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SACS Standards 2004: A Compliance Strategy for Academic Libraries

William N. Nelson

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Introduction

In January 2004, the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*¹ promulgated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC), replaced the *Criteria for Accreditation* in effect since 1986. These SACS-COC standards apply to universities, colleges, and community colleges whether they are public or private, non-profit or proprietary institutions. The *Criteria* included 480 "must" statements for compliance, 22 of them relating directly to libraries. *Principles of Accreditation* is much less prescriptive in stating institutional and library requirements, using such subjective terminology as, "appropriate resources," "appropriate facilities and services," "adequate library resources," "sufficient collections and resources," "sufficient number of qualified staff—with appropriate education or experience," and "adequate physical facilities." Along with the new standards came new challenges and opportunities for Southeastern colleges and universities, and their libraries.

This article first provides an introduction to and summary of *Principles of Accreditation* accompanied by a detailed list of provisions specifically applicable to libraries in higher education. The provisions and importance of *Standards for College Libraries*, approved by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2000, are summarized and examples

1. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges. 2003. *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*. Decatur, Georgia: Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The current version of the document is available as a pdf file at: <http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp> [last accessed 9-23-2004]

of implementation are identified. In a 2003 revision, minimal changes were made to these ACRL standards, which received final approval as the *ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* in June 2004. These standards now supercede the three ACRL type-of-library standards produced separately for universities, colleges, and community and junior colleges. All institutions accredited by a regional accreditation agency or professional groups that expect outcomes assessment will gain valuable information and suggestions by reviewing these ACRL standards.

Since the new SACS-COC *Principles of Accreditation* is much less prescriptive than the superceded one, it is difficult for librarians to determine an appropriate compliance strategy. Use of the newest ACRL standards for the assessment of an academic library provides the comprehensive library evaluation required to demonstrate compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation*.

Principles of Accreditation

Following is a summary of the major provisions of the new SACS-COC standards. *Principles of Accreditation* requires that an institution have a purpose, as well as sufficient resources, programs, and services to accomplish its purpose on a continuing basis. The institution also must maintain "clearly specified educational objectives" that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees offered. Additionally, the institution must be successful in achieving its stated objectives.

Asserting that accreditation is both a process and a product, *Principles of Accreditation* envisions the process as involving:

- (1) assessment of the institution's effectiveness in fulfilling its mission;
- (2) compliance with accreditation requirements; and
- (3) continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning, programs, and services.

As a product, accreditation is a public statement assuring an institution's capacity to provide effective programs and services; it is also an affirmation of an institution's commitment to SACS principles.

SACS accreditation requires integrity and a commitment to “quality enhancement.” For quality enhancement SACS-COC “expects institutions to dedicate themselves to enhancing the quality of their programs and services within the context of their missions, resources, and capabilities and creating an environment in which teaching, research, and learning occurs.” The concept presumes that “each member institution is engaged in an ongoing program of improvement and can demonstrate how well it fulfills its stated mission.” Additionally, “an institution is expected to document quality and effectiveness in all its major aspects.”

Initial and continued SACS accreditation involves: (1) the collective analysis and judgment of the institution’s internal constituencies; (2) informed review by external peers; and (3) a decision by the elected representatives of the COC. The COC evaluates an institution based on compliance with: (1) the Principles of Accreditation (also called Key Principles), (2) the Core Requirements, (3) the Comprehensive Standards, and (4) Title IV requirements (for those receiving federal funds).

Without compliance with the Core Requirements, an institution cannot gain or maintain SACS-COC accreditation. The Comprehensive Standards represent the norms or commonly accepted standards of good practice that are required of institutions and establish a necessary level of expected accomplishment in three areas: (1) institutional mission, governance, effectiveness; (2) programs; and (3) resources.

The SACS peer review process consists of internal and external components. The internal review requires:

- (1) An expanded institutional profile (two annually),
- (2) Compliance certification representing the institution’s internal analysis of its compliance with each Core Requirement and Comprehensive Standard, and
- (3) A focused and succinct Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) addressing institutional improvement.

The External Review involves off- and on-site reviews. For the off-site portion a small team (usually including a librarian) meets at an off-site location, reviews documentation provided by the

institution, and determines the institution’s compliance with standards. For the on-site review a team of peers (which may include a librarian) conducts a focused on-site review to:

- (1) verify the institution’s statements of compliance,
- (2) evaluate actions proposed regarding the institutions statements of non-compliance,
- (3) evaluate acceptability of the QEP,
- (4) provide consultation on the issues addressed in the QEP, and
- (5) prepare a written report.

