Instruction Coordinators and Higher Education Accreditation: a Study of Awareness and Assessment Documentation Use

Abstract

This study gauges instruction and information literacy coordinators’ awareness of higher education accreditation processes at their institutions and provides a picture of how coordinators use assessment documentation produced by units external to the library. The study took the form of a survey sent to a random sample of instruction coordinators and information literacy librarians stratified by regional accrediting body. Results showed that instruction coordinators generally are aware of accreditation processes but that only about half use documentation relating to student learning assessment, which may include written student learning outcomes at the institution, program, or course level, plans for assessing learning outcomes, and reports on assessment activities and results, to further their information literacy goals. Accreditation awareness is influenced by time in position, time in the profession, and, to some extent, regional accreditor. Use of and considered importance of assessment documentation is influenced by size of institution, regional accreditor, and, to some extent, time in position. Suggestions for increasing awareness and use of documentation include introducing the accreditation process to new librarians in library school, encouraging contribution of experiences with assessment documentation to the literature and regional conferences, and advocating for instruction coordinators to serve on campus assessment committees.

Keywords: accreditation; information literacy; student learning assessment; awareness; assessment documentation
Introduction

About a decade ago, regional accrediting bodies undertook major revisions of their accreditation standards. The changes emphasized student learning and assessment, and in many cases included the concept of information literacy as a learning outcome. The revised standards required that institutions provide evidence that student learning outcomes were being met, which in turn has led to new documentation streams, including written learning outcomes, assessment plans, reports on results and improvement plans. This assessment data tells faculty and administrators the story of what their students are learning and where there are gaps, making a culture of continuous improvement possible.

Leaders in the library profession found the revised standards promising for advancing information literacy and the role of librarians as teachers and collaborators. Incorporation of information literacy as a learning outcome opened a door to embedding information literacy within program curricula and provided a new way to measure library impact. Writers promoted awareness and use of accreditation standards and assessment data in order to facilitate library partnerships with faculty and administrators, thus fulfilling institutional learning goals.

Over the years, individual studies, for example Tuñón (2003) and Millet, Donald, and Wilson (2009), have reported successfully mining the potential of regional standards and accreditation processes to enhance collaboration between librarians and their institutions in advancing information literacy. But we are only beginning to understand how the profession is doing as a whole in using accreditation standards and assessment data. This study seeks to answer the following questions: How aware are instruction coordinators and information literacy librarians of their institution’s regional accreditation standards and how these standards address information literacy? How aware are instruction coordinators/information literacy librarians of assessment data produced by teaching units and what factors contribute to their use of this
data? How important do they consider assessment data to fulfilling their goals for information literacy?

As predicted by leaders in the profession, accreditation standards and assessment data have become important tools for aligning library goals for advancement of information literacy with institutional goals for student learning and for creating effective partnerships between librarians, teaching faculty, and administrators. This study is significant in that it is the first to assess how well instruction librarians are harnessing these resources in their daily work, where gaps in awareness and use may exist, and what factors may influence those gaps. Understanding why those gaps occur may lead to solutions for addressing them, including the development and sharing of best practices. Greater awareness and use of accreditation processes and assessment data throughout the profession could lead to better integration of information literacy into curricula, resulting in more effective fulfillment of library and institutional goals and greater recognition of the library’s impact on student learning.

Literature Review

The library literature covering the accreditation process in higher education is primarily concerned with how regional accrediting bodies understand information literacy as evidenced by their standards, and the implications of the standards for information literacy goals. Revisions to standards in the first half of the last decade prompted a flurry of articles on this subject. In particular, Middle States revised its Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education in 2002, giving information literacy significantly more prominence. Ratteray (2002) reports on how the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2000, influenced the steering committee working on revisions to the Characteristics. He predicts that the new standards will make institutions
include information literacy in long-range assessment plans, tie information literacy more closely to student learning, and strengthen collaborative bonds between faculty, administrators, and librarians. Gratch-Lindauer (2002) provides a detailed content analysis of draft, recently revised, and updated standards from all six regional accreditors. She finds increased emphasis on student learning outcomes and assessment, less tendency to relegate libraries to a separate section with special measurement “inputs,” and a strengthening of information literacy, distance learning, the teaching role of librarians, innovation, and collaboration. One recommendation she makes is to use learning outcomes to document to what extent the library is used.

