

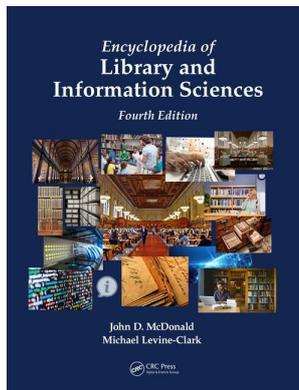
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# Accreditation of Library and Information Studies Programs in the United States and Canada

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## Abstract

The entry details the purposes, definition, historical and operational contexts, and future prospects for accreditation of library and information studies programs by the American Library Association.

## INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is a quality assurance process guided by standards, policies, and procedures. The process entails the assessment of educational quality and the continued enhancement of operations through the development and validation of standards. Accreditation is also a condition wherein an accredited status signifies that the education provided is of quality.<sup>[1]</sup>

## PURPOSE OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation provides for quality assessment and enhancement, with quality defined as the effective utilization of resources to achieve appropriate educational objectives. The purpose of accreditation is to assure the public, members of a profession, employers, students, and the educational community that an institution or program 1) has clearly defined educationally appropriate objectives, 2) maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, 3) is in fact accomplishing them substantially, and 4) can be expected to continue to do so.<sup>[2]</sup> Accreditation does not result in the ranking of programs or institutions, but rather respects the uniqueness of each, while ensuring that all meet appropriate standards.

The fundamental assumptions of accreditation are that 1) self-regulation in education is preferable and in the long run is more effective than governmental regulation (in accordance with the 10th Amendment), 2) a system of quality assurance can be effective only to the extent that it recognizes and builds upon constituent willingness to engage in the process, 3) self-regulation is possible if expectations are clear, 4) most institutions will self-regulate if it is believed that they might otherwise be identified by their peers as doing something wrong, and 5) only a few institutions deliberately engage in behavior that they know is not in the public interest.<sup>[3]</sup>

The American Library Association (ALA) *Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and*

*Information Studies* express the purpose of accreditation as protecting "the public interest" and providing guidance "for educators." The ALA "Committee [on Accreditation] offers a means of quality control in the professional staffing" for "library and information services."<sup>[4]</sup>

## CONTEXT

Accreditation is a voluntary, nongovernmental, collegial process of self-study and external review. It involves a framework of international, national, regional, vocational, specialized, and professional accrediting organizations. In the United States, there are 67 accreditors recognized as reputable by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and some accreditors by both.<sup>[5]</sup>

"Regional" and "national" organizations accredit whole institutions, while specialized and professional agencies accredit programs and free-standing institutions. These organizations, while based in the United States, may accredit institutions and programs of study outside the United States. The ALA, for instance, also accredits programs at the master's degree level in library and information studies (LIS).

ALA is recognized by the CHEA, whose requirements state that accreditors "[must maintain] appropriate and fair policies and procedures that include effective checks and balances."<sup>[6]</sup> *ALA Accreditation Process, Policies, and Procedures*, developed by the ALA Office for Accreditation (OA) and approved by the ALA Committee on Accreditation (COA), guide the process. The OA conforms to good accreditation practice as set forth by the CHEA and the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA).

As a member of the ASPA, the ALA follows the *ASPA Code of Good Practice*, which states that a member must exhibit "a system of checks and balances in its standards development and accreditation procedures. [A member must avoid] relationships and practices that would provoke

questions about its overall objectivity and integrity.”<sup>[7]</sup> The ALA process includes appeal policies and procedures that provide a system of checks and balances to protect the integrity and fairness of the process for the institution in which programs reside.<sup>[1]</sup>

The ALA accredits the professional degree in librarianship, established by the ALA governing council as the master’s degree. The ALA is recognized by the CHEA as the accreditor for LIS programs offered under the degree-granting authority of regionally accredited institutions located in the United States, Puerto Rico, and by agreement with the Canadian Library Association, in Canada. The ALA is one of the 20 ASPA member agencies that accredit educational entities in both in the United States and Canada.<sup>[8]</sup> CHEA recognition requires that an accreditor undergo review every 5 years to confirm eligibility and demonstrate compliance with its standards.

