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Hitching your wagon to institutional goals

Anne Zald and Michelle Millet

Abstract

The landscape of accreditation and accountability in higher education is in a period of rapid change, coalescing around issues identified in the 2006 report of the Spellings Commission, “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education.” Information literacy librarians need to connect their instructional efforts to the institutional strategies and initiatives that address continuous improvement whatever their source, e.g. accreditation agencies, funding bodies such as state legislatures, institutional participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), University & College Accountability Network (U-CAN), or internal initiatives of the institution’s administration. The challenge for instruction librarians is great, requiring delivery and assessment of educational programs while simultaneously facilitating the library administration’s engagement with institutional education initiatives. It is our fundamental belief, however, that the library is poised to be in a position of leadership when it comes to answering these external pressures on higher education for accountability. The Information Literacy QEP at Trinity University illustrates a number of the leadership challenges that instruction librarians must engage and their example is one that will encourage us to continue to grow in the area of assessment of student learning. While all solutions will be local, the lessons learned from the Trinity experience regarding institutional engagement and cultural change can be generalized.

The Third Decade and Accountability

As we enter the Third Decade of academic information literacy programming, institutional integration is a critical strategy we must employ to achieve sustained transformation. Connecting library programs to institutional accreditation processes is a lever which must be utilized with a broad understanding of its benefits and limitations. To quickly recap the decennial framework, during the first decade of information literacy programming the foundation was established, culminating in the 1989 ALA President’s Commission definition of information literacy (American Library Association 1989) and articulating the role of various stakeholders in promoting the societal value of information literacy. During the second decade ACRL issued the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2000) and sought partnerships with

higher education associations and accrediting agencies to align information literacy with the broader discussions of teaching and learning in higher education (Thompson 2002) . This second decade brought widespread innovation within academic libraries to implement strategies and programs to move library instruction into a curricular context. The third decade is characterized by a growing clamor for change in higher education both from within and without the academy. Academic librarians must now ensure that programmatic educational initiatives are attentive to institutional context and priorities which, increasingly are being driven by external calls for accountability (McLendon, Hearn, and Deaton 2006).

The social consensus defining higher education as a “common good” worthy of extensive public financial support is coming under increasing scrutiny, critique (Hacker, Andrew, and Claudia Dreifus 2010; Kamenetz 2007) and, not to be underestimated, increasing competition (Kamenetz 2010; Wilson 2010). In 2006 the Spellings Commission (The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education 2006) brought these debates into high relief, followed by the contentious 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (Lowry 2009). In response to the Spellings Commission report and state legislative mandates, accreditation processes are evolving toward increasing transparency and accountability (Brittingham 2008) and librarians must be cognizant of and active in all the assessment and accountability processes which the institution is engaging. These issues remain contentious for higher education years after the Spellings Commission debate as illustrated by the 2011 publication of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* and the *Degree Qualifications Profile* from the Lumina foundation (Anonymous. January 18, 2011; Lumina Foundations 2011).

Since the 1940’s as federal funds became an increasingly important component of the higher education financial model (e.g. student financial aid, research funding, etc.) accreditation by the regional agencies shifted from a voluntary process to a de facto requirement with federal recognition of the regional agencies as the arbiter of quality. It is important to recognize that the Spellings Report and other critics of higher education are challenging the underlying rationale of the accreditation process.

Accreditation serves two functions: institutional quality improvement among its members (the “private” function) and quality assurance (the “public” function) . . .

The role of accreditors as gatekeepers for federal funds has brought increasing expectations that accreditation serve the public interest by focusing more directly . . . on educational effectiveness as indicated by student learning and success. It is the quality-assurance function that is under question (Brittingham 2008, 32-33).

Critics of federally sanctioned accreditation assert that accreditation is part of the problem.

The accreditation process suffers from structural problems: secrecy, low standards, and little interest in learning outcomes ... The accreditors have been able to carve up the country into regional cartels . . . accreditors have been able to apply intrusive, prescriptive standards (Neal 2008, 27).