Around the same time, Thompson (2002, p. 221) compares all six regional accreditation standards on their use of “the IL words,” and related concepts in the process of gauging the status of a 1989 recommendation from the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. ALA had recommended that commissions on higher education mandate the inclusion of information literacy in all curricula. Like Ratteray, Thompson projects (2002, p. 227) that the increased inclusion of information literacy in accreditation standards will lead to increased embedding of information literacy in program curricula as “an essential ingredient in the education process”. He also predicts instructional librarians turning into teacher-librarians--incorporating active teaching techniques, curriculum development, partnering with faculty to teach information literacy, and educating faculty on information literacy concepts. In passing, he mentions a 1997 Middle States document called “Assessing Librarian Effectiveness as Teacher/Facilitator of Information Management” which suggests that librarians should “review the institution’s outcomes assessment data to determine if institutional or course-specific findings relate to opportunities the library may have to improve learning” (Thompson, 2002, p. 231).

Another body of literature starting around this time addresses accreditation standards in terms of how libraries have responded to them or are using them as leverage to begin successful dialogues about integrated instruction programs. Nova Southeastern University, for
example, used recommendations from a 1997 reaccreditation process to build a new library in 2001 and to increase the staffing and role of its Distance and Instructional Library Services department (Tuñón, 2003). Trinity University in San Antonio was able to launch an information-literacy-across-the-curriculum program called Expanding Horizons because of a 2008 Southern Association of Schools and Colleges requirement to include a Quality Enhancement Plan in bids for reaccreditation (Millet et al., 2009). Malone and Nelson (2006) proposed the 2004 ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education as a tool for providing evidence of compliance with Middles States standards. Other librarians have described how ACRL’s information literacy standards may be linked to discipline-specific accreditation standards in order to develop partnerships with faculty colleagues (Birch, Greenfield, Janke, Schaeffer, & Woods, 2008; Ruediger & Jung, 2007; Trussell, 2004).

Research conducted by Saunders (2007) builds on earlier predictions by making further comparisons of regional accreditation standards. She employs a content analysis of the standards of the six regional accrediting bodies to see how the concept of information literacy compares region to region, and to gauge support in other standards for Middle States’ framework for an integrated information literacy program. Saunders finds that while not all of the accrediting bodies use the term “information literacy,” five out of six provide significant support for the skills associated with information literacy competencies put forth by Middle States. She suggests that in general library instruction practices have not caught up with standards in terms of establishing integrated information literacy programs as opposed to “compartmentalized” stand alone sessions, and she encourages both librarian awareness of accreditation standards and collection of data that can demonstrate how the library impacts student learning outcomes.

In 2008, Saunders goes further, doing a content analysis of the library literature to see to what extent professional conversations about information literacy show awareness of accreditation standards and guidelines. She finds that while some librarians are aware of
accreditation guidelines and how they can help further information literacy collaboration and assessment, references to standards in the literature are very low. Of all articles retrieved from Wilson’s Library Literature from 2000 to 2008 about information literacy, only 1.2 percent mentioned accreditation standards (Saunders, 2008, p. 310). Middle States was the accrediting body most often mentioned, followed by Southern, New England, Western and Northwestern.

In 2011, Saunders follows up this research with a content analysis of accreditation self studies and accreditation visiting team reports, incorporating four case study qualitative interviews of Middle States institutions. She found that information literacy was mentioned in 80.4 percent of the self studies of Middle States institutions (p. 86). However, only 42.3 percent of Middle States institutions conducted assessment of outcomes relating to information literacy (p. 93).

Institutions in other regions approached Middle States (78.2 percent) in mentioning information literacy, or equivalent language, in their self-studies (p. 106). However, only 32.8 percent of these institutions assess student learning outcomes for information literacy at any level of the institution (p. 112). Saunders (2011) also identified five themes in the self study regarding information literacy (collaboration, assessment, accountability and transparency, institutional culture, and leadership) which she explores in Middle States and non-Middle States participants.

The study described in this article advances the existing literature in documenting how accreditation standards supporting information literacy are impacting libraries nationwide. Earlier studies like those of Ratteray, Gratch-Lindauer, and Thompson made predictions about the impact of recently revised or draft accreditation standards and raised awareness about their future implications. Later articles record individual libraries’ responses to accreditation, giving the sense that standards are having some impact in the profession even though the extent is not known. Saunders’s work is a turning point in beginning to understand how earlier predictions about accreditation standards and information literacy have played out in practice. The current study provides additional understanding by looking at accreditation and student
learning assessment from the perspective of the individual instruction coordinator. It illustrates how goals in the profession and those put forth by the administrations of institutions of higher learning are being realized at the ground level.