The ALA falls outside the scope of the USDE recognition, which by statute does not concern itself with accreditors that do not perform a Title IV “gate-keeping role” for federal loan and grant funds. That gate-keeping role falls to the institutions in which LIS programs reside, which are regionally accredited. The ALA standards require a program in the United States to reside within a regionally accredited institution.<sup>[4]</sup>

Canadian institutions of higher education, however, operate under provincial legislation, with older institutions likely to have an act specific to themselves. As the number of postsecondary institutions seeking degree-granting powers has increased through the 1990s to the present, provinces have devised their own mechanisms for considering these requests; for example, the Province of Alberta operates the Campus Alberta Quality Council, and Ontario has the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. However, while the processes for obtaining provincial approval to offer degree programs may have similarities to accreditation processes (incorporating self-studies and external reviews), the language in Canada is not that of “accreditation” of each institution.

Individual academic programs in Canada are subject to accreditation processes, as is the case with library and information science education. In recognition of cross-border mobility between the two nations, Canadian accreditation processes often recognize the American program in some way. The Canadian Medical Association accredits graduate medical education, and its accreditation committee includes two observers from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, from the United States. The Canadian Architectural Certification Board comprises only Canadians, but acknowledges a close working relationship with NAAB (National Architectural Accrediting Board).

The COA has 12 members, stipulated by the ALA Committee on Organization as five practitioners and five academics who are ALA members, and two public-at-large members, all appointed by ALA presidents-elect. The ALA members serve a 4-year nonrenewable term,

while the public-at-large members are appointed to serve a 2-year term, renewable once.

## HISTORY

The origins of accreditation are traced to the progressivism movement of the mid-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, which saw the rise of higher education in the United States beginning in 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Act, which came to be known as the Land Grant College Act.<sup>[9]</sup>

Accreditation of postsecondary education developed in parallel with library studies education. Through efforts led by Melvil Dewey, the first library school was founded in 1883 as the School of Library Economy at Columbia College (now Columbia University). Similar schools elsewhere followed, and in 1900, accreditation of library studies was born when the ALA established the Committee on Library Training that formulated the first standards of quality for library education.<sup>[10]</sup>

The first comprehensive study of library education was undertaken in 1921 with Carnegie Corporation funding by librarian and economist Dr. Charles C. Williamson. His report *Training for Library Service* stressed the need to draw a strong distinction between professional and clerical work in libraries, recommending that library education schools require applicants to hold an undergraduate degree.<sup>[11]</sup> It was not until 1951, however, that the master’s degree was established by ALA policy 54.2 as the professional degree.

The ALA Board of Education for Librarianship (BEL) was established in 1924 to develop “minimum standards for library programs.” The Carnegie Corporation used these quantitative training measures as a basis for endowing existing and newly formed schools, including the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, the first library school to offer a graduate educational program in librarianship.<sup>[12]</sup>

As library education moved into more traditional academic contexts within university settings, the next revision of the standards in 1933 was more descriptive of the principles and practices of the profession and less prescriptive and training oriented. This revision was a cooperative effort between the BEL and the Association of American Library Schools [AALS; now the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE)]. At that time, there were 25 LIS schools in the United States and Canada.

The next revision was undertaken by the BEL, the AALS, and the ALA Library Education Division and approved by the ALA Council on July 15, 1951. These standards incorporated the premise that the professional degree be a minimum of 5 years of study beyond secondary school and should lead to a master’s degree.

In 1955, the COA was established as the decision-making body for accrediting professional degree programs

in LIS. The work of the COA is administered by the OA, formerly the Office for Education. The OA also coordinates reviews of school library media teacher education programs.

The COA established a standards revision subcommittee in 1970 that produced the 1972 *Standards for Accreditation*, which notes that its requirements and recommendations emphasize “qualitative rather than quantitative considerations... and that, therefore the standards lend themselves to some variation in interpretation... The standards are indicative but not prescriptive.” The 1972 standards guided programs until the ALA Council adopted the *Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies 1992*, which became effective January 1, 1993.

Between the 1972 and 1992 standards, a grant from H.W. Wilson funded the ALISE to convene a conference of 17 organizations including ALA to discuss whether the accreditation process could be broadened to provide for governance and operation through a collaborative, mutually supported mechanism.<sup>[12]</sup> That same year, the U.S. Department of Education funded the COA to explore implementation of a collaborative accreditation structure. As a result of that exploration, the COA prepared a report *Accreditation: A Way Ahead*, released April 1986.

