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Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) and accreditation: When assessment is not optional

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Abstract

A new university accreditation system in the U.S. is known as the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), developed in 1999 by the North Central Association. AQIP is designed to offer an alternative to current re-accreditation procedures, engaging institutions in a continuous quality improvement process. Kent State University has been selected as one of thirteen initial institutions to participate. All academic units, including the libraries, are required to develop assessment plans that focus on student learning outcomes. Of particular challenge for the libraries is building meaningful assessments that demonstrate direct impacts on student learning.

Introduction

There is a new university accreditation system in the United States known as the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), developed by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA). The NCA, now referred to as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), was founded in 1895. As one of six regional associations, it accredits more than 1,000 institutions of higher education in the nineteen-state North Central region.

The HLC's traditional accreditation process involves a ten-year cycle in which institutions are reviewed for re-accreditation purposes. Once every ten years, an institution of higher education is obliged to undertake an extensive self-study in order to determine how well the organization is meeting the HLC's established criteria. The self-study then becomes the institution's formal application for re-accreditation. A team of evaluators appointed by the HLC visits following the self-study of an institution. The team's report offers suggestions for improvement and concludes with a recommendation regarding re-accreditation (The Higher Learning Commission, 2001).

An accreditation process such as the one used by the HLC is designed to serve several purposes. First, the process should serve to establish and maintain an institution's credibility with the public. It should serve as a "stamp of approval" that an institution provides a meaningful higher education experience and that its graduates are knowledgeable and qualified individuals. Second, the process should serve to satisfy accountability. An accredited institution is one that is open to pub-

lic scrutiny in order to ensure that the resources of the institution have been sufficiently aligned to meet its mission with integrity. Third, accreditation helps determine whether an institution is eligible to participate in federally funded programs, such as student financial aid.

ACADEMIC QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

AQIP is offered as an alternative accreditation procedure, engaging institutions in a continuous quality improvement process rather than a ten-year cycle. The goal of AQIP is to challenge institutions, on a more frequent basis, to reach higher levels of performance while providing tangible benefits in terms of becoming a stronger organization (Spanghel, 2000). AQIP focuses on the academic mission of an institution and, specifically, on improving student learning. AQIP institutions will set objectives and undertake annual institution-wide assessment of progress toward meeting those objectives, reporting the results each year to the HLC. Results of the annual assessments should then be used to modify or establish new objectives. An institution participates in an AQIP Strategy Forum and conducts an Institutional Quality Review during a three to five year cycle. Every seven years, a formal re-accreditation validation occurs based on the annual results, participation in a Strategy Forum, and the results of the Institutional Quality Review ("Processes of the Academic Quality Improvement Project").

AQIP differs from the traditional accreditation process by concentrating on teaching and learning, and by involving faculty more intensely in the academic improvement process. More timely feedback is provided to HLC institutions due to the annual and three-to-five year cycles. The new procedures are less intrusive given that institutions can set their own goals, allowing approaches to be responsive to distinctive institutional needs and aspirations (Spanghel, 2000).

Institutions that elect to participate in the AQIP alternative accreditation process are provided with nine AQIP Quality Criteria to be used to frame the establishment of goals and objectives. The nine criteria are: (a) helping students learn, (b) accomplishing other distinctive objectives, (c) understanding students' and other stakeholders' needs, (d) valuing people, (e) leading and communicating, (f) supporting institutional operations, (g) measuring effectiveness, (h) planning continuous improvement, and (i) building collaborative relationships ("The AQIP Quality Criteria"). Institutions

can emphasize some criteria more than others. However, it is understood that “helping students learn” is first among equals and cannot be ignored.

ONE INSTITUTION’S RESPONSE

A goal of the HLC is to have one-third of its institutions voluntarily chose the AQIP alternative for re-accreditation by 2002. Kent State University (KSU) applied and was selected as one of thirteen initial institutions to participate in AQIP. KSU had already taken formal steps toward academic assessment as result of its previous traditional ten-year accreditation review by the HLC and so was well positioned for AQIP. The Provost established an Advisory Committee on Academic Assessment with members appointed by the Faculty Senate. The purpose of the Committee is to assist, and serve as a resource for, the University in developing educational goal statements for all academic programs. Once goals are articulated, measurable objectives need to be specified. Independent but parallel to the development of AQIP, the University essentially began creating a process that could lead to a continuous improvement cycle. When AQIP presented itself as a method for obtaining more timely and meaningful results from the accreditation process, KSU had in place the beginnings of an infrastructure to engage faculty in the necessary thinking about student learning outcomes.