Methodology

The researcher developed survey questions that would assess an individual instruction coordinator’s awareness of the reaccreditation process at his or her institution as well as use of assessment documentation external to the library (See Appendix A). Three instruction coordinators in the Washington Regional Library Consortium helped her test the survey. She included demographic questions such as time in position, time out of library school, and institution size in order to see if these variables would have any bearing on awareness or use of assessment documentation.

The member institutions of the six regional accrediting bodies for higher education constituted the population for the study. These include the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, and the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges. Discipline-specific accrediting agencies, for example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education for education, and community college accreditors, such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, were not included. The researcher collected membership directories freely available on the Web. She screened for and excluded foreign institutions and for-profit institutions. She also excluded any institution that did not grant at least one bachelor’s degree. The study does not include community colleges that offer only associate degrees, nor highly specialized graduate or professional schools (for example, optometry, acupuncture, theology) in
which a librarian would not have a reasonable opportunity to come across student learning assessment documentation for multiple disciplines or general education. Studying the Carnegie Foundation enrollment profile classifications helped her determine that requiring a bachelor’s degree be offered for inclusion was the best approach. The population varied widely in terms of institution size, types of degrees and subjects offered, and religious mission. The population numbered 1,727 institutions.

After screening the population, the researcher drew a random sample of 15 percent of the population stratified by region (261 institutions in total), in hopes of getting responses from 10 percent of the population, or 173 responses. She then visited the websites of the libraries at those institutions and identified the instruction coordinator, information literacy librarian, or closest equivalent. She contacted libraries in which it was unclear who filled this role to identify the best person to invite. She hoped that sending an invitation to a person would yield more usable responses than other strategies such as broadcast to a listserv.

She made six duplicate copies of the survey on SurveyMonkey so that she could send a unique URL to each regional sample and thus track results by region. She hypothesized that how regional accreditation standards emphasized information literacy would have an impact on awareness among instruction coordinators in that region. The survey was sent out in late November and early December 2011 with a follow up in early January 2012. Approximately 80 responses were received, a response rate of about 31 percent or about 4.6 percent of the population.

The researcher decided to draw another random sample in order to try to get responses from closer to 10 percent of the population. She decided that the data would still be up to date if it was from the same academic year. She followed the same method as before to prepare the sample and send invitations to an additional 161 librarians for a total sample of 422. Invitations went out in late March, and reminders were sent in mid-April. The survey closed on May 1,
2012 with 148 responses, a total response rate of 35 percent. Figure 1 shows the response rates for all six regions. The overall percentage of the population responding was 8.6 percent.

Figure 1. Survey Response Rates from Six Accrediting Regions

The researcher recoded responses to awareness questions into two categories, either “Know” or “Don’t Know” in order to measure the level of awareness of accreditation. She also merged the data from the six regions into one file, coding for each region, in order to measure differences between regions in awareness and use of assessment data.

Limitations of the Study

The survey’s intent was to gauge the awareness of participants at the moment they completed it. Participants were asked to respond “Don’t Know” to any questions to which they did not know the answer. Since participants were not answering in a controlled environment, there is a possibility that a few respondents looked up answers before responding. There was no control over the invited participant sending the survey to another person, although only responses from those saying that they were primarily responsible for coordinating teaching and learning/library instruction initiatives at their libraries were used in the study. While the answers to some questions, such as “What is the name of your regional accreditor” and “Does your
accreditor mention information literacy in its standards?” could be cross-checked to determine awareness, others, like “Do you have a body that oversees assessment?” could not.

In analyzing the results, the researcher realized that it would have been useful to have asked participants who said they did not use assessment data why they did not use it. The study also could have explored other factors that potentially could contribute to awareness of accreditation or use of assessment documentation, for example, whether an institution was currently under an accreditation review, or whether a full credit course on information literacy was offered. These are paths for further research on academic libraries and higher education accreditation.

Because there were two samples and two survey periods, there is a possibility that an external event unknown to the researcher could have affected results for the second sample. There was a four-month lag between the drawing of the first and second samples, the first occurring in early November 2011 and the second occurring in early March 2012. It is possible that a small number of instruction coordinator positions could have been vacated and refilled during this time, so that the makeup of the second sample could have been slightly different than it would have been if drawn with the first sample in November. The researcher felt that the possible effect on results was minimal and would be outweighed by a significant increase in overall responses.