Alternatively, critics claim that through transparency in the marketplace institutions should be held accountable to, "...the people who matter: the students, parents, and taxpayers who fund higher education" (Neal 2008, 28). Although the recommendations of the Spellings Commission, emphasizing consumer accountability and performance outcomes such as student learning and completion rates were not implemented at that time through federal law or regulation, they do have an ongoing influence. Several of the six regional accrediting agencies have revised their standards since the appearance of the Spellings Report in 2006. The ongoing national dialog around institutional and student learning assessment has intensified and voluntary associations of higher education institutions have been established to address issues of consumer value and transparency. Both the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) and the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) are building publicly accessible data repositories, institutional profiles and cost comparisons to assist prospective students and their families. In addition the VSA, with support from the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) and the Lumina Foundation, is conducting research to determine the comparability of existing measures of student learning (Voluntary System of Accountability 2010).

In this shifting landscape of accreditation and accountability the key questions for library managers are also shifting away from those emphasized under the "quality assurance"

function of accreditation which emphasized collection volume counts and adequacy of facilities. The question libraries increasingly need to answer is, “How does the library advance the missions of the institution?” (Association of College & Research Libraries 2010, 11). Institutions are increasingly being asked to define their mission and value in terms of student learning rather than by number of degrees conferred. Therefore, librarians must actively participate in local efforts to define learning outcomes and demonstrate added value to student learning in response to these increasing calls for accountability not only from university administrators but also from consumers, federal and state legislators and funding agencies. Information literacy in the third decade engages librarians in the paradigm shift from facility- and collection-centric services to an institutionally-integrated approach to the educational role of libraries and librarians. As accreditation, assessment and accountability in higher education increasingly focus upon student learning outcomes, information literacy is much more firmly grounded as an institutional outcome addressed in the learning outcomes of general education and the majors to which the library can make significant contributions in the areas of definition, implementation, and collaboration on faculty development to address course and program redesign.

A Case Study: External Pressure, An Accreditation Opportunity and Faculty Support through Curricular Change

As is the case in many academic libraries the Coates Library at Trinity University, a selective liberal arts institution in San Antonio, Texas, implemented the liaison librarian model where librarians were partnered with academic departments, building individual librarian-faculty partnerships to enact a course-integrated approach to library instruction. This model is typical of the second decade of information literacy described earlier in this chapter. Statistics showed the “program” to be growing; the number of sessions was increasing and librarians were certainly teaching more classes than ever. There was, however, a critical component missing. In this situation there was no larger curriculum map that illustrated how or where information literacy was “happening” across the liberal arts disciplines. Neither the Library nor the institution could demonstrate student achievement of this learning outcome as a part of a Trinity University degree. Achieving that larger vision, effecting a transformation, would require the Library to be connected in a substantial way to a curricular need. The Library’s challenge was to demonstrate the value of information literacy to student learning and shift the responsibility for information literacy as a student

learning outcome back into the hands of the teaching faculty who are responsible for creating curriculum.

Librarians constantly seek opportunities to make the case that information literacy is an intellectual competency critical to success in all the disciplines and, indeed, a foundation for lifelong learning. Informally, through conversations with faculty, and formally through internal institutional processes such as curriculum and program reviews, librarians can create those opportunities. However, external processes such as accreditation can be more powerful for many reasons, not the least of which is their institution-wide scope.

Regional higher education organizations which include accreditation among their responsibilities are looking for ways to enhance student learning. This is in part a response to external critics but also a result of extended discussion within higher education circles over the past decades. The reaffirmation of accreditation process that libraries are most familiar with remains in place and involves documenting past and present practice in a format now called the “Compliance Certification” documentation. Compliance Certification addresses the bean counting of input/output documentation such as tracking down transcripts, figuring out student-to-faculty ratios and, for the library, providing volume counts for academic departments. Rather than depending exclusively on this input-output accounting, institutions in the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS) have the opportunity to select and develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as part of the reaffirmation process. The QEP became part of reaffirmations in 2005 and served as a way for the academic institutions under the purview of SACS to be forward thinking.

According to SACS, the Quality Enhancement Plan “describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined topic or issue(s) related to enhancing student learning” (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges 2004, 24). Each institution within the SACS region develops its own plan for choosing and implementing a QEP. The directions on how to implement a plan are not mandated or sanctioned from SACS itself. The Southern Association merely requires that a QEP demonstrate the following criteria: it enhances student learning; shows broad-based institutional participation; reviews current best practices in the topic; be supported financially by the institution; state a clear timeline and responsibilities; and demonstrate that

the QEP topic is feasible and assessable (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges 2004, 3).

