

ALA's Role in Library Education

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"The aim of education is the knowledge not of facts but
of values."

-- William Ralph Inge

The American Library Association has two committees with responsibility for library education – the Committee on Education and the Committee on Accreditation. I have no direct knowledge of how the Committee on Education works so I will quickly go over its nominal responsibilities and then focus on what I know from personal experience about the Committee on Accreditation or COA.

In general terms, the Education Committee's charge is, and I quote from the *ALA Handbook*," To have responsibility for developing and recommending the Association's policies related to the full spectrum of education for all *library and information studies* personnel. To assure that the Association actively solicits from its members information about the condition, currency, relevance, and type of education necessary to improve current and future library and information services.To identify needed research concerning

education for library and information studies and to help promote its accomplishment." [p. 17 *ALA Handbook*]

In addition to the Committee on Education, there is the Education Assembly that is charged "To provide within ALA an opportunity for broad representation of the membership and for affiliated groups to exchange information, share ideas, and express concerns pertaining to education for library service with a view toward assisting the Committee on Education in carrying out its charge. [p. 17 *ALA Handbook*]

This committee and its forum have played key roles in the recent development of ALA's Core Values and Core Competencies. The Committee on Education is ALA's voice on matters of library education but it is not the only voice, the other being the Committee on Accreditation.

Whereas the official charge of the Committee on Education runs almost 5 column inches, the charge for COA consists of a single sentence: "To be responsible for the execution of the accreditation program of ALA, and to develop and formulate standards of education for library and information studies for the approval of Council." [p. 14 *ALA Handbook of Organization 2005-2006.*]

Supporting that single sentence, however, are the *1992 Standards for Accreditation*, the *Accreditation Process Policies & Procedures (AP3)*, and the *ALA Committee on Accreditation Handbook for Committee Members*. The ALA Office for Accreditation also provides support for COA, the 61 LIS programs, ALA members, and the general public seeking information about library education and accreditation.

You can read these public documents on your own and you can find out more about accreditation in general by going to the ALA web site and navigating to the COA pages.

In her essay "The Fog of My Career: Some Reflections and Lessons Learned (with apologies to Errol Morris and Robert S. McNamara)," [(*Perspectives, Insights & Priorities: 17 Leaders Speak Freely of Librarianship*, edited by Norman Horrocks, Lanham, Md., Toronto, Oxford: 2005)] Gillian McCombs shares twelve lessons that she has learned over a lifetime with Lesson No.1: Everything is personal." (p. 82)

What I would like to do with my few minutes here today is to describe in personal terms the COA role in library education.

My first experience with accreditation was in 1960 when I was a junior in high school. I attended a Department of Defense high school in what was then West Germany. A group of us were unhappy with our school. We didn't think that the courses and teachers were challenging enough for our college ambitions. When we heard that the North Central Association (I think that is correct) was coming to review the school, we began meeting to outline our concerns, sure that if we were reasonable, sweeping changes would be made and we would all live happily ever after, Phi Beta Kappa keys for one and all.

We never met with anyone from the North Central Association. I don't know what the process entailed or if the visiting team spoke with other students that we didn't know about, but it doesn't matter. The high school was accredited, as it should have been, and those of us in that group went

on to college after all and at least graduated. As I have thought back on that experience, I have come to realize that the curriculum was excellent and so were the teachers, even those who perhaps did not challenge us in the ways we thought that we wanted.

This reminds me of a second hand (hearsay, in other words) story about a professor in a library and information science program who was sure, as they went through their self-study, that the program would not be accredited and was shocked when it was re-accredited.

I had a similar feeling after my first experience as a member of an external review panel. I was sure that the program would lose its accreditation because there were so many problems in so many of the standards. But it didn't. As someone close to the process, you can get myopic. No one issue—with the exception of funding—is all important to the success of a program. No one issue will cause a program to lose its accreditation—nor should it.

The lessons here, before moving on to the COA and its work, are that accreditation, no matter what the field, operates on broad principles, even when being as prescriptive, say, as a standards for medical schools. So when a program meets minimum standards, accreditation is granted or re-affirmed. That does not mean, however, that those minimum conditions can't or shouldn't be raised. In a collegial setting, the program wants to work to correct the problems identified by their external review panel or COA.

Despite some experience with accreditation as a library director and as a member of external review panels (even chairing one) I came to COA with those misconceptions and more. I was sure that it was a political process and that COA never cracked down on programs that I knew to be inferior, based mainly on hearsay.

After more than a full year on the committee, I can state that COA is the most demanding and gratifying committee I have served on in more than 30 years of

division and ALA level involvement. Why I feel that way gets to the heart of COA and what it means to library education.

I think that the great satisfaction that I get from COA work derives partly from the importance of its mission and the close professional relationships developed with Committee members in our long hours of meeting together. Program review is ongoing and rigorous – three full days of work, four times a year. COA members include practitioners, educators, and members of the public—public members are those with no ties to librarianship (except without fail they are card carrying members of a library somewhere in the country). Public members come to put into action their commitment to libraries.

For currently accredited programs of library and information science (61 programs at 56 institutions in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico), ALA accreditation is a continuous developmental process conducted in a collegial fashion. ALA accreditation is not only a comprehensive review every few years, it involves required

annual reporting, special reports and meetings with program and institutional leadership as needed, and broad and open communication between and among LIS programs, students, practicing librarians, and COA.

Earlier, I quoted Gillian McCombs observation that everything is personal and that is certainly true for the COA except in one important way. Personal feelings about a given program, including colleagues, must be and are set aside. When personal relationships present a conflict of interest or the suggestion of a conflict, for example, recent employment in a program, a COA member isn't even present when that program is under any kind of discussion.

Having said that, our personal views and experience do come into play when we discuss a program and it affects how we read program documentation or react to program leaders when they meet with COA. But through COA discussions, we learn to look beyond our own experiences and biases. We actually learn to listen actively to one another, that most elusive of skills that we are aware of but

often have trouble practicing in our daily lives. A case in point is our readings and discussions of program presentations. Oftentimes, we all pick up on certain things, but more often, each committee member picks up a detail that others missed or thought unimportant. Once it is brought to the group's attention, a whole new thread of conversation develops.

COA changes each year in obvious ways such as the introduction of a new chair and new committee members. It changes within a year also as new members begin to better understand the importance of the annual statistical reports, the correspondence logs, and other regular activities. It changes as continuing members gain experience and confidence.

COA works organically, responding to the needs of the profession and needs of the programs. It changes just as LIS programs change with the times. Distance education is a prime example. As the COA standards are revised, there will likely be more explicit reference to distance education as

suggested by the external subcommittee that reviewed the Standards for revision in 2002. The report from that subcommittee is available from the Office for Accreditation website. I encourage you all to read that report and the other documents, too, as COA begins to revise the 1992 *Standards* that have served so well for so long.

In closing, faculty and practitioners serve on external review panels and for COA and its subcommittees. The only way to truly understand ALA's role in library education is to get involved through committees or external review panels. We will have a training session for external review panel work during ALA Annual Conference on Friday, in New Orleans. If you're not already in the external reviewer pool, submit the short webform from the accreditation website-- sign up and show up.

I also invite you to COA's open meeting this Sunday, January 22 from 4 – 5 p.m. in the Convention Center, Room 215.

Thank you.

