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Winning the Accreditation Game: The Library as Key Player and Hidden Gold Mine

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So the library is the campus white elephant which no one in the college administration understands? At a time in which libraries struggle to maintain adequate funding levels, explain the continued need for their existence "despite" the growth of electronic resources, a seldom-tapped gold mine exists right at the library administrators' fingertips — the library's role as key player in college-wide and departmental (re)accreditation.

Libraries can aggressively assert their role as a crucial element of the campus by demonstrating to the visiting accreditation teams their leadership in supporting the curricula, active communication with all academic departments, and full understanding of the academic departments' needs & issues. Much of this communication can be pulled from policy statements such as the library mission, collection policy and management data such as budget analyses & growth statistics. A positive way of communicating with the accrediting agencies as a key friend of the academic department(s) under review is by packaging the choices of the library data and tailoring them to the theme set by the agency.

Strategy

A good library presentation to the accreditation board is the result of consistent, ongoing, open lines of communications between the library and all teaching departments. This keeps the library up-to-date on the intellectual facets of the curriculum, any changes, and special issues important to each department. This knowledge, informally gained through continual communication with the departmental professors, renders the library so familiar with the academic programs that it becomes much easier to speak the specialists' language and to arrange the available quantitative data in a way which reflects profound understanding of the departments. This is easy to accomplish. Simply keep talking with the departments, listen to every curriculum-related comment uttered with a view to big-picture as well as detailed library-collection analysis. Then the "intuitive" identification and custom presentation of relevant department-specific data comes virtually naturally.

The Library as Innovator

The depth of data requested can vary from one accrediting agency to the next. However, the library can assert its front-line presence by compiling lists of its own serials and books supporting the department under der review, a list of the latest book orders, a compilation of publications not presently owned but identified as collection-addition needs, and an overall statement on the library's strengths and continuous improvement strategy. For a large regional research library the most appropriate portrait would be of that library alone, whereas a smaller library which is part of a local-area consortium would benefit from expanding the description to a summary of the consortial borrowing privileges and mutual services, a list of the other [consortium] member libraries' serials supporting the department under review, and an overview description of each library's book collection.

Several of The Citadel's departments have recently been reviewed and several more are preparing for reaccreditation within the next year. The American Chemical Society visited the campus in 1995 without bringing in the library; their main focus was on the Chemistry Department's lab facilities, the faculty, the proximity of the library to the department. The ACS requested no information beyond a list of supporting serials, collection statistics, and basic budget figures. Overall, the custom begun here is the compilation of a discipline-specific collection portfolio for each visiting accrediting team. Each portfolio is compiled as a neatly sectioned booklet and contains: a brief statement on the nature of the departmental curricula with summary statement about library collections, needs identified as important for addition to the collection, description of the approval plan profile, most recent full fiscal year's book orders (bibliography), in-house list of serials and consortial libraries' lists of serials supporting the department to be reviewed. In showcasing the library, be sensitive to the discipline at hand.

Recent examples

Business Administration

In February 1996, the MBA program was accredited by the Association of American Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The portfolio describing the Business-related collections was tailored to their theme of the year, "Continuous improvement." The portfolio contained a statement summarizing the history of the systematic collection improvement through rigorous analysis of curriculum and library needs, budgetary commitment, active identification and acquisition of new publications, and a sample printout from the most recent book order to reflect the mix of knowledge areas being covered by the Business purchases. As the happy result, The Citadel's Business Department is now the first department ever to be accredited by AACSB which had previously only accredited autonomous business schools.

Engineering

For the joint re-accreditation of the Civil and Electrical Engineering departments in October 1996, no specific "theme" was announced. Thus the details were left entirely to the creativity and initiative of the library. A customized portfolio containing the same basic sections was again compiled. The summary statement acknowledged the cross-disciplinary nature of civil and electrical engineering, poised this library as the core collection of "pure engineering sciences" and paired it with the other consortial libraries' specialized and related collections. Issues such as public health/sanitation, architectural design, medical applications of electronic technology are addressed in the summary descriptions of each consortial library's collection. Other components include lists of our own subscriptions for each engineering discipline and for those other scientific departments which support the study of engineering, a list of the books ordered for each department in the most recent full fiscal year, a statement of identified needs, and description of the recently launched approval plan for the two engineering departments. A library annual report and newsletter is enclosed, and the entire portfolio is bound together as a booklet with chapter dividers.

Collections and electronic access

While the library is still recognized as the "information hub," accreditation agencies are increasingly willing to be flexible with regard to the formats of the information. Especially in the areas of journals and indexing/abstracting products, "content" seems to be winning over "container." Electronic resources are viewed favorably when they are networked in a seamless,

user-friendly manner and when Internet access is reliable. Recognition of the ease of use of electronic resources is growing and accreditors are increasingly sensitive to the large-scale financial commitment to these resources on the part of libraries. Accrediting teams also seem to be growing in sensitivity to libraries' need to conserve space and funds and they are not opposed to the notion of document delivery and fulltext online access to journals, provided that the access is user-friendly and reliable.

Conclusion

Regardless of the academic discipline under review, accreditation agencies consistently look for these components when evaluating departments: the range and depth of subjects offered; departmental lab facilities if appropriate; departmental and campuswide computer and tutorial facilities; specialty areas, research, teaching, and service work among the teaching faculty; library facilities. Regarding specific library components, accreditors examine the overall range of library services, the accessibility of the library and its collections (including hours that the library is open and staffing levels), and relevancy and currency of library collections.

Bottom Line

The most important factor is for the entire campus to showcase itself as a unified, mutually informed whole when presenting its programs to the visiting accreditation teams. Evaluators cannot help but be impressed by high levels of cooperation and the library's true understanding of the knowledge base for which the department under review is responsible. And, customized packaging of library resources shows a keen level of preparedness. A well-organized campus with a high degree of inter-departmental cooperation sends a positive message to visitors — as powerfully as the quality of the program itself. 🐢

Naked Truth about Internet Culture, by Dinty W. Moore. The Internet book is actually from the backlist but you see by it the variety of titles that Algonquin carries, too, not just Southern fiction, although that would not be a bad line to get stuck in.

And as if this isn't enough to make the heart start pining for home, the husband of a second cousin has got me listening to WTOB (Winston-Salem, North Carolina) on the World Wide Web <http://www.wtob.com>.

Harold Birdsong is the advertising manager for WTOB and is interested in using the Internet to expand the audience and the advertising of his station. It features CNN news, North Carolina news, and several talk shows. The reception is clear and the local accents familiar. Tune in and give a listen. Tell them that Tom sent you (they have an email address for easy correspondence). Readers need news, too, and here is a great way to tune in without turning on.

Happy new year to each and every one of you gentle readers. 🐢

Ward Shaw announced that he is interested in finding some major research libraries which would be willing let him market access to their contents. This is only the beginning. Some will view this kind of cooperation as an anathema to the goals of higher education, others will look upon it as the democratization of information access at last. I am in the latter camp. By the way, Ward isn't the devil but I thought it might cause you to read this last sound byte.

Cooperation is not dead. It lives in new clothes. 🐢