At Trinity, the president appointed a 15-member committee to review proposals submitted by students, staff, and faculty from all over campus. Twelve proposals in total were submitted which the committee narrowed first to six and then to three after public discussion and presentation of each proposal. Anyone from the university could comment on the proposals and there was opportunity for both face-to-face questioning and write-in questions and comments. The three finalist proposals were forwarded to the president for final selection (Millet 2010).

The Case Study of a QEP: Being Prepared to Provide Your Data

The Coates Library at Trinity read eagerly about the Quality Enhancement Plan requirement for schools within the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS) and the precedent established by the “information fluency” QEP at the University of Central Florida (University of Central Florida 2006). The Library seized on the QEP process as an opportunity to impact student learning by creating a plan for systematically integrating information literacy across the curriculum. The idea was not to promote the library’s instruction program, but rather to transform the library’s teaching mission from one-shot instruction occurring in a scattered manner throughout the curriculum to an approach that emphasized working with faculty to create a year-by-year approach across the curriculum to create, implement, and measure specific learning goals for individual courses and even academic departments. The QEP process put the Library into competition with other proposals submitted across the campus. The Library QEP proposal provided both a plan and a structure for Trinity University to articulate and implement campus-wide learning outcomes for both undergraduate and graduate students. Major features of the proposal were course and assignment redesign structured in a multi-year plan that progressed through the curriculum and faculty development through summer and mid-semester workshops. In addition to focusing each year of the plan on a progressive level of the curriculum, departments were also able to work closely with their liaison librarian to define department-specific learning objectives if they wished.

A number of factors contributed to the president's selection of the Libraries Information Literacy Across the Curriculum program as the campus-wide Quality Enhancement Plan initiative. For the four years prior, librarians had gathered and used data in conversations with faculty to elicit what the faculty wanted students to learn and to share what librarians could see happening. Through this legwork, librarian by librarian, liaison to department, the topic of information literacy was familiar to a broad cross section of the faculty. By tracking data and understanding student learning the Library QEP proposal was able to demonstrate feasibility as well as a track record of demonstrable impact.

What We Knew: Adding Value

In addition to the groundwork laid through the liaison program, the Information Literacy Coordinator spearheaded a variety of assessment instruments for the teaching librarians to employ in their instruction individually in classes, while also taking part in larger assessments such as the First Year Information Literacy in the Liberal Arts Assessment (FYILLAA) project, which was based at Carleton College at the time. This tool, in particular, provided Trinity with data comparing itself to elite liberal arts colleges around the country. Results from this study showed that Trinity students had less research and information literacy experience coming into college than those at peer institutions, yet also had a higher self confidence in their abilities (Trinity University 2008). By working with the faculty in small groups over lunch conversations about what they wished their students could do, the library learned that evidence from more prestigious institutions often held sway with many teaching faculty. Comparative data from aspirant peer institutions can be a powerful tool. Assessment of student learning became an integral part of the information literacy program at Trinity before the QEP even presented itself because the Library had a strong working relationship with the office responsible for campus assessment. For libraries and librarians this is another way to get a seat at the table and be prepared for the larger opportunities that come along, i.e. contributing a question or two to the survey administered to graduating seniors asking about their critical thinking skills, or having access to institutional data from large scale assessments like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ).

In addition to these efforts to gather quantitative data, the Information Literacy Coordinator and University Librarian held regular focus-group type luncheons for teaching faculty to talk about ways in which they felt their students' work could be bettered and strengthened with collaboration between librarians and faculty. Instruction within the Libraries saw an increase of over 50% from 2003 to 2007 (the year the QEP was chosen), an indicator of increased collaboration between librarians and faculty, and growing familiarity with the Library as an instructional partner.