Key Elements for Libraries

A careful review of *Principles of Accreditation* identified the following seventeen specific elements of the standards that are directly applicable to libraries in higher education. They are listed according to the section of standards where they appear.

Application of the Requirements

“The requirements [of the *Principles of Accreditation*] apply to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered.” (p. 7)

Core Requirements

“The institution has a clearly defined and published mission statement specific to the institution and appropriate to an institution of higher education, addressing teaching and learning and, where applicable, research and public service.” **Core Requirement 2.4** (p. 15)

“The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation that incorporate a systematic review of programs and services that (a) results in continuing improvement and (b) demonstrates that the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission.” **Core Requirement 2.5** (p. 15)

“The institution, through ownership or formal arrangements or agreements, provides and supports student and faculty access and user privileges to adequate library collections as well as to other learning/information resources consistent with the degrees offered. These collections and resources are sufficient to support all its educational, research, and public service programs.” **Core Requirement 2.9** (p. 17)

Governance and Administration

“The institution has qualified administrative officers with experience, competence, and capacity to lead the institution.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.2.8** (p. 21)

“The institution defines and publishes policies regarding appointment and employment of faculty and staff.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.2.9** (p. 22)

“The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its administrators, including the chief executive officer, on a periodic basis.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.2.10** (p. 22)

Institutional Effectiveness

“The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1** (p. 22)

Educational Programs

“The institution provides appropriate academic support services.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.4.9** (p. 23)

“The institution’s use of technology enhances student learning, is appropriate for meeting the objectives of its programs, and ensures that students have access to and training in the use of technology.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.4.14** (p. 24)

“The institution ensures that its graduate instruction and resources foster independent learning enabling the graduate to contribute to a profession or field of study.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.6.2** (p. 24)

Faculty

“The institution regularly evaluates the effectiveness of each faculty member in accord with published criteria, regardless of contractual or tenured status.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.7.2** (p. 26)

“The institution provides evidence of ongoing professional development of faculty as teachers, scholars, and practitioners.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.7.3** (p. 26)

Library and Other Learning Resources

“The institution provides facilities, services, and learning/information resources that are appropriate to support its teaching, research, and service mission.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.8.1** (p. 26)

“The institution ensures that users have access

to regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.8.2** (p. 26)

“The institution provides a sufficient number of qualified staff—with appropriate education or experiences both in library and/or other learning/information resources—to accomplish the mission of the institution.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.8.3** (p. 26)

Financial and Physical Resources

“The institution operates and maintains physical facilities, both on and off campus, that are adequate to serve the needs of the institution’s educational programs, support services, and mission-related activities.” **Comprehensive Standard 3.10.7** (p. 27)

ACRL Standards for College Libraries (2000 Edition)²

The Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, promulgates professional standards for academic libraries. Since 1959 several editions of type-of-library standards have been approved for university libraries, college libraries, and community and junior college libraries. The 2000 edition of the *Standards for College Libraries* was notable as the first set of ACRL standards to incorporate outcomes assessment.

With the 2000 edition of the *Standards for College Libraries*, ACRL departed from the trend of establishing prescriptive standards. Some standards about quality and quantity were retained from the earlier edition, but the main emphasis of the most recent college standards was to assist libraries in establishing individual goals within the context of their own institutional goals. The *Standards* included basic statistical “inputs” used for traditional aspects of assessment, as well as outcomes assessment, and provided methods to analyze library outcomes and operations. Additionally, questions were included to provide guidance for the provision of library services.

2. Association of College and Research Libraries. 2000. *Standards for College Libraries*, The Final Version, approved January 2000. *College & Research Libraries News* 61 (3) (March): 175-182.

That edition of the standards addressed twelve different aspects of academic libraries: planning, assessment, outcomes assessment, services, instruction, resources, access, staff, facilities, communication and cooperation, administration, and budget. Even though these standards were developed for college libraries, they were relevant to all academic libraries. Foremost, these standards incorporated outcomes assessment as defined by the ACRL Task Force Report on Academic Library Outcomes Assessment.³

ACRL *Standards for College Libraries* introduced and described the use of suggested points of comparison and the use of outcomes measures. It provided qualitative measures to assess user satisfaction, and service quality. That set of standards also provided quantitative measures (inputs and outputs) for internal trend analysis and comparison with peers.