**Results**

In general, instruction coordinators nationwide are aware of the higher education accreditation process and processes at their own institutions. For most of the awareness questions, total responses from all regions hovered around 85-90 percent aware and 13-14 unaware (Fig. 2).
The exception was “Does your accreditor mention information literacy in its standards?”

Responses to this question show that 55 percent of respondents were aware of how regional accreditation standards treat information literacy, and 45 percent were not. This seems inconsistent, but upon breaking the responses up by region, it is apparent that the regional accreditor does have some bearing on this question. (Fig. 3) The North Central, Southern and

Figure 3. Percent Awareness of Information Literacy in Accreditation Standards by Regional Accradiator
Western regions showed a higher percentage of coordinators who did not know the answer to this question, which brought up the total percentage of responses indicating unawareness.

Frequency data shows how variables such as years in the position, years in the profession, and size of institution affect awareness of the accreditation process. Coordinators who had been in their positions less than three years generally were less aware of their accreditor and their local process than those who had been in their positions longer. (Fig. 4) Coordinators in their positions more than five years were on average 13 percent more aware than those in their positions less than three years. Coordinators also increased their awareness of accreditation the longer they were out of library school. (Fig. 5) New librarians’ awareness

Figure 4. Percentage of Respondents Aware of Accreditation by Years in Position
was on average 26 percentage points lower than those in the profession more than five years. Size did not play a significant role in awareness of accreditation.

The researcher ran Lambda and Pearson’s Chi Square tests, non-directional measures of association, on these independent variables. Results showed a statistically significant association only between years in the profession and knowledge of the name of the regional accrediting body. A Pearson’s Chi Square test yielded a value of 15.339 with a significance of .004 at the .05 level of significance. This value translates into a probability of only near 1 percent that the correlation of the two variables occurred by chance.

About half of the instruction coordinators taking the survey, 54 percent, had looked at assessment documentation (learning outcomes, assessment plans, reports of assessment results) not generated by the library. In the regional breakdown (Fig. 6),
Middle States showed the highest percentage of people who looked at this documentation. Many coordinators who did look at this kind of documentation looked at it frequently, with just over half (51 percent) consulting it 4 or more times in six months, and another 39 percent looking at it between one and three times in six months. (Fig. 7). Most looked at all three types
of documentation with student learning outcomes being the most consulted (87.3 percent), followed by assessment plans (80 percent) and reports on assessment activities (73.6 percent).

Participants were also asked about the level of the documentation they reviewed, either institution-level, department-level, program within a department, or individual course.

Department-level documentation was consulted by nearly 60 percent of the participants, followed by institution (55.6 percent), individual course (48.6 percent), and program within a department or school (40.8 percent).

Of those who looked at outside documentation, 58 percent rated it 5 on a 5-point scale, or very important, to realizing their information literacy goals and 85 percent rated it either a 4 or a 5. (Fig. 8) The importance scale broken down by regions is interesting to review because it shows that for only one region, Middle States, the number of coordinators who thought this documentation very important surpasses the number of coordinators who did not look at it at all. (Fig. 9—Note, there were no importance ratings of 1) This remains true if the number of coordinators who rated the documentation either a 4 or 5 in importance is compared with those who did not look at it at all.

Figure 8. Importance of Assessment Documentation to Information Literacy Goals (1-5 scale with 5 being very important)
Statistical tests were run in order to see if the independent variables of time in the position, time in the profession, institution size and region had any influence on whether and how often coordinators looked at assessment documentation or the importance they placed on it. The greatest influence appears to be size of the institution. A Pearson’s Chi-Square test run on size as the independent variable and whether or not a coordinator looked at assessment documentation as the dependent variable resulted in a significance of .017 and a value of 12.057. The resulting probability that the correlation of the responses and institution size occurred by chance is only somewhere between 2.5 and 1 percent. A Gamma test (a directional measure of association for ordinal data) run on size and frequency of consultation revealed a positive value of .351 with a significance of .001. This result means that as institution size increases, frequency of consultation of assessment documentation increases, and the strength of this relationship is low to moderate. Because the two variables were ordinal, the researcher also decided to run a Spearman’s Rho correlation (a directional measure of association for ordinal data), which yielded results with a similar interpretation. The
Spearman’s Correlation Coefficient value was a positive .267. This result tells us that as institution size increases, frequency of consultation increases, and the strength of that relationship is on the low side. A Spearman’s Rho correlation also was run on institution size and how important the coordinator considered assessment documentation to realizing information literacy goals. The value in this case was a positive .257 with a significance of .002. Again, this result shows that a relationship among value placed on assessment documentation and institution size exists.

