

The Importance of Standards and Assessment

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The library profession has long recognized the importance of standards in all aspects of library work. Since 1959 the Association of College and Research Libraries has taken the lead in developing standards and guidelines for academic libraries.¹ The ACRL website notes that the “ACRL is the source that the higher education community looks to for standards and guidelines on academic libraries.”² The development and widespread acceptance and use of standards is critical in the assessment of student outcomes, especially for information literacy. Librarians in Maryland concluded that in order for students at all levels to succeed academically, they

must be able to access, retrieve, evaluate, manage, and use information effectively and efficiently from a variety of print and non-print sources. Information resources are multiplying exponentially, and becoming more diverse, more complex, and more interdisciplinary. Successful students must be information literate, as well as technologically proficient, in order to complete basic coursework and degree requirements.³

Nowhere else are standards more critical than during the accreditation process. Accreditation is defined as the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community.⁴ Barbara A. Beno reports that in recent years, accreditation standards developed and used by most of the

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regional accreditors have changed to incorporate the assessment of student learning as a central process in evaluating institutional effectiveness. The incorporation of student learning outcomes into accreditation evaluation processes reflects a decade-long movement in higher education to assess student learning.⁵

It follows that once standards for student learning have been established, the focus logically turns to assessment. Ilene Rockman notes that “assessment is a process for quality improvement. As such, since libraries are both administrative and academic units, they have an important role to play in the continuous quality improvement goals of their parent organizations.”⁶ Assessment for libraries is not a new invention, but for some it may require reenvisioning the library’s role in assessing student outcomes at the institutional level. Libraries involved with student assessment will have to rethink who, what, how, and in many cases where they are assessing in order to satisfy institutional or external requirements.

Kenneth Smith reminds us that in the shift from the faculty expert model to one that is based on student-realized outcomes, these outcomes include “not only what students know, but also the skills they develop, what they are able to do, and the attitudes of mind that characterize the way they will approach their work over a lifetime of change.”⁷ Ensuring that students are information literate and prepared for lifelong learning is and has long been a key priority for the profession of librarianship.

Academic accrediting associations and national discipline-specific organizations have begun to lend their weight to the implementation of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education by including information literacy in accreditation guidelines. The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools has taken a leadership role in this regard, stating that “Information Literacy is vital to all disciplines and to effective teaching and learning in any institution. Institutions of higher education need to provide students and instructors with the knowledge, skills and tools to obtain information in many formats and media.”⁸

Although the ACRL did not approve and disseminate the current version of the standards until 2000, a large number of academic institutions and individual researchers had already begun to develop standards for assessing information literacy skills.⁹ This trend has continued, and the resulting efforts and findings comprise a body of research that is fractured, with no clear trends or generalizable findings for comparative purposes across academic institutions.

Currently, there are at least two known large-scale efforts under way to develop and implement objective, standardized survey instruments that will produce results that are comparable across campuses, but their initial findings have not yet been publicly disseminated.¹⁰ Additionally, although a significant amount of information literacy assessment is taking place in library and information science education (for dissertations and theses) and in practice, very few of the survey instruments are based on any one set of standards.¹¹ This book provides a place to begin an assessment-based dialogue about the importance of using a uniform protocol for assessing the baseline information literacy skills of college and university students. It uses the ACRL Standards as a basic framework for developing and implementing an information literacy research agenda at the individual or institutional level, with an eye toward building a body of research literature produced by practitioners and researchers that yields usable, comparable data.

This book fills a gap in the literature on information literacy assessment by providing a link between the standards themselves and the desire to acquire and analyze data from information literacy assessment as a component of institutional assessment for accreditation and self-study purposes.

The authors anticipate the use of this book as a guide to building a culture of information literacy assessment from the grassroots level up through library and university administration.

This book includes a total of ten chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the ACRL Standards and provides a brief discussion of them overall. The chapter includes examples of how to integrate the standards into instruction programs, bibliographic instruction sessions, librarian-taught labs, and stand-alone courses; and there is also a section with tips on developing library-related assignments. Each of chapters 3 through 7 introduces an individual standard, along with its performance indicators and outcomes. Sample assessment queries from institutions in the United States, Canada, and Australia are provided in each chapter, and assignments that represent best practices are also included for many of the performance indicators. These assignments are examples of ways to explain, introduce, and reinforce information literacy concepts and outcomes to students.