Fernekes and Nelson examined the application of the 2000 edition to academic libraries. They concluded that academic libraries, both college and university, have found the *Standards for College Libraries* to be practical for the following reasons:

- (1) They meet the expectations by accrediting associations that require outcomes assessment.
- (2) They are applicable to any size library, and are the basis for a single standard for all academic libraries.
- (3) They have been successfully applied by academic libraries.
- (4) They provide a nationally approved professional standard for comprehensive assessment of academic libraries.⁴

3. Association of College and Research Libraries. 1998. Task Force on Academic Library Outcomes Assessment Report. Chicago: American Library Association (June 27, 1998). Available at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/whitepapers/taskforceacademic.htm> [last accessed 9-23-2004]

4. Fernekes, Robert W. and William N. Nelson. 2002. How Practical are the ACRL "Standards for College Libraries"?: Applying Standards in the Academic Library. *College & Research Libraries News* 63 (10) (November): 711-713.

A number of academic libraries have successfully applied the standards, and several have made all or part of their assessment publicly available on the web.⁵ To provide further guidance for the practical application of the *Standards*, ACRL published a workbook keyed to the 2000 edition.⁶

ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education⁷

Since the ACRL Board of Directors mandated in 1998 that all new and revised standards incorporate outcomes assessment, the 2000 edition of the *Standards for College Libraries* served as a model for applying outcomes assessment in other type-of-library standards.

5. Amherst College [November 2002] <http://www.amherst.edu/library/assessment/facilities/> [last accessed 7-26-2004]

Butler University Libraries [May 2002]. The "Accreditation Self-Study" report was posted on the web, but recently removed by institutional policy because of the age the document. An electronic copy can be obtained by contacting Lewis Miller, Dean of Libraries, at lmiller@butler.edu

Governors State [January 2000]. http://www.govst.edu/gsu_library/t_gsu_library.asp?id=1201 [last accessed 9-23-2004] – pdf file available here. <http://webserve.govst.edu/library/assess.htm> [last accessed 9-23-2004] - The original html file is still available here.

University of Wisconsin–Parkside <http://www.uwp.edu/departments/library/services/selfstudy.htm> [last accessed 9-23-2004]

6. Nelson, William N. and Robert W. Fernekes. 2002. *Standards and Assessment for Academic Libraries: A Workbook*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.

7. Association of College and Research Libraries. 2003. Standards for Libraries in Higher Education: A Draft. *College & Research Libraries News* 64 (5) (May): 329-336. The final version (approved June 29, 2004) is not yet in print, but is available at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardslibraries.htm> [last accessed 9-23-2004]

In 2002, the ACRL Board appointed a College and Research Libraries Standards Task Force with representatives from each of the three type-of-library sections (ULS, CLS, and CJCLS; representing the university, college, and community and junior college libraries sections) to work together on a common set of standards for academic libraries. The task force developed a document, *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, which closely follows the *Standards for College Libraries*. The Task Force held open hearings and solicited comments on the draft document, which received final approval by ACRL in June 2004 and superceded the separate standards for universities, colleges, and two-year institutions.

The *Standards for College Libraries*, 2000 edition was the basis for the *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, which has the same format as the earlier document, with minimal changes to the text. The primary new elements are: (1) replacement of the word “college” with “institution” throughout the document, and (2) substitution of the word “higher education” for “college” in the title. This latter terminology is used because some technical institutes are not considered “academic” but are included in the broader term, “higher education.”

Common Elements: ACRL & SACS-COC Standards

The United States is divided into six regions, each of which has an association responsible for accreditation of higher education institutions. All six of the regional accrediting associations have rewritten their standards in the last several years. These regional standards typically have very vague requirements that relate to libraries and learning resources. This trend is more pronounced in the revised standards. As an example, all the revised standards have eliminated a separate standard for libraries and learning resources and have included them within the other sections. One of the most important changes in the standards has been the new emphasis on student learning outcomes, placing more emphasis on what students learn and less on how they learn it.

Nelson and Fernekes reviewed the regional association standards, including the SACS-COC *Principles of Accreditation* for provisions affecting academic libraries, and categorized

them by the twelve sections of the 2000 edition of the *Standards for College Libraries*: planning, assessment, outcomes assessment, services, instruction, resources, access, staff, facilities, communication and cooperation, and administration. That analysis was published in the ACRL workbook on standards and assessment in academic libraries. The analysis showed that the 2004 SACS *Principles of Accreditation* had corresponding elements in eleven of the twelve sections of the ACRL standards.⁸ The chart has been revised for the *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* and to incorporate changes in the numbering system of the *Principles of Accreditation*. The new chart is included below.