While institution size was the most important factor determining the frequency of consultation of assessment documentation and its importance to furthering information literacy goals, there was one other factor that had an influence. The length of time a coordinator was in his or her current position compared with whether or not s/he looked at assessment documentation using a Chi Square test yielded a value of 12.163 with a significance of .016. The resulting probability that the responses correlated by chance fell between 5 and 1 percent, indicating a significant relationship between these variables.

Discussion

About 85 percent of survey participants were aware of many aspects of the accreditation process at their institutions, showing that awareness of the higher education accreditation process among instruction and information literacy coordinators is widespread. The only exception was awareness of information literacy in regional accreditation standards, which lagged behind at 55 percent and varied widely by accrediting body. How regional accreditation standards discuss information literacy may explain lower awareness in the North Central and Southern regions. The North Central Association Higher Learning Commission Criteria for
Accreditation mentions neither information literacy nor library instruction.¹ The Southern Association’s Principles of Accreditation (2012, p. 31) does not mention information literacy by name but says that institutions must ensure that “. . . users have access to regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information sources.” Since these standards do not emphasize information literacy as a concept, it seems reasonable that institutions covered by them would place less importance on information literacy for reaccreditation, and it follows that coordinators in these regions would be less aware of what the standards say. The third region to show a lower awareness of information literacy in regional accreditation standards was the Western Association, whose Handbook of Accreditation (2008) mentions information literacy by name within undergraduate education, Standard 2.2a.

Comments from survey respondents in this region did not give any further information about why awareness was lower than in other regions. The respondents for this region were all seasoned librarians with five or more years in the profession, and more than half (56%) had been in their position for more than five years, one of the higher percentages in the pool. The Western region is one of the smaller regions and therefore had one of the smaller samples in the study. It is quite possible that a larger sample is needed to see if this region really differs from the pattern and why.

Length of experience in a position coordinating library instruction or information literacy and length of experience in the library profession were factors that had influence on awareness of national and local accreditation processes and use of assessment documentation. Results showed that as time in position and the profession increased, so did awareness of the accreditation process. Awareness jumped between 12 and 33 percentage points from librarians with less than three years experience in the profession to those with more than five. A

¹ In January 2013, the Commission adopted new criteria that for the first time reference guidance in effective use of research and information resources.
correlation also exists between time in position and whether or not a coordinator consulted assessment documentation.

The survey results suggest that assessment documentation produced outside the library is valuable for promoting information literacy. Eighty-five percent of respondents who used assessment documentation gave it an importance rating of 4 or 5 on a five-point scale in realizing information literacy goals. Therefore, there is a need to explore how to emphasize accreditation processes and resulting assessment documentation in library school curricula and in the orientation of new coordinators. Addressing the accreditation process in library programs would help increase awareness among new academic librarians and ready them to link the library’s information literacy efforts to the larger process.

In order to determine how the accreditation process is covered in the curricula of library science programs, the researcher reviewed course descriptions available on the Web from the 58 American Library Association (ALA)-accredited schools of library and information science. Of these programs, only two mentioned accreditation in course descriptions. The University of Illinois web catalog has a relevant course called Higher Education and Information Professionals, which specifically covers the topic. Louisiana State University states (2012) that accreditation is covered in its Academic Libraries course. It is unclear that the higher education accreditation process is covered in similar courses. Being introduced to the accreditation process and its accompanying documentation in library school would help newer coordinators develop effective strategies for advancing information literacy earlier in their careers.

