

# CREATING AVENUES: PARTNERSHIPS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

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Regional accrediting bodies have increasingly mandated assessments of student learning outcomes. This reflects the current push for accountability triggered by legislatures who represent a public that wants to see the best return on the tax dollar. The interesting part is that not all regional accrediting bodies are requiring the same level of documentation of student learning. As a result, one challenge for librarians is to determine the assessment criteria appropriate for their university contexts. Criteria can be defined in several ways—by the regional accreditors, by the professional accreditors, and by the institution. Boards of regents and institutions' respective higher education systems may also mandate criteria. The demands of multiple and sometimes conflicting bodies present formidable challenges to understand and assess learning. The regional accrediting commission formulates their criteria based on the definition of information literacy cited by the Association of College and Research Libraries' standards for information literacy.

## MANDATES

The emphasis of this article is collaboration and creation of tools to assess student learning outcomes to share with an institution's regional accrediting body. Overall, there are six regional accrediting commissions, which in total are responsible for accrediting 3500 higher education institutions. The regional commissions are guided by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions. Each regional commission is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. It is important to keep abreast of an institution's respective regional commission as accreditation standards may change. In creating the table below, the authors identified core standards, criteria, or requirements that may be relevant for assessment of student learning by individual regional accrediting bodies. While comparing the regional commissions, the authors also noted that there were two regional commissions which published new standards recently, Middle States and New England (see Table 1).

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**TABLE 1**  
**Regional Accrediting Bodies:**  
**States Served, Websites, Key Standards and Relevant Notes**

<b>Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools</b>	FL, DC, DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA, PR, VI <a href="http://www.msche.org/">http://www.msche.org/</a> Standard 11: Educational Offerings Standard 12: General Education Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning New edition of the Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education was implemented in 2003
<b>Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities</b>	AK, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA <a href="http://www.nwccu.org/">http://www.nwccu.org/</a> Standard 2: Educational Program and its Effectiveness Standard 5: Library and Information Resources Lists specific types of documentation which are required
<b>North Central Association of Colleges and Schools</b>	AR, AZ, CO, IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, OK, NM, SD, WI, WV, WY <a href="http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/">http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/</a> Criterion 3: Student learning and effective teaching Lists examples for documentation
<b>New England Association of Schools and Colleges</b>	CT, ME, MA, RI, VT <a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/cihe.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/cihe.htm</a> Standard 4: The Academic Program Standard 7: Library and Other Information Resources New accreditation standards effective 1/2006
<b>Southern Association of Colleges and Schools</b>	AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, VA <a href="http://www.sacscoc.org/">http://www.sacscoc.org/</a> Core requirement 2.12: Quality Enhancement Plan Comprehensive Standard 3.8: Library and Other Learning Resources Provides report from Council of Regional Accrediting Commission about assessment of student learning
<b>Western Association of Schools and Colleges</b>	CA, HI, and Pacific Basin region <a href="http://www.wascweb.org/">http://www.wascweb.org/</a> Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives through Core Functions Lists questions about student learning; helpful link on assessment

Note: Table compiled from information on regional accrediting bodies' websites. Standards listed are the core or main standards that are applicable for student learning. There may be additional standards that are relevant for assessment of student learning.

Depending on your institution, you can seek guidance determining the standards; there may be an assessment office on your campus to help orient you to standards. Some libraries may have assessment coordinators. If your library does not have an assessment coordinator, there may be a campus representative who can help you to facilitate this process. If not, you may need to check with a regional accrediting office for guidance. To learn more about assessment, you can read *Regional Accreditation and Student Learning: Principles for Good Practices* (2003), a report from the Council of Regional Accrediting bodies that can be accessed via the Middle States website listed in the References section.

## ASSESSMENT

In order to begin the information literacy skills assessment process, you will need to read the mission statements for your institution and for your library. There should be themes in the university's and library's mission statements that tie in to ACRL's Information Literacy Standards. If applicable, read your institution's learning goals. You can move on to review instruction session goals with the respective faculty member and develop instruction session goals for their classes that then can be written as session outcomes. As you develop your outcomes, you can create a short survey which can be a pre-test and post-test format. To develop a better understanding of assessing student learning outcomes you may want to read *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* by Suskie (2004). There are a multitude of resources available to help you formulate your student learning outcomes and then assess those outcomes. Additionally, you may want to consider setting a benchmark, such as 60% of the students passing a survey. You may use national assessment initiatives to determine how your institution compares with your peer institutions or comparable institutions.

Assessment can be conducted at several different levels--instructor, library, university and national testing. Most assessments are surveys conducted at the instructor, library, and/or university levels. National assessments include Project SAILS and The National Survey of Student Engagement, although both of these result in the institution paying a fee to participate. Mark and Boruff-Jones (2003) discuss assessing students' information literacy skills by analyzing the institutions' results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and comparing them to their Carnegie peers. To learn more about the match between NSSE and your regional accrediting body, see the accreditation tool-kit at the website for the National Survey of Student Engagement.