Chapter 8 discusses empirically proven areas that have an impact on information literacy assessment but are not explicitly covered by the standards: the nature of the relationship between students and faculty, students' perceptions of and attitudes about the standards, detailed demographic and background information, and technological competencies. This chapter also

includes examples of queries designed to assess in some of these areas. Chapter 9 discusses how to develop assessment instruments based on the standards, from garnering institutional support and developing research goals and objectives to writing different types of individual queries. And finally, chapter 10 provides a discussion on the how-to's of automating assessment instruments. This chapter was written specifically for those individuals who may not have the technological skill set to perform certain aspects of instrument automation such as programming or developing a relational database. It is accompanied by a glossary of technical terminology.

During the writing of this book, the authors identified more than seventy survey instruments, which are listed in the appendix. Every effort was made to identify an individual or institution responsible for the survey instruments listed, in order to provide an avenue for requesting copies once the URLs in the appendix are no longer valid. It is the authors' hope that these instruments will provide a starting point for exploring assessment in your own library.

NOTES

1. William N. Nelson and Robert W. Fernekes, "Who Uses ACRL Standards?" *College and Research Libraries News* 66, no. 5 (May 2005): 359.

2. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Standards and Guidelines," <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardguidelines.htm>.

3. Universities of Maryland Collaborative, "Universities of Maryland Collaborative Information Literacy Grant Proposal" (working paper, 2004).

4. Middle States Commission on Higher Education, *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* (Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002), iv, <http://www.msache.org>.

5. Barbara A. Beno, "The Role of Student Learning Outcomes in Accreditation Quality Review," *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 126 (Summer 2004): 65.

6. Ilene F. Rockman, "The Importance of Assessment," *Reference Services Review* 30, no. 3 (2002): 18.

7. Kenneth R. Smith, "New Roles and Responsibilities for the University Library: Advancing Student Learning through Outcomes Assessment," *ARL*, no. 213 (December 2000): 2.

8. Middle States Commission on Higher Education, *Developing Research and Communication Skills: Guidelines for Information Literacy in the Curriculum* (Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2003), 32.

9. See UCLA Instructional Services Advisory Committee, "Instructional Competencies Survey Project, 1997–1998," <http://www.bol.ucla.edu/%7Ejhschm/project/presentation.htm>; Kathleen Dunn, "Information Competency Assessment: Web-Based Assessment of

University Entry-Level Information Competency” (June 1999), <http://www.csupomona.edu/~library/InfoComp/>.

10. Lisa G. O'Connor, Carolyn J. Radcliff, and Julie A. Gedeon, “Applying Systems Design and Item Response Theory to the Problem of Measuring Information Literacy Skills,” *College and Research Libraries* 63, no. 6 (November 2002): 528–43; Educational Testing Service, “ETS Launches ICT Literacy Assessment, an Online Measure of Student Information and Communication Technology Proficiency,” <http://www.ets.org/ictliteracy/educator.html>; and Ilene Rockman and Gordon Smith, “National Higher Education Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Initiative: A Unique Partnership,” www.calstate.edu/LS/CARL.ppt.

11. See Lut Rahim Nero, “An Assessment of Information Literacy among Graduating Teacher Education Majors of Four Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (SSHE) Universities” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1999); Teresa Yvonne Neely, “Aspects of Information Literacy: A Sociological and Psychological Study” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2000); Patricia Davitt Maughan, “Assessing Information Literacy among Undergraduates: A Discussion of the Literature and the University of California-Berkeley Assessment Experience,” *College and Research Libraries* 62, no. 1 (January 2001): 71–85; Carol A. Powell and Jane Case-Smith, “Information Literacy Skills of Occupational Therapy Graduates: A Survey of Learning Outcomes,” *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 91, no. 4 (October 2003): 468–78; and Molly R. Flaspohler, “Information Literacy Program Assessment: One Small College Takes the Big Plunge,” *Reference Services Review* 31, no. 2 (2003): 129–40. Flaspohler’s study used the ACRL Standards to develop interventions, but the survey instrument was developed at the UCLA Libraries based on standards developed in 1998; see <http://www.bol.ucla.edu/~jherschm/project/>.