Another way to increase awareness of an institution’s accreditation process is to be involved in it. Although the main focus of this survey was awareness of accreditation, the results reveal as an interesting side note that librarians are often uninvolved in campus committees that oversee the assessment process. Fig. 10 shows that of the instruction
coordinators who knew that their institution had an assessment oversight body, nearly half (46%) knew that librarians did not serve on it. Comments reveal that reasons for not having librarians on these committees include lack of support on the part of the institution and exclusion due to faculty governance rules. Some librarians reported that their director or library administrator was involved in the campus committee rather than the instruction coordinator. Some comments indicate that even though librarians do not sit on the accreditation committee that they are involved in the process, for example, through campus-wide review of accreditation documents or participation in self-studies. Finding ways to allow librarians to participate in the accreditation process and continuing to advocate for librarians to serve on assessment committees is important, not just to increase awareness, but also because those involved in the process have greater access to assessment documentation that is seen to be valuable to promoting information literacy goals. Service on assessment committees might be pushed down to the coordinator level so that the person directly responsible for the library’s information literacy efforts can relate them to student learning assessment across the institution.

Figure 10. Responses Regarding Librarian Service on the Institutional Student Learning Assessment Committee

The survey reveals that only about half of instruction coordinators, 54 percent, look at assessment documentation produced outside the library. Participants from the Middle States
region had a higher instance of consulting this documentation and of finding it important. This difference is likely to be a result of Middle States’ promotion of information literacy in accreditation standards. Institution size turned out to be the most important factor in determining how frequently coordinators used assessment documentation and how important they considered it. Statistical tests found that as an institution’s FTE enrollment increases from under 3,000 to 10,000 or more, coordinators consult assessment documentation more frequently and find it more important to furthering their information literacy goals. A possible explanation is that in smaller institutions with fewer librarians, the job of coordinating instruction is combined with other responsibilities, leaving less time to focus on analyzing this documentation.

Survey comments gave some insight into why participants felt student learning assessment documentation was important or not so important to the promotion of information literacy goals. One comment said that because the vocabulary of information literacy is not standardized across the institution, it is difficult to extract useful information from other units’ documentation. Another suggests that the institution is just not invested in assessment. Other comments addressed usefulness of other departments’ documentation as models or to help devise meaningful information literacy instruction. Many comments expressed the need to consult assessment documentation in order to link information literacy effectively to course goals and outcomes. Here are two representative comments:

“Without understanding learning objectives of the undergraduate program (especially the Core Curriculum), librarians cannot effectively articulate our teaching with student & faculty needs. Connecting them is imperative.”

“In my experience, the best (and easiest) way to garner support from the institution outside of the library is to be aware of academic assessment that is occurring and to tie our IL goals and outcomes to that assessment criteria.”
Survey comments provide information on why coordinators consider assessment documentation to be important, but they do not provide much insight as to why some coordinators do not find it important or do not use it. In hindsight, it would have been useful to collect comments from participants who did not use the documentation in order to understand whether they are simply unaware of it, or have chosen not to use it for a particular reason. Because the survey results do show that institution size and, to some extent, time in position, are influencing documentation consultation, an interim strategy might be to highlight assessment documentation use best practices in programming at appropriate conferences, particularly regional ones that are more accessible to librarians from smaller institutions. In addition, those who have made successful use of assessment documentation should be encouraged to contribute to the literature. Readily available best practices would help coordinators whose time is divided among multiple responsibilities take better advantage of assessment documentation to promote information literacy. Appendix B to this article provides a basic outline of one way to analyze this documentation.

Instruction coordinators who review assessment documentation use it in a variety of ways according to participant comments. Many responses mention using documentation to develop library instruction to meet student learning outcomes expressed by the institution or department. Some librarians have been able to collaborate with other units to develop rubrics or change curriculum to better teach information literacy based on documentation review. Another major use of assessment documentation is to get a snapshot of information literacy at the institution: what students know and don’t know, where information literacy skills are employed and assessed, and what unit priorities are. Many also use what they find out to identify target departments for information literacy outreach as illustrated in Appendix B, using gaps in student learning as leverage to promote information literacy solutions. A number of comments also relate that coordinators use assessment documentation as a point of communication, to illustrate to administrators that information literacy learning is widespread or
to translate information literacy concepts into language relevant to a particular department.

Finally, librarians use assessment documentation in their own assessment efforts, including getting ideas for assessment methods, developing library instruction assessment, evaluating liaison work, assessing collections and information literacy courses, and determining the library’s impact on student success.

**Conclusion**

A decade ago, the library profession predicted that revisions in accreditation standards giving information literacy and assessment of student learning more prominence would encourage collaboration among librarians and teaching faculty, tying of information literacy to student learning, “teacher librarians,” and formalizing information literacy outcomes within curricula. In order to fulfill the promise of revised accreditation standards, it naturally follows that information literacy librarians and instruction coordinators need to be aware of and participate in the accreditation process in their institutions. Additionally, they need to be attuned to the information literacy-related learning outcomes and student learning assessment going on in other teaching departments and the overall institution.