A Compliance Strategy

Any evidence of compliance with SACS-COC standards should be: (1) relevant to the *Principles of Accreditation*, (2) current, (3) representative or typical, (4) integrated and coherent (relating to fact), (5) useful, (6) verifiable and authoritative, and (7) quantifiable and quantitative.⁹ The non-prescriptive nature of the SACS standards presents a challenge to those attempting to document compliance. At the same time this affords the academic library an opportunity for a comprehensive evaluation of the library that will generate useful and authoritative data for use in regional and specialized accreditation reports.

A recommended compliance strategy is to use a nationally-approved, comprehensive standard for a thorough review of the academic library. The ACRL *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* (as was its predecessor, the 2000 edition of *Standards for College Libraries*) is an ideal standard to use. This set of standards can be used as the basis to draw conclusions regarding the adequacy, sufficiency, and appropriateness of library collections, services and facilities. Once the *Standards* have been applied, the conclusions are supported by the

8. Nelson and Fernekes. *Standards Workbook*, 142-143.

9. Russell, Ralph. 2003. Presentation, “Assessing Library/Learning Resources Using the New Standards.” Georgia Library Association-Council of Media Organizations Conference. Jekyll Island, Georgia: October 23, 2003.

data generated by the assessment. With the thorough review, bolstered by data that support the conclusions, the SACS peer reviewers must agree with the conclusions or demonstrate some error or flaw in the process. The use of the ACRL standards seems to be an ideal strategy, as SACS-COC has already approved a set of “guidelines” which may be used in assessment of the faculty section of the *Principles*.

Outcomes assessment is now almost universally required by regional accrediting associations and specialized accrediting bodies. By using this comprehensive, national academic library standard, libraries have the opportunity to review all aspects of the academic library, not just those specifically mentioned in the SACS *Principles*. Use of the *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* can provide the library evaluation required by all of the groups that accredit a particular institution. The conclusion and supporting data from application of the *Standards* can then be reformatted as necessary to meet the particular reporting requirements, allowing the library to conduct its own coherent and ongoing evaluation plan, then reporting the data as needed to meet accreditation requirements.

Use of these *Standards* also facilitates the comparison of data among peers because all peers using the standards would be collecting the same data. Furthermore, once one library in a group of peers aggregates and analyzes the data, it is available for all other members of the peer group. The onerous task of collecting and aggregating the data can be shared among institutions. For example, in a group of five peers, a given library could accomplish the comprehensive collection of data once every five years, or each library could collect only a fifth of the total each year.

SACS and the other accrediting associations generally take the position that they will not accept any standards, other than their own, in making a determination about the accreditation of an institution. However, it is reported that ACRL standards have been informally used to supplement those of the regional associations in the evaluation of academic libraries.¹⁰ Some

10. Coleman, Paul and Ada D. Jarred. 1994. Regional Association Criteria and the “Standards for College Libraries”: The Informal

have asserted that the ACRL standards can have an impact on the library more significant than accreditation itself.¹¹

The best strategy for library compliance with the new SACS-COC standards is to design and implement an assessment plan based on the *ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, then present the conclusions and supporting data in a format compatible with institutional and SACS requirements. To assist in such an effort, the attached chart provides cross references between the SACS-COC Principles of Accreditation and the twelve sections of the *ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*.¹²

Role of Quantitative Input Measures for Libraries in Accreditation. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 20 (3) (November): 273-284.

11. Williams, Delmus E. and Phyllis O'Connor. 1994. Academic Libraries and the Literature of Accreditation. In *The Challenge and Practice of Academic Accreditation: A Sourcebook for Library Administrators*, ed. Edward Garten, 243-249. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

12. This chart was compiled by Nelson and Fernekes. It is a revision of a chart originally published in Nelson and Fernekes, *Standards Workbook*, 142-143.

Cross Reference Chart
SACS Accreditation Standards: Provisions Affecting Academic Libraries
(July 2004)