The KSU Advisory Committee on Academic Assessment developed a recommended six-step annual cycle that academic departments could use as a blueprint for developing or revising educational goal statements and for assessing progress. The most important aspect of this blueprint is its bottom-up approach that empowers faculty within an academic unit to have control over their assessment process. Just as AQIP is designed to allow an institution to focus on distinctive needs and aspirations, the KSU process permits a department to do the same without intrusive directions from above. The six-step annual cycle includes: (a) defining program goals and objectives, (b) determining methods for assessing goals and objectives, (c) developing a timetable for assessment, (d) implementing an assessment plan, (e) reporting progress on accomplishing goals and objectives, and (f) integrating assessment results into program improvement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES

As the HLC and other regional accrediting bodies continue to develop continuous improvement criteria based on assessment, and as state governments and the general public increasingly demand accountability, there are implications for academic libraries. The challenge is for librarians to build meaningful assessments that demonstrate a positive impact of a library’s programs on student learning. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this new environment for librarians is

that the traditional measurements of library success, such as user satisfaction or size and use of the collections, are not particularly relevant. Instead, demonstrable means of determining student learning are required.

While academic departments have course-length contact with students in some type of classroom, lab, studio, or even World Wide Web setting, librarians do not typically have this advantage for affecting student learning. One might even argue that because a library is not a “teaching unit” it would be understandable and excusable for librarians to ignore mandates for student learning accountability. However, for an academic library to forego assessment of student learning at an AQIP institution is to sacrifice being positioned well for future funding initiatives. Clearly, one likely consequence at any intensely assessment-based institution will be to channel new or reallocated funds based on assessment results. Therefore, continuous improvement accreditation processes bring a host of opportunities and challenges to academic libraries.

Kenneth Smith (December 2000) recommends that the “library must move from a content view (books, subject knowledge) to a competency view (what students will be able to do).” He further suggest that ACRL’s *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000) is a good starting point. Moreover, Smith makes an important point when he notes that many academic departments will share with the library certain globally (i.e., university-wide) desired student learning outcomes such as competencies in critical thinking, technology management, communication, and collaborative reasoning. The library’s mission in this environment is to demonstrate to academic departments that librarians can help address and meet these objectives through integrated course offerings and learning materials. The benefit is that librarians are helping the teaching faculty meet their own department’s learning outcomes objectives. Faculty can concentrate on students mastering subject content and achieving program goals while librarians focus on universal objectives by working with faculty to teach competencies within the context of a discipline.

Smith (December 2000) recommends six activities in which academic librarians should engage. These activities are: (a) develop learning outcomes from the library’s perspective, (b) develop offerings to meet the outcomes, (c) understand the learning outcomes of academic degree programs, (d) consider how the library’s curriculum offerings can be integrated into academic courses, (e) identify ways to measure whether outcomes are being achieved, and (f) collect and analyze data to modify curriculum strategies. These activities are intended to create the necessary movement of the library from a content orientation to a competency perspective.

THE LIBRARY'S RESPONSE

The question is, how does a library use this agenda to begin responding, in practical terms, to the pressure of demonstrating a measurable impact on student learning? At KSU all academic units, including the library, are now required to develop assessment plans that focus on student learning outcomes. Goals, objectives, measurements, timetables, and feedback loops are expected to be articulated in writing to the Provost. In fact, the annual planning process for the Academic Affairs division compels each unit to address assessment in writing and in some detail. The resulting document is then used as part of the process that determines future budget allocations. This turn of events has forced KSU librarians to develop a strategy for addressing assessment.

The first step was assigning the Assistant Dean for Collection Management (ADCM) as the assessment coordinator for the library. This meant the ADCM would be responsible for seeing that the library was undertaking assessment activities and for reporting progress to the larger university community. The ADCM's first task was to foster a culture of assessment within the organization. At a meeting of the librarians, the issue of an assessment culture was raised on three fronts. First, the fundamental questions the organization must ask itself were discussed:

1. How do we know if our library programs are effective?
2. How do we assess the impact of libraries on student learning?
3. How do we use this as an opportunity to better integrate ourselves with academic units?

Second, the issue of "process" was addressed. How does a library set about thinking about assessment and learning outcomes? At KSU, it was recommended by the ADCM that discussions should occur at three levels: (a) among all of the librarians; (b) among the management team of the dean, associate dean, and assistant deans; and (c) at the departmental levels within the library. Individual librarians, the management team, and library departments would then undertake assessment activities.

Third, motivation to do assessment was bolstered by pointing out the benefits. Assessment activities allow librarians to document successes for purposes of individual promotion, tenure, and pay increases as well as for promoting the library to the university community. Engaging in assessment creates a need for professional development in terms of librarian training in measurement and analysis techniques. Until very recently, little research has been done on the library's impact on student learning outcomes so there are many research opportunities in this area for librarians. Also, resource allocations will be required to support assessment activities.

Perhaps the most difficult concept to communicate to both superiors and subordinates is that to foster a culture of assessment the reward system needs to recognize efforts rather than specific outcomes. The point of assessment is to engage in a continuous improvement through a cycle of goal setting, activity, measurement, analysis, and adjustments. That is why it is important, for accurate measurement and honest analysis, that individuals and units not be rewarded or punished for immediate results. Self-assessment requires a certain level of trust that the results will not be harmful.

Having started to build a culture of assessment, the next phase for the librarians was to consider, within the context of AQIP and Kenneth Smith's thoughtful recommendations, the following questions:

1. What do we already do that assesses the library's impact on student learning?
2. What easy additional steps can we take to assess existing activities?
3. How can we better integrate the library with academic departments?
4. What is the essential role of the library in terms of impacting student learning outcomes?
5. Who can help us by providing and analyzing data?
6. What other opportunities exist to engage in assessment?