The results of this study reveal much about the profession’s progress in using the accreditation process to advance information literacy. The encouraging part is that most instruction coordinators are aware of the accreditation process at the regional and institutional level, although in three of the six regions there is less awareness of how standards address information literacy. A cause for concern is that about half of librarians with primary responsibility for advancing information literacy are not seeking out assessment documentation external to the library and harnessing it in order to support the library’s efforts. This may be due to a number of factors needing more exploration, but if the reason is lack of awareness, some suggestions present themselves. Those who have made successful use of this documentation could contribute their experiences to the literature, which currently has a dearth of articles.
relating the library to accreditation standards, and to national and regional conferences. Library school students and new instruction coordinators should be introduced to the higher education accreditation process and assessment of student learning in formal degree programs and on-the-job training. Continued advocacy for librarian involvement on committees that oversee student learning assessment is important, and instruction coordinators should be appointed to library seats on existing committees when possible to increase their direct participation in this process. Learning about accreditation processes and making use of the data they generate can help librarians formalize information literacy instruction within the campus curriculum. As a result, we help our institutions advance overall goals for student learning. It is a significant way to demonstrate our impact on student success, and a worthy goal to pursue.

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References


Appendix A: Accreditation Awareness Survey Instrument

Accreditation Awareness Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gauge your level of awareness of the accreditation process in higher education and to see to what extent you use documentation related to student learning assessment in your job duties.

Participating in this survey is voluntary, and you can leave at any time. Answers will be anonymous and aggregated so that individuals cannot be identified. There are no wrong answers. In fact, since this research could result in recommendations for library school curricula, it would be most helpful to choose the “Don't Know” response if there is something that you don't know, rather than trying to look it up. My purpose is to gauge participants’ awareness at this moment.

First, I would like to know a little about you and your institution.

1. What is your position title?

2. Are you directly responsible for facilitating, planning, or coordinating teaching and learning/library instruction initiatives at your institution?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. How long have you been in this position?
   a. Less than 3 years
   b. 3-5 years
   c. More than 5 years

4. How long ago did you get the MLS, MSIS, or equivalent degree?
   a. Less than 3 years ago
   b. 3-5 years ago
   c. More than 5 years ago
5. What is your institution’s total FTE enrollment?
   a. 1-2,999 students
   b. 3,000-9,999 students
   c. 10,000 or more students

Now I would like to ask some questions about your institution’s accreditation process. If you don’t know the answer to a question, please answer “don’t know” rather than trying to look it up.

6. What is the name of your institution’s regional (not program-specific) accrediting body?

7. Does your regional accrediting body mention information literacy in its standards for accreditation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don’t know

8. How long is it until your institution’s next accreditation review?
   a. Less than 5 years
   b. 5-10 years
   c. More than 10 years
   d. Don’t know

9. Does your institution have a committee or other body that oversees assessment of student learning?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don’t Know
10. If you said yes to the previous question, do librarians serve on this committee or other body?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't Know

11. Comments about your answers in this section:

Now I would like to ask some questions about documentation related to assessment of student learning, which is sometimes collected and used as part of the accreditation review process. This documentation may include written student learning outcomes at the institution, program, or course level, plans for assessing learning outcomes, and reports on assessment activities and results.

12. Have you looked at student learning assessment documentation as part of your daily job responsibilities? Exclude anything produced by the library (i.e. the library’s student learning outcomes).
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not Sure
   If no or not sure, survey ends

13. What kind(s) of documentation have you looked at? (choose all that apply)
   a. Student learning outcomes
   b. Plans for assessing student learning
   c. Reports on assessment activities tied to student learning
   d. Other (please describe):

14. At what level was the documentation? (choose all that apply)
a. Entire institution
b. Individual department or school
c. Individual program within a department or school
d. Individual course
e. Other (please describe):

15. In the last six months, how often have you looked at student learning assessment documentation as part of your regular job responsibilities? Exclude anything produced by the library.

a. 0
b. 1-3
c. 4-6
d. More than 6

16. How important do you consider assessment documentation produced by units outside the library to be in realizing your information literacy goals?