<p>ACRL, <i>Standards for Libraries in Higher Education</i> (June 2004)</p>	<p>Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, <i>Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement</i> (January 2004 edition)</p>
<p>Planning</p>	<p>“The institution has a clearly defined and published mission statement specific to the institution and appropriate to an institution of higher education, addressing teaching and learning and, where applicable, research and public service.” Core Requirement 2.4</p> <p>“The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan and demonstrates the plan is part of an ongoing planning and evaluation process.” Core Requirement 2.12</p>
<p>Assessment</p>	<p>“The institution regularly evaluates the effectiveness of each faculty member in accord with published criteria, regardless of contractual or tenured status.” Comprehensive Standard 3.7.2</p> <p>“The institution demonstrates that each educational program for which academic credit is awarded (a) is approved by the faculty and the administration, and (b) establishes and evaluates program and learning objectives.” Comprehensive Standard 3.4.1</p>
<p>Outcomes Assessment</p>	<p>“The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that incorporate a systematic review of programs and services that (a) results in continuing improvement and (b) demonstrates that the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission.” Core Requirement 2.5</p> <p>“The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.” Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1</p>
<p>Services</p>	<p>“The institution provides facilities, services, and learning/information resources that are appropriate to support its teaching, research, and service mission.” Comprehensive Standard 3.8.1</p> <p>“The institution provides student support programs, services, and activities consistent with its mission that promote student learning and enhance the development of its students.” Core Requirement 2.10.</p> <p>“The institution provides appropriate academic support services.” Comprehensive Standard 3.4.9</p> <p>“The requirements [of the <i>Principles of Accreditation</i>] apply to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. (from the section on “Application of the Standards”)</p>

<p>ACRL, <i>Standards for Libraries in Higher Education</i> (June 2004)</p>	<p>Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, <i>Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement</i> (January 2004 edition)</p>
<p>Instruction</p>	<p>“The institution ensures that users have access to regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources.” Comprehensive Standard 3.8.2</p> <p>“The institution’s use of technology enhances student learning, is appropriate for meeting the objectives of its programs, and ensures that students have access to training in the use of technology.” Comprehensive Standard 3.4.14</p>
<p>Resources</p>	<p>“The institution provides facilities, services, and learning/information resources that are appropriate to support its teaching, research, and service mission.” Comprehensive Standard 3.8.1.</p> <p>“The institution, through ownership or formal arrangements or agreements, provides and supports student and faculty access and user privileges to adequate library collections as well as to other learning/information resources consistent with the degrees offered. These collections and resources are sufficient to support all its educational, research, and public service programs.” Core Requirement 2.9</p> <p>“The institution ensures that its graduate instruction and resources foster independent learning, enabling the graduate to contribute to a profession or field of study.” Comprehensive Standard 3.6.2</p>
<p>Access</p>	<p>“The institution, through ownership or formal arrangements or agreements, provides and supports student and faculty access and user privileges to adequate library collections as well as to other learning/information resources consistent with the degrees offered. These collections and resources are sufficient to support all its educational, research, and public service programs.” Core Requirement 2.9</p>
<p>Staff</p>	<p>“The institution provides a sufficient number of qualified staff--with appropriate education or experiences both in library and/or other learning/information resources--to accomplish the mission of the institution.” Comprehensive Standard 3.8.3</p> <p>“The institution has qualified administrative and academic officers with the experience, competence, and capacity to lead the institution.” Comprehensive Standard 3.2.8</p> <p>“The institution defines and publishes policies regarding appointment and employment of faculty and staff.” Comprehensive Standards 3.2.9</p> <p>“The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its administrators, including the chief executive officer, on a periodic basis.” Comprehensive Standard 3.2.10</p> <p>“The institution employs competent faculty members qualified to accomplish the mission and goals of the institution.” Comprehensive Standard 3.7.1</p> <p>“The institution provides evidence of ongoing professional development of faculty as teachers, scholars, and practitioners.” Comprehensive Standard 3.7.3</p>

<p>ACRL, <i>Standards for Libraries in Higher Education</i> (June 2004)</p>	<p>Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, <i>Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement</i> (January 2004 edition)</p>
<p>Facilities</p>	<p>“The institution provides facilities, services, and learning/information resources that are appropriate to support its teaching, research, and service mission.” Comprehensive Standard 3.8.1</p> <p>“The institution operates and maintains physical facilities, both on and off campus, that are adequate to serve the needs of the institution’s educational programs, support services, and mission-related activities.” Comprehensive Standard 3.10.7</p> <p>“The institution has a sound financial base and demonstrated financial stability, and adequate physical resources to support the mission of the institution and the scope of its programs and services.” Core Requirement 2.11</p>
<p>Communication & Cooperation</p>	<p>“The institution has a clear and comprehensive mission statement that guides it; is approved by the governing board; is periodically reviewed by the board; and is communicated to the institution’s constituencies.” Comprehensive Standard 3.1.1</p>
<p>Administration</p>	<p>“The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.” Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1</p>
<p>Budget</p>	<p>“The institution has a sound financial base and demonstrated financial stability, and adequate physical resources to support the mission of the institution and the scope of its programs and services.” Core Requirement 2.11</p>