In 1999, members of the ALA, the ALISE, the American Association of Law Libraries, the Medical Library Association, and the Special Libraries Association convened as a steering committee for the first Congress on Professional Education (COPE I) to focus on “initial preparation for librarianship.” Their report included 30 recommendations.<sup>[13]</sup> Following those recommendations, COA revised its process policies and procedures, including a streamlined appeals process and a policy requiring that a program be placed on conditional accreditation status before accreditation could be withdrawn. Those revisions are published as *ALA Accreditation Process Policies and Procedures*, effective December 15, 2006. New editions followed in 2012 and 2015.

In 2002, a COA subcommittee reviewed the standards, surveyed constituents, and provided a report with recommendations. That report led to a draft of proposed changes that were released for comment on November 17, 2006. A revised version of the *Standards* was approved for adoption by the ALA Council on January 15, 2008. A 5-year COA standards review (2009–2014) resulted in a revised edition approved for adoption by the ALA Council on February 2, 2015.

## STANDARDS AND PROCESS

Revisions of the ALA standards over the years reflect the evolution of accreditation in general from quantitative to qualitative. The ALA standards emphasize improvement by stating that the intent of the standards is “to foster excellence through a program’s development of criteria

for evaluating effectiveness, developing and applying qualitative and quantitative measures of these criteria, analyzing data from measurements, and applying analysis to program improvement. The Standards stress innovation, and encourage programs to take an active role in and concern for future developments and growth in the field.” In each of the standards, emphasis is on a program demonstrating “how the results of evaluation are systematically used” for improvement and “plan for the future.” Programs must demonstrate use of “the results of their evaluations for broad-based, continuous program planning, development, and improvement.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The standards define the field as “concerned with recordable information and knowledge, and the services and technologies to facilitate their management and use. Library and information studies encompasses information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, selection, acquisition, organization and description, storage and retrieval, preservation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination, and management.”<sup>[4]</sup>

A 5-year review of the 2008 *Standards* conducted by the ALA COA in public discussion with stakeholders, virtually through webinar and website comment collection, and in face-to-face meetings, resulted in a revision adopted by the ALA Council on February 2, 2015, at the ALA Midwinter Meeting. The 2015 standards specify five areas for determining program quality: Standard I. Systematic Planning; Standard II. Curriculum; Standard III. Faculty; Standard IV. Students; and Standards V. Administration, Finances, and Resources.

Programs seeking initial or continued ALA accreditation status address how they are meeting the *Standards* by following the established *Accreditation Process Policies and Procedures*. A primary function of the OA is to administrate the review process. The process entails preparation of a self-study that is verified by an external review panel at least every 7 years as part of the comprehensive review process, an annual statistical report, and a biennial narrative report addressing changes since the last comprehensive review.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

Interest in accreditation as a quality assurance mechanism remains intense, especially with the ongoing development of online program delivery. Currently, 29 of the 59 institutions offering an ALA-accredited program are providing a 100% online program. Regional accreditors depend on specialized accreditors and vice versa. ALA accreditation requires programs to reside within regionally accredited institutions.

Most developed countries outside the United States rely on governmental entities such as ministries of education to assure educational quality. Visitors to the ALA and attendees at accreditation conferences from outside the United States express interest in the collegial peer-review

nongovernmental nature of accreditation as practiced in the United States. Visitors to the OA have expressed admiration of the clarity and brevity of the ALA *Standards* and the well-developed review process.

It is the self-regulatory nature of accreditation as practiced in the United States that appears to promise a greater potential for the kind of agility sought to meet demand for education on a global scale. Based on the U.S. Census Bureau Population Division International Database, the Center for Higher Education projects that global demand for higher education will continue to grow exponentially from 48 million learners in 1997 to 159 million by 2025. Programs are likely to proliferate in an effort to meet this demand, and with that, quality assurance will become all the more important.<sup>[14]</sup>

Master of library and information studies programs in the United States and Canada continue to come forward seeking ALA accreditation. In January 2014, an eighth Canadian program was granted initial accreditation. Yet another program domestically was initially accredited in 2015 to bring the total number to 64. Two programs in the United States are currently in Candidacy status under review for initial ALA accreditation.<sup>[15]</sup>

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