I consider this documentation:

1  2  3  4  5  N/A  I have no information literacy goals
Not important                Very important

17. Comments about this answer:

18. How do you use student learning assessment documentation from units outside the library?
Appendix B: Analyzing Program Learning Outcomes and Assessment Plans

Since information literacy is included in the standards of quality distributed by accrediting bodies, it frequently appears either directly or indirectly in the learning outcomes of individual departments. By examining learning outcomes and assessment plans publicly available on the university website, or by seeking out paper copies from the collecting office, the instruction librarian can analyze how different programs incorporate information literacy into their curricula and where there might be gaps.

For example, here are two learning outcomes from different departments, taken anonymously from my university’s Learning Outcomes and Assessment Website:

Department #1 Learning Outcome: Ability to develop, shape, and complete research projects effectively
Students will be able to: 1) identify appropriate research topics in a particular subject area, 2) develop appropriate questions to shape research project, 3) find appropriate research sources for project, 4) write papers using appropriate scholarly sources from books, articles, or web-based resources, 5) construct these papers demonstrating cogent argument, clear analysis of topics and sources, and articulate, grammatically correct language.

Department #2 Learning Outcome: Informational Literacy.
Students will demonstrate informational literacy by having the ability and skills to effectively and legitimately use various sources of information required for functioning in a global, information society.

The first department, while not calling it by that name, has written a specific outcome for information literacy related to the discipline. This outcome demonstrates a conceptual understanding of what information literacy is and that it is composed of different skills, some of
which are particularly relevant. The outcome for the second department is more tentative. It sounds as if the department has heard of information literacy as something students need to learn, but does not understand the concept and how it would apply to their program.

Looking at the two departments’ plans for assessing this information literacy outcome, Department #1 also has a more defined plan for finding out if students are learning what is expected. The above outcome will be measured with a direct measure, a final research paper assigned in the spring semester of senior year, evaluated with a rubric evaluating proficiency of “locating and critically evaluating relevant sources in secondary literature, and the formulation of a cogent and clear thesis and argumentation utilizing these sources.” The assignments will be evaluated by two faculty members in the department, and the outcome will be assessed every year.

Department #2’s assessment plan for the information literacy learning outcome says the following: “Existing assignments in upper level courses that require significant amount of primary research for their completion. Insert additional requirement on existing project rubrics.”

This is a reasonable direct measure, but it is lacking some important details. The department has not identified which assignments to use and does not have specific placement for the assessment as Department #1 does in the senior year. Faculty members are thinking about but seemingly have not yet devised a rubric to measure the outcome. A related part of the reporting form states that the outcome will be assessed on an “ad hoc” basis every six years, which is vague. The assessment plan reinforces the interpretation that Department #2 is either unsure of how to assess information literacy or not committed to assessing it.

Library instruction statistics for the past few years show that both departments have had library instruction, although the patterns are different. Department #1, a small department, has had approximately one library instruction session per semester in different courses. For several years an information literacy session has been given in the introductory course that all majors take. Department #2, a larger department, has had library instruction that does not follow much
of a pattern. Single sessions have been taught as part of a first-year experience program not necessarily for majors. At the time library sessions were required for all courses in this program, so this session was not necessarily a move by the course instructor to address a learning outcome. Other sessions were demonstrations of one database in two sections of a course not repeated since, so apparently a one-off instance rather than an attempt by the department to address overall information literacy outcomes for their students.

The learning outcomes and assessment plan coupled with past instruction statistics suggest that Department #2 is a priority target for outreach on the part of the library. A subject specialist in Department #2’s area could use the publicly available learning outcomes as an opening to have a discussion about connecting the library to the learning goals of the program. The librarian could bring some of the resources located on the Association of College and Research Libraries Instruction Section Information Literacy in the Disciplines Wiki (http://www.wikis.ala.org/acrl/index.php/Information_literacy_in_the_disciplines) to the department to help in developing a more specific, discipline-related information literacy learning outcome. Perhaps the librarian could help the department strategically place an information literacy session in the curriculum to support this goal. Additionally, the librarian could offer assistance in measuring the outcome, perhaps helping the department to decide which assignments are appropriate and to develop an additional requirement for the project rubric. The ideal result of these conversations would be to formalize information literacy within the department’s curriculum. The librarian would have a more effective partnership with the faculty of the department, who in turn would be able to document students’ progress toward this goal in future assessment reports.