ALA COMMITTEE ON ACCREDITATION

In 2009 I was appointed to COA.

CHARGE: The Committee on Accreditation (COA) is responsible for the execution of the accreditation program of ALA. The committee also develops and formulates standards of education for library and information studies for the approval of Council.

HISTORY: Created by the ALA Council in June 1956 formerly the Board of Education for Librarians, which was established in 1924.

MEMBERSHIP: The COA consists of 12 members appointed by ALA president-elect. Of the 12 members, 10 are personal members of ALA appointed to represent educators and practitioners. Of these 10 members one must be Canadian. The remaining two COA members must be appointed from the public-at-large to represent the public interest.

TERMS OF APPOINTMENT: Personal members of ALA are elected for one four-year term and public-at-large-members for a two year tern, renewable once. The Chair of COA is appointed annually by the president-elect for a one –year term and may be reappointed once. When a vacancy occurs on the COA before the end of the members’ term, the ALA Executive Board appoints a replacement.

ALA Accreditation at a glance:

63 ALA-accredited MLIS programs

58 institutions with ALA-accredited MLIS programs

34 U.S. (including Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico) with ALA-accredited programs

5 Canadian provinces with ALA-accredited programs

19 ALA-accredited programs offering 100% online programs

0 Program with candidacy status

3 Programs with pre-candidacy status

19,978 students enrolled in ALA-accredited MLIS programs in fall 2010

7,672 Graduates of ALA-accredited MLIS programs during the 2009-2010 academic year.

ALA accreditation indicates that the program meets or exceeds the Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies, established by COA and adopted by ALA Council. The accreditation process involves rigorous, ongoing self-evaluation by the program and verification of evidence through an external review. COA evaluates each program for conformity to the Standards, which addresses the following:

Standard I Mission, Goals, and Objