are we putting our collection dollars into the right areas? Are some areas of the collection used more intensely than others? Are new acquisitions, print or digital, being used? How can we tweak our online systems to give us a better picture of the match between expenditures and collection use?

In addition to awareness and instruction efforts, we will need to figure out how to assess the learning impact of targeted student contact with reference works. Nobody should get their hopes up, including accrediting site teams. The fruits of education can take a long time to ripen.

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But we can do a few things to assess our efforts. Webpage counters, comparatively over time, can be an indicator of use. Where we have worked directly with faculty on a particular class, their comments and suggestions will give us important feedback as we refine our efforts. User evaluations from instruction classes, too, can provide insight and direction. Pretty lame, but a start. Assessment is something we'll refine

Endnotes

1. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools recently withdrew accreditation from Barber-Scotia College. Ninety percent of its students receive some form of federal financial aid, and are now ineligible to receive it. See "Barber-Scotia Won't Appeal SACS Action," *Charlotte Observer*, 10 July 2004, at www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/living/education/higher_learning/9122719.htm?1c.
2. The six regional associations of colleges and schools, named after the region in which they operate, comprise the principal higher education accreditation bodies in the United States. They are: Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, and Western. See, for example, the North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission Website: www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org.
3. See Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. *Handbook of Accreditation*. (Chicago: HLC, 2003), 3.2-11, at www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/resources/handbook/Handbook03.pdf.
4. "U.S. Congress Questions Accreditation Practices." *The Diamondback: The University of Maryland's Independent Student Newspaper* (College Park, Md.), October 18, 2002. At www.inform.umd.edu/News/Diamondback/archives/2002/10/18/news4.html. See also "The ABCs of Accreditation." Though without author or institutional attribution, the piece offers a brief useful summary of accreditation issues, interactions between federal agencies and accrediting associations, and reorganizations among those associations, at www.1stdegree.info/pages/accreditation.html.
5. For a description of the project, methodology, results, and updates, see: <http://lib.umflint.edu/consummary.html> and <http://lib.umflint.edu/conupdate.html>.
6. *Magazines for Libraries*. Edited by Cheryl LaGuardia. 12th ed. (New Providence, NJ: Bowker, 2003). This source fails to include a number of significant journals of opinion on the social and political right (e.g., *First Things*, *Human Life Review*, *Modern Age*, *Regulation*), so in this area will need to be supplemented. The editor may have sound reasons for some of the dozen or so omissions I noticed. But if *First Hand* belongs, so does *First Things*. Happily, *ATG* made the cut. Check out its review on p.637.
7. *Guide to Reference Books*. Edited by Robert Balay. 11th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996).
8. For an update on ARL's E-Metrics Project, see the "Statistics and Measurements" section of Duane Webster's summary of recent ARL activity in *Bowker Annual* 2003, 48th ed., pp.181-82.

as we go, but we need to demonstrate awareness and begin.

Final thoughts

Well, those are a few ideas you might have ready to greet the accreditation train when next it wheezes into town. Some of you may have even better ones. Great. We could all profit from hearing them.

Some others of you may resent the new out-comes orthodoxy. You may believe that what we do in academic libraries is self-evidently a good thing. I have sympathy for that view. In academic libraries we collect the great conversation that takes place between serious people across the generations. Our collections embody

a set of judgments about what we, as educators believe worth holding ready, or having readily accessible, for our students. Maybe none of them in a given year will read any **Twain**, or **Tocqueville**, or **Orwell**, none listen to any **Beethoven**, or **Haydn**, or **Wagner**.

But were that the case, we shouldn't be unmoved. We ought to do something about it. We ought, as the new **NCA** criteria admonish, to make sure "that something worthwhile is happening to students because learning resources exist." If we use our imaginations to act and to assess, we will discover that libraries can be even more central to effective teaching and student learning than even we librarians suspected. 🐘

Facts Go Online: Are Print Reference Collections Still Relevant?

by **Dave Tyckoson** (Head, Reference Department, Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno) <davety@csufresno.edu>

They sit there, right outside my office, waiting for someone like me to come along. I see them every day, walking past them time after time, seeing them so often that I no longer notice their presence. They've been there longer than I have and at least some of them will remain long after I have moved on. Like many objects that are so familiar to us that they fade into the background, they have become a sort of wallpaper for my everyday existence. Some announce their presence in bright colors of orange and red and yellow. Others sit sedately in coats of muted browns and blues, lined up neatly in row after row, like soldiers at attention, awaiting their latest orders. Yet those orders rarely come these days.

I take comfort in their presence, although, like many old friends, I no longer consult them as frequently as I used to. They are always there for me, ready when I need them. But it seems like I just don't need them very much anymore. As you might guess, I am talking about my old friends, print reference books.

Looking out my door, I see these familiar volumes hundreds of times a day. Perhaps symbolically, although certainly a mere coincidence of building geography, as Head of the Reference Department my office sits at the head of the reference collection (the A call numbers in the LC classification). The row of low shelving outside my door contains encyclopedias: *World Book*, *Americana*, *Britannica* (including a current set, the classic 1910 11th edition, and a reproduction of the eighteenth century original), an old, well-worn copy of *Collier's*, and my own sentimental favorite, the *Academic American*, with at least one volume missing which can never be replaced. Mounted on the wall outside my office, so close that I can literally reach around and grab a volume without stepping outside, sits *Contemporary Authors*. And staring at me, in a straight line from my office door, at eye level from my desk, almost daring me to grab it, sits that single vol-

ume that personifies the reference book, the *World Almanac*.

Behind these gems sit 35,000 additional volumes of reference works covering every topic under the sun. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, almanacs, chronologies, directories, indexes, and abstracts, all waiting for someone to come along to absorb their contents. From philosophy and religion to business and economics to art and music to physics and chemistry to health and medicine to library science and bibliography (ah, those mysterious Z's), these reference books contain a consolidation of all human knowledge from all over the globe from the beginning of recorded history to the present day. This collection, refined and built over the past 90+ years, for which we order new titles every day and remove outdated volumes on an ongoing basis, represents the totality of human thought and experience. In many ways, this reference collection, and every other reference collection like it, represents the sum total of human intellectual achievement. So why don't I ever use it any more?

Several recent events have led me to question the use and relevance of maintaining such a print collection. One was a meeting at last summer's **ALA Conference** in Orlando. In a conversation with a representative of a major reference publisher, I was asked what new sources we need in a particular subject area. I surprised myself with my response when I said "Nothing. What we need has either already been published or is all on the Web." Another event was a discussion with one of the librarians here at my library. We were deciding on whether to buy a new edition of a classic reference work. Although we both agreed that we used to use that title all the time, we decided that we did not need to spend the money to buy it again this year. But the precipitating event that brought this into focus was *Facts on File*.

Facts on File. It's one of the first reference
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