Reviewing The Academic Library: A Guide To Self-Study And External Review

E. Mitchell
Peggy Seiden
Swarthmore College, pseiden1@swarthmore.edu

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Introduction
Eleanor Mitchell and Peggy Seiden

The impetus for writing this book was to address a gap in the literature concerning reviewing the academic library. While many recent resources provide guidance on library assessment, we were challenged to find any publication from the past several decades focusing on the review process for academic libraries. Whether driven to assess by external pressure or by an organizationally inspired desire to improve, library managers are expected to be able to plan and implement both comprehensive and targeted evaluations of their impact, services, resources, and programs. Many of us have been invited to serve on review teams for other academic libraries, either as part of a reaccreditation process or as part of a general review. And at our own institutions, we have initiated reviews of our libraries or been asked to do so by a senior administrator. There are no blueprints out there for how this is to be done.

We invited key thinkers and leaders to consider what we identified as the major aspects of the formal assessment and review of academic libraries. We hope that the reader finds sufficient practical and applicable information in the book, but we also wanted to contextualize that advice through current theory and approaches. In the process of developing this book, we found that we also were developing a theory of the review process.

The book is structured in three major parts. The first four chapters focus on the rationale for the self-study. Chapter 1, by Baird and Fogarty, provides an overview of the higher education regional accreditation landscape; they review common concepts as applied to libraries. Gilchrist takes these same standards and examines them microscopically in chapter 2, providing
specific recommendations for libraries’ responses to each standard in each region. Thibodeau and Melamut in chapter 3 look at programmatic accreditation (e.g., nursing and legal programs) and how the library can become an integral component in the entire review process. However, many library reviews are not initiated in response to cyclical accreditation but are driven by internal institutional or library needs. These reviews are the subject of chapter 4, by Lucia and Gremmels. While we are very familiar with these types of reviews, it can be difficult to find people who are willing to discuss them on the record because these reviews are frequently highly political. Lucia and Gremmels, through data from interviews and surveys they conducted, are able to provide the reader with a real-world picture of the drivers behind such reviews and the processes utilized. Their data reminds us that you are never a prophet in your own land and may need to bring in an external review team as a nonpartisan voice to speak on behalf of the library.

The second section of this volume looks at approaches to the process of the review. In chapter 5, Mitchell and Seiden untangle various thematic strands from the other chapters—those that focus on the impetus for self-studies and reviews and those that discuss the value of different types of data and assessment frameworks. They walk the reader through the entire process, from identifying stakeholders through crafting the narrative. Snelson’s chapter 6 considers various approaches to a review—thematic, organizational, and programmatic. She then describes the standards-based approach taken at her institution, which used the ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education to organize its self-study. In chapter 7, Malenfant and Deiss guide both the host institution and the review team in all aspects of the external review. Like Lucia and Gremmels and Mitchell and Seiden, they begin with a discussion of the impetus of reviews. They address issues such as the composition of the review team, with whom it should meet, and sharing the results of the review.

Part of our rationale in editing this work is to advocate for a culture of assessment as the context for ongoing reviews of libraries. We invited representatives from Texas A&M University Libraries, who have a significant track record with a multipronged approach to assessment, to write on this issue. Mosley, Goodwin, and Maciel discuss the culture of assessment at
Texas A&M University Libraries in chapter 8, including both the inception of LibQUAL+ (discussed at length by Kyrillidou and Consiglio in chapter 11) and numerous approaches designed and implemented locally by their librarians.

Mosley, Goodwin and Maciel’s chapter is a strong segue into the third part of the book, which focuses on various approaches to assessment. This section covers the major assessment tools that libraries utilize. It begins with chapter 9 by Jim Rettig, which questions why we count what we count. Rettig has written on this topic previously, and we felt that his perspective on quantitative measures deserved a place in this book. Rettig begins with a historical overview of data collection. He argues that every library should question why it collects the data it does and whether its data is genuine, accurate, and reliable. He raises critical concerns regarding the validity of data definitions across libraries and over time and calls on libraries to examine these issues carefully. Juxtaposed to Rettig’s chapter is Fishel’s examination in chapter 10 of the three major quantitative data collection instruments—ARL Statistics, ACRL Statistics, and IPEDS—as to their strengths and weaknesses. She also raises caveats about data accuracy and relevance similar to those raised by Rettig. In chapter 11, Kyrillidou and Consiglio discuss two qualitative instruments—LibQUAL+ and the MISO Survey—which they, respectively, design and administer. They give a historical overview, explain the theoretical underpinnings of these tools, and look toward future developments. Consiglio’s second chapter, chapter 12, proposes a new methodology to address what he sees as a particular weakness of instruments like MISO and LibQUAL+—the lack of deeper qualitative data to support the survey findings and the need for ongoing assessment that marries these two approaches. Smallen’s chapter 13 is a case study of the implementation of the MISO Survey at Hamilton College library with a focus on specific improvements made as a result of the data collected. Smallen describes the value of the MISO Survey as a basis for clarifying conversations with faculty and students. (Mosley, Goodwin, and Maciel’s chapter provides similar anecdotes based on data they collected through LibQUAL+ and other methodologies.)

While general statistics-gathering tools and qualitative surveys reveal critical data regarding the library’s services and resources, student learning
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outcomes data allows the library to directly tie its activities to the core mission of the institution. Hinchliffe and Wong’s chapter 14 discusses the increasing importance of the assessment of student learning outcomes in the accreditation and programmatic review of universities and colleges and how the library’s information literacy program can provide relevant data to support this part of a review. They offer a particular and practical focus on writing student learning outcomes and on providing evidence in a review process.

Perhaps the most recent assessment focus has been on the value of academic libraries. These discussions began with work of Paula Kaufmann on return on investment (ROI), and currently library value is one of ACRL’s major strategic initiatives. Bowles-Terry, in chapter 15, gives a historical overview and discusses case studies that have attempted to assess the library’s impact on such metrics as student retention, GPA, graduation rates, and faculty productivity. Bowles-Terry acknowledges that there are many difficulties to this type of assessment and that while it may prove difficult to demonstrate causation, there is substantial evidence of strong correlations between library use and student and faculty academic success.

We asked Jim Neal from Columbia University to write the concluding essay that would help library administrators look at the future of academic libraries and the kinds of measures we will need to assess our impact. Neal’s essay in chapter 16 contextualizes the library within the broader higher education environment and exhorts us to embrace a future likely filled with “anxiety, disruption, and chaos.” He sees our future success as linked to radical collaboration and entrepreneurship in order to support the demands of expansive and diverse user communities, the preservation of our print and digital legacies, and new knowledge creation.

At core a practical handbook for the self-study and review process, this publication will ground these activities in an understanding of the changing roles of academic libraries in the higher education and information environment. Beyond its use as a manual for cyclical reviews, this volume will underscore the need for libraries to engage in a continuous process of assessment and to demonstrate clear and concrete evidence of value. From the numerous assessment methodologies and approaches discussed to the chapters that challenge those very approaches and methods, the book
provides concrete and useful information and raises key questions and provocative caveats about the review process.

The review process can be onerous, and libraries may have a difficult time assuming ownership of the process when they do not necessarily initiate the work. Although the self-study may reveal challenges, it will also shine a light on the library’s achievements, and ultimately the process itself is both illuminating and rewarding.