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School of Library and Information Science and American Library Association Committee for Accreditation

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By J. Norton, Director

Accreditation is frequently a topic of discussion in library schools. These discussions are usually among the entities involved and the public is unaware of the specific activities of accreditation.

At the Mississippi Library Association Annual Conference in October 2011, attendees at our focus group and at other encounters requested that we provide more information about the process and importance of accreditation by the American Library Association. It is a topic frequently discussed but sometimes the details are lost. In general, accreditations are designed to ensure that educational bodies conform to standards that assure the employer population that students are exposed to the appropriate tools and situations. As stated in the introduction to the *ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library & Information Studies* (American Library Association, Office for Accreditation, January 2008):

> Accreditation assures the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution or program (*a*) has clearly defined and educationally appropriate objectives expressed as student learning outcomes, (*b*) maintains conditions under which achievement of objectives can reasonably be expected, (*c*) is in fact accomplishing objectives substantially, and (*d*) can be expected to continue to do so. Accreditation serves as a mechanism for quality assessment and quality enhancement with quality defined as the effective utilization of resources to achieve appropriate educational objectives and student learning outcomes. (3)

The Southern Miss School of Library and Information Science is the only ALA accredited program in the state of Mississippi and one of only 62 such programs in North America. We have been continuously accredited since 1980. Accreditation covers the graduate degree programs, Master of Library and Information Science, and Master of Library and Information Science with Licensure. Our accreditation

is a national recognition by the professional body that reviews what we do and how we do it, to ensure that we are always striving for improvement. Accredited degrees are required in the majority of professional library positions.

It is a continuing commitment to serving Mississippi that drives Southern Miss SLIS to maintain standards that ensure our continued accreditation and promote the university's mission "to cultivate intellectual development and creativity through the generation, dissemination, application and preservation of knowledge" (The University of Southern Mississippi, Mission Statement, 2011). We serve the state, region and profession through pursuing the SLIS Mission "to prepare qualified individuals for professional roles in libraries and other information environments with appropriate knowledge and skills to serve the information needs of their communities" (School of Library and Information Science, 2011).

To maintain continuous ALA accreditation, Schools of Library Science are required to respond to the annual Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) statistical reports, which are shared with the ALA Committee on Accreditation, and reported to all of the ALA accredited programs. These statistics provide information about fall course enrollments, student demographics, student support, faculty, financial administration, and curriculum. In addition to this annual reporting requirement, every two years, or more often if requested by COA, schools must provide a report to the ALA COA about the status, activities, and program developments in response to the ALA Standards for Accreditation. The biennial and statistical reports are part of how SLIS keeps focused on ongoing and continuous accreditation. We also complete a WEAVE report for the university that documents our measures of student performance and our assessment processes. Our most recent WEAVE submission has been evaluated by the University Assessment Review committee as commendable, the highest level achievable.

Each ALA biennial report deals with the standards, but the seven year review, the Program Presentation, goes into more detail and reports on each of the accreditation standards. This is reviewed by an External Review Panel who conducts a site visit to examine first hand the evidence of compliance. The ALA COA is an elected body of ALA members who also reviews our presentation and the report that the External Review Panel submits. Our Program Presentation was submitted January 16, 2012 and the External Review Panel will be on campus February 26-28th.

Currently, we are in a normal seven year visit cycle after addressing some issues in the 2003 visit that were resolved by the March 2005 accreditation review. We are in a state of continuous self-review in comparison with the ALA COA 2008 Standards, and more recently we have made a comparison with the ALA Core Competencies (American Library Association, 2009). These competencies are used to define the basic knowledge that a "person graduating from an ALA-accredited master's program in library and information studies should know and, where appropriate, be able to employ." The broad categories addressed by the competencies are:
1. Foundations of the Profession
2. Information Resources
3. Organization of Recorded Knowledge and Information
4. Technological Knowledge and Skills
5. Reference and User Services
6. Research
7. Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning
8. Administration and Management
The detailed breakout of each category can be found at:
http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/sites/ala.org.educationcareers/files/content/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf. These competencies are general, not type of library specific. Each division has additional information specific to type of library or librarian (e.g., YALSA's Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth: Young Adults Deserve the Best at http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/yacompetencies2010).

Our self-study of course syllabi, assessments and student outcomes in 2010-2011 identified approximately 90 percent coverage of the ALA Core Competencies. We will ask an external panel of alums and employers to make the same comparison for us in 2012-2013 to validate our findings through a combination of surveys and real-time online townhall meetings. Materials to participate in these activities will be made available in late March with the online townhall meetings to become regularly scheduled events to meet and discuss the program activities, characteristics of graduates that employers desire, and to interact more effectively with our friends, alums, students and employers. In addition to these townhall meetings, SLIS is investigating how to provide topical, and timely, education to our alums and friends via annual webinars.

One of the issues of accreditation that has ever growing implications with the advance of educational technology is that of constituency contact, not just keeping up with our alums, but with all who may employ our graduates. While Mississippi and the southeastern region of the U.S. remain our primary focus of service, because of the online nature of our program we now provide the opportunity for students from many other venues to access our degree program without having to travel to Mississippi! Students came to us from all over the world in summers when we were face to face; now with the online program we have students taking classes from all over the country, and from around the world, all the time. By being attentive to the ALA Core Competencies, as representative of the entire ALA nation's perceptions of the appropriate preparation of library professionals, we are conforming to the interests of our constituencies. However, to ensure that we are indeed meeting the needs of our regional employers, as well as distant ones, and keeping current with the ongoing changes in the practice, we must engage more alums, employers and practitioners in our curriculum construction and offerings.

Southern Miss is accredited regionally by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) who prefer we not have instructors without terminal (PhD) degrees teaching graduate level classes. We stopped using practitioners to teach our introductory

level master's courses because of this SACS issue. With changes in the availability of technology, and we hope with the support of our constituencies, we will bring more practitioners into the classrooms as guest lecturers and commentators for case study analysis. This will be in place by fall 2012. One component of this will be LIS 500 Library Information Science, a new course that will be an introduction to our program for our students as well as the beginning of their exposure to the many areas of librarianship that are available. We invite practitioners from all areas of the field to participate via podcasts, audio lectures, and real-time interviews. We need your help to assemble a collection of case studies for students to learn about the realities of the profession. We want students to understand that this field is immensely challenging and ever evolving in response to changing technology, culture and educational environments. If you are interested in participating in these activities please email us at slis@usm.edu with the subject line LIS 500.

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Melanie J Norton joined the faculty of the School of Library and Information Science in August 1993. She was tenured in 1999 and promoted to associate professor in 2001. Dr. Norton was appointed director of the School of Library and Information Science in January 2003 when the School was moved as part of the University reorganization from the College of Liberal Arts into the College of Education and Psychology.