What do we already do? The reference department has over the past decade participated four times in the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program (WOREP). The WOREP is a survey instrument developed to determine user success as perceived by both library users and the library staff serving them. It is one of the few standardized tools available to librarians to measure the effectiveness of the service they offer. By using the WOREP on a nearly biennial schedule, our reference department has had a benchmark of its own performance against which to measure the effectiveness of changes in staffing mix, training, and service protocols. Not only has this department stood nearly alone nationally in using the WOREP on repeated occasions, but also the results from the most recent survey showed that a new high level of performance has been reached. KSU's use of the WOREP was reported on at the 3rd Northumbria International Conference in August 1999 (Radcliff, 2000).

What easy steps can we take? After looking at existing library activities or programs that could be evaluated, the technical services department developed an assessment component for the practicum experiences of Library and Information Science (SLIS) students working for college credit in the department. Evaluation procedures were developed that seek feedback on several levels from students about their practicum experiences. Feedback includes interviewing students about the experience in terms of skills attainment and goals accomplishment, brainstorming with the students about future practicum projects and

improvements to the program, and requesting a copy of their SLIS-required practicum paper. The results of this feedback should allow continual improvement of the practicum experience.

How can we better integrate with academic departments? Traditionally, collection development work with academic departments and library instruction for academic courses has been handled through two separate programs under different assistant deans at KSU. Some librarians participated in both programs; others did one or the other. Some librarians provided collection development for one academic department but instruction for another. In order to better integrate the library with academic departments, the two programs were recently merged and librarian assignments altered. Now the same librarian does both collection development and instruction for departments. The goal is to present most of the library's services as a holistic approach to a discipline's information needs and provide a single point of contact. Librarians are now expected to make regular and frequent contact with their assigned departments and to address their instructional needs in a planned and systematic fashion. This should serve as an opportunity to discuss with academic departments desired student learning outcomes and how librarians can help academic units measure success in addressing these goals.

What is the essential role of the library? At KSU, information literacy has been embraced by the library as an essential component of student success and an area in which librarians can make a unique contribution. Two librarians and a third researcher have been working to develop a survey instrument that assesses the level of information literacy skills of undergraduate college students. The library decided to embrace this effort because such an instrument would be a useful tool in pre- and post-testing the impact of efforts to impart information literacy skills to undergraduate students. The investigators presented on the development of the instrument at the Association of College and Research Libraries' national conference in March 2001 and have received a number of requests since then to share their progress with the national academic library community (O'Connor, Radcliff, & Gedeon, 2001). Long-term plans include incorporating other measures of overall student ability (HSGPA, ACT/SAT scores, college GPA). Once the instrument is fully developed, it can be used for longitudinal testing with a cohort.

Who can help us? A recently developed service, known as PERCs (Personalized Reference Consultations), allows students and faculty to make hour-long appointments with a reference librarian to discuss a specific information need. Some instructors have started to require them for certain courses. In order to gauge the impact of such a service, reference librarians have begun recording the student identifica-

tion numbers of participants. Working with KSU's institutional research office, we will be able to track the academic success of these individuals by linking their PERC participation with their academic record, such as course grades and grade point averages. The point is that most campuses have such research offices that collect data on students and can be a useful resource for helping the library to measure programs. The library can combine its own data with other existing institutional data to enhance the degree of analysis.

What other opportunities exist? Through the OhioLINK consortium, KSU will likely participate in LibQUAL+ in the near future. LibQUAL+ tends to focus on user satisfaction and does not necessarily provide the type of data useful for measuring impact on student learning. However, if most of OhioLINK's member institutions participate, it will at least provide a good comprehensive picture of the state of academic libraries in Ohio with regard to those elements it is designed to measure. KSU can then use this information to communicate to our community where we fit and where we want to move to within that framework. By serving as useful benchmark, LibQUAL+ will be yet another tool for continuous improvement.

Summary

AQIP is the latest manifestation of a growing demand for higher education to engage in continuous improvement. It carries with it the weight of institutional accreditation and therefore cannot be ignored. By focusing on the need to show a positive impact on student learning outcomes, AQIP and other similar programs challenge the library's ability to demonstrate success. Librarians in this environment need to focus less on measurements of user satisfaction and more on affecting student learning. It is recommended that the first step is to foster a culture of assessment within and throughout the library.

Assessment activities do not need to be comprehensive, but rather can be managed by measuring current activities that impact students directly. Discuss with academic departments common student learning outcomes and how librarians can help them measure success in addressing these goals. If possible, identify the unique contributions that the library makes to the institution in terms of student learning (e.g., information literacy). Undertake continuous improvement by articulating goals and objectives, collecting relevant data, analyzing data to determine strengths and weaknesses, and then improving services and programs by developing new or revised goals and objectives. Most importantly, take advantage of a remarkable opportunity to engage in new and meaningful collaborations with colleagues throughout the institution.

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