Emphasis on assessing students' information literacy skills has increased the workloads of and demands on librarians and faculty. Thompson (2002) notes the shift in the work that we do from not only teaching students how to locate materials but

also assessing information literacy skills. Thompson's conclusion stresses that "collaboration is the key to information literacy" (p. 236). As a result, it is critical to develop partnerships so faculty and librarians can work together to determine and assess information literacy skills. The caveat is to work smarter, not harder, with the tools that you already have available.

To be effective, Suskie (2004) states that assessment needs to be a continuous cycle with four steps:

- Establish learning goals
- Provide learning opportunities
- Assess student learning
- Use the results

Assessment results are often shared with university committees. At Frostburg State University, the results are shared with the Student Learning Advisory Group, the Institutional Assessment Committee, Deans' Council, and the President's Cabinet, as well as with faculty and library faculty instructors. The results are also shared with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and other external bodies. The Lewis J. Ort Library is mandated to report assessment activities as outlined in the academic program assessments, since all academic programs are required to report progress at regular intervals.

Librarians needed to develop a set of common Information Literacy Learning Goals. Once we determined the Library's learning goals, we were able to establish a common survey to assess the Orientation students at the end of their first semester when the students took their final exam. Then we shifted the point of first-year library instruction to the Freshman Composition sections and conducted an assessment survey there. As this was a new development, there was a need to reach out and collaborate with faculty.

## PARTNERSHIPS

The key to collaboration is open mindedness in order to understand learning outcomes and to agree on assessment types. Building rapport helps the buy-in process. Faculty who are really afraid of change may put up extra resistance. The goal is not to make this process harder, but to take a practical approach.

At Frostburg, librarians ask faculty to accompany students to instruction sessions. Some faculty may bring their students to the library sessions without an assignment, although if this occurs, the librarian may create an assignment which can be in the form of research exercises and guided practice questions (formative, direct) to help raise students' levels of concern and attention. Also, the assignment helps to reinforce the learning concepts introduced at the instruction session. See Table 2 for different types of assessment tools you could use during or after library instruction.

**Table 2.**  
Different Assessment Tools

<b>Formative</b>	<b>Summative</b>	<b>Direct</b>	<b>Indirect</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Research Exercises</li> <li>•Guided Practice Session</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Short survey—Instructor generated</li> <li>•Freshman Composition survey (all sections)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Survey</li> <li>•Short Assignment (applying their skills)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Student Self-Report</li> </ul>

Judy scheduled a library instruction session for her freshman composition students for the first time in several years because the university undergraduate education initiative mandated that she should. She wanted to get going with it as soon as she realized she had no choice in whether to do it, so she wanted to influence the process of what and how it was accomplished.

Kate strove to meet Judy’s expectations without making extra work for Judy. Before conducting Judy’s first library instruction class, Kate took Judy to lunch to discuss her vision of what the session should accomplish. Kate then drafted an outline of the session and session handouts and sent them to Judy for feedback. They exchanged several rounds of feedback, then settled on the handouts to give students.

**FINDINGS: TIPS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Be aware that change is not going to happen overnight. Start with small steps. Review ACRL’s Information Literacy webpage. Create an assessment binder to compile everything. If you are working at a large institution, consider assessing by sample size, as it is not possible to assess all students. If you have time, participate in an e-seminar to sharpen your assessment skills. To learn about additional resources that exist for assessment, read Mark’s (2004) article entitled “Assessing Student Learning: Available Resources.” Also, for librarians and faculty to continually learn from colleagues, consider joining listservs such as **ilt-swg**, **ili**, or **assess** to keep abreast of the latest information. Another tip if you are working at a large university where it may be more difficult to reach out to faculty: consider updating your scheduling library session page to request a syllabus attachment and a list of session goals and library assignment if applicable.

The need is critical to collaborate with faculty in greater numbers. The hard part is that it is time intensive to develop and collaborate with faculty as they have many demands on their time. It is important to realize that the collaborative process takes time and to allow the time needed. Three keys to success are to develop and assess in small parts, to share the library’s vision with faculty, and to find ways to let faculty share their vision with library staff.

Another tip is to take advantage of assessment data that has already been collected as part of national assessment initiatives, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement. These are standardized questionnaires designed to assess student engagement,

given to freshman and seniors. If your institution participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement, you may want to consider analyzing or tying in those results to information literacy. This provides additional documentation beyond what librarians and faculty may already be collecting at the library level.

For example, our in-house survey results at Frostburg State were used to differentiate content from the orientation session to the library and the Freshman Composition session. Additionally, we were asked to offer sessions on plagiarism. At students’ request, Kate and Judy developed a handout of advanced tips for using Microsoft Word.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

For FSU librarians and collaborating faculty, we may want to consider conducting a longitudinal study of the Freshmen Composition survey results to see if we find that there is a significant increase in students’ information literacy skills as a result of library instruction. In general, with regard to the six regional commissions, one could conduct a study of the sample of institutions from each of the regional commissions to see what their assessment experience has been in the last five years.

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