The heart of the Trinity QEP was placing a financial value on working closely with faculty, with the right personnel, to develop assignments and redesign courses to integrate information literacy (Millet, Michelle S., Donald, Jeremy, Wilson, David W. 2009). The largest portion of the QEP budget was allocated to three activities; 1) to provide grants for creating new and redesigning existing courses, 2) to bring in experts and outside teaching faculty to provide faculty development workshops, and 3) to offer stipends to teaching faculty to attend annual and mid-semester gatherings where they learned more about information literacy and the course grant opportunities. Each summer faculty teaching courses that paralleled the goals of the QEP or who showed an interest in redesigning their course to integrate information literacy objectives were invited to workshops. The emphasis of the workshops was to ensure that student information literacy learning would be evaluated in the context of the assignments. Integration into the curriculum often, but not always, resulted in library instruction as a part of the course. The Library made clear to faculty participants that the goal of the QEP was not merely to increase the number of library instruction sessions. Through these collaborations the QEP could achieve the related goals of strengthening the place of information literacy on campus, building faculty acceptance of the responsibility to address information literacy in their teaching, building teaching partnerships between faculty and librarians, and expanding the perception of the educational role of libraries and librarians.

Conclusion: General Lessons from the Case Study

This case study illustrates that for transformational impact, a library instruction program must be actively engaged outside of the library in partnership with the academic departments and administrative structures that govern the curriculum. In addition the case study points to both the strengths and the limitations of an instruction program built

exclusively on individual teaching partnerships forged by liaison librarians. Those partnerships are critical for building knowledge on the part of both members of the partnership, e.g. the librarian gains knowledge both of faculty teaching practices and challenges as well as student information behavior and needs, while faculty gain knowledge of the contributions that librarians can make to student learning. Faculty-librarian partnerships also provide opportunities to gather data, both qualitative and quantitative, that can be used to demonstrate the library's impact on student learning. However, successful teaching partnerships can only take a library instruction program so far. Ultimately a library instruction program built entirely upon course-level partnerships is not sustainable and cannot support consistent student achievement of institutional learning outcomes. Curricular integration requires the full engagement of those responsible for creating curriculum, e.g. the faculty. Full responsibility for the partnerships required for curricular integration cannot lie solely at the course level with the liaison librarian, instruction coordinator or department head. Institutional impact requires a corresponding engagement of the library administration in advocating for the educational mission of the library and paving pathways for partnerships to address curriculum at the institutional level of departments, schools and colleges.

This case study also points to several principles for institutional engagement which librarians and library administrators can employ to achieve sustainable and transformative information literacy programming. First, regardless of which regional accrediting agency governs your institution connect the libraries to all the relevant standards, processes and priorities which that agency establishes for your institution, paying attention not only to collections and facilities but also to the institution's educational mission. By identifying information literacy as the library's contribution to the educational mission of the institution, librarians stake a role in furthering progress on institutional challenges. Second, connect the libraries to institutional participation in alternative assessment or value initiatives, e.g. VSA, U-CAN, thereby contributing to the measures your institution has identified as vital to communicating value to external stakeholders. Third, connect the libraries to institutional assessment initiatives that are underway including participation at the national, state, consortial or peer institution level [see <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/surveys.htm> for information about additional national surveys in which your institution may participate]. Fourth, connect the libraries to formal or informal initiatives focused upon student learning assessment, curriculum or

program reviews, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), etc. Many institutions have a center which focuses on faculty development related to teaching and learning. If such an obvious starting point does not exist, take the next step and consider how the library can initiate those conversations. The library, situated at the cross roads of many institutional priorities, may have knowledge about where conversation about teaching and learning is occurring, who is participating in that conversation, and the broader range of expertise that can be drawn into the conversation, e.g. computing and assessment professionals, instructional designers and technologists, etc. Librarians are very good at organizational processes, meeting facilitation, and working on cross-functional teams. Play a leadership role at your institution by identifying needs related to the institution's educational mission and organizing ways to meet those needs.

What a library organization will learn and how it will act based upon engaging these principles will vary. Institutional culture and practices are deeply engrained and will influence strategies and objectives. These principles require administrative engagement, political savvy, and persistence to influence cultural change. Articulating the library's contribution to issues of institutional, consortia, state or regional importance will raise difficult questions that libraries may be unaccustomed to answering, or do not yet have a methodology to answer. In this they will join their faculty and administrative colleagues in grappling with a changing higher education environment and forging new partnerships to improve institutional performance.

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