

The role of academic libraries in teaching and learning

By Mignon Adams

An interview with Middle States' Howard Simmons

Howard L. Simmons, the executive director of the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools since 1988, has consistently championed libraries and information literacy. We thought his views on the role of libraries in the accreditation process would be of interest.

Dr. Simmons holds an undergraduate degree in Spanish from Spring Hill College, a master's degree in Russian from Indiana University, and a doctorate in higher education from Florida State University. Before coming to Middle States in 1974, he taught Russian and Spanish at high school and college levels and served in various college administrative positions.

Middle States is the accrediting agency for colleges in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Dr. Simmons, you appear to have a great deal of respect for libraries. What in your background contributed to this?

I've always been interested in books, and reading and words, and origins of words, which led me to the library. In high school I used to miss gym class to go to the library. I was there so often that the librarian put me to work. I processed books, accessioned them—that was exciting, to see new books coming in—and the librarian sometimes let me help classify them. And because I knew where everything was in that library, I helped students, explaining to them what they should be using.

When I went to college I continued to work in the library. Because the stacks were closed, I also

continued to help students, helping them to find things on their own. I questioned the reserve system: why should anyone want to be limited to just what was on reserve? I argued with faculty that if students were to really learn, they needed to go beyond the reserve system. A few were convinced! I guess I was interested in information literacy even then.

Later, as an associate director at Middle States, when I went from campus to campus, I didn't see much use of libraries. I saw librarians spending time on tasks which could be done by someone else, tasks like those I had done as a student. I saw students coming in to use the facilities for purposes other than actual learning experiences. Most students never developed any strategies in using a library. It seemed strange that someone would think that bringing in an English class at the beginning of the semester for half an hour would allow the students to learn everything they needed to about a library. Where were the connections to the undergraduate experience, the undergraduate curriculum?

If we are to be serious about improvement in the teaching-learning cycle, then it appeared to me that the library ought to play a pivotal role, particularly since we say that the library is central to the educational mission. And to make it work, librarians need to be empowered. I decided that the influence of an accred-



Howard Simmons

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iting agency would help them do so. I saw this also as a way of improving the college curriculum.

Since your assuming the executive directorship at Middle States, the organization has taken some new initiatives in what it expects from libraries. Could you explain these initiatives?

When I became executive director, I led a convocation with an agenda of items I thought should be emphasized. One item on the list was a more creative and more effective utilization of learning resources. Subsequently, we looked at *Characteristics of Excellence* (Middle States' statement on standards for accreditation) and added a sentence on the essential nature

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of an active and continuous program of bibliographic instruction.

In the fall of 1989, at the annual training workshop for commission team leaders, librarians who serve on Middle States teams were also invited. In a joint session, Middle States staff described the several new initiatives, including an emphasis on libraries and bibliographic instruction. In the afternoon, library team members met in workshops to discuss how this new emphasis should affect the way they approached evaluation visits.

In 1991 three workshops on information literacy and general education were held. Each time an invitation went to the chief academic officer of each Middle States institution. At the first two workshops we asked for teams made up of a librarian, a computer or a-v person, and a teaching faculty member. Some institutions sent five representatives! At the last one we asked for one person per institution so that we could reach more institutions. Each group featured a keynote speech by Patricia Breivik and small group discussions on how information literacy could be integrated into general education.

We are currently in the process of revising and updating *Characteristics of Excellence*. Task forces have been assigned to look at various sections and I expect that the section on libraries will emphasize information literacy and resource-based education. People normally pay

attention to recommendations made by an accrediting body.

What future initiatives do you expect Middle States to take?

We need to continue the training of people on our teams. We need to train all librarians who serve on our teams in the importance of the integration of information literacy into the curriculum. And not just librarians, subject matter specialists should be looking at what's happening also. The role of the librarians should be to orient and educate others on the team.

Excellent programs of bibliographic instruction need to be documented in order for them to be replicated. We plan to feature what institutions are doing in future issues of our newsletter, but that's not enough. That's a project I think we'll do to highlight "emblems of excellence."

We also need a practical handbook on information literacy to serve as a guide for institutions who want to get started.

How do the various regional accrediting agencies work together? Do they influence each other?

There's an Assembly of Regional Accrediting Bodies which meets twice a year as a group, and we also meet when the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation meets. We have committees which meet on special projects. I'm currently on a committee concerning training. We keep in contact with each other.

We don't attempt to standardize our approaches. Each region has its own culture, traditions, and ways of doing things, but people tend to take back new ideas to their own regions.

What role can, or should, professional organizations like the Association of College and Research Libraries play with accrediting agencies?

ACRL could work with us to survey other accrediting agencies to see what they're doing in the area of information literacy. All the accrediting agencies have standards which relate to library utilization, but I don't think any have gotten so specific as we have. ACRL could identify, on a national level, knowledgeable librarians who could serve as advisors.

ACRL has created a list of accreditation experts.

Now, why didn't I know that! There need to be better communication links, perhaps through the local chapters of ACRL, which could work with their regional groups.

ACRL could encourage librarians in other areas to serve on evaluation teams. Middle States has a long tradition of always having a librarian on comprehensive evaluation visits, but I suspect this isn't always true in other re-

gions. ACRL could have an influence on other accrediting agencies to see that this happens.

Finally, ACRL could identify and highlight institutions with excellent programs in information literacy. People need to know about these.

How does the commission use standards provided by a professional organization?

They provide resource materials for evaluators. We can't substitute anyone's standards for ours, which are always qualitative, and our process always involves peer judgment. We encourage evaluators and institutions to use them, and list them in the back of our handbook. Our evaluators are told, however, not to use them slavishly, because they must always take into account the unique nature of the institution they're evaluating.

I would support qualitative as opposed to quantitative standards for libraries. For example, when I hear that a library has added the millionth book, I wonder how many of these million are old, outdated, and never used.

How do you feel about the access vs. ownership issue for libraries?

Access is the wave of the future. No library is going to be able to afford everything. Its dollars need to be spent on the means of accessing materials, not just those in the United

States, but in the world. Accrediting agencies won't have any difficulty with access versus ownership. We're looking for support of programs. We don't care if a student accesses information from a book on the shelves or through a computer.

What kind of information would you look for in a library's self-study?

Well, all the pertinent information and statistics on collections, ratios, the historical development of the collection, how it relates to the academic program, and the last time it was weeded; a description of the bibliographic instruction program and how many actual classes take place; information which describes how the library interacts with students and faculty to get them to use the resources; if there are off-campus programs, comparable information on access there; the degree to which the library has computerized access; the networks they belong to.

There should be interaction between the librarian and other pertinent self-study committees, particularly those concerned with academic review. There should be a professional librarian on the steering committee. An academic representative cannot be the sole person to represent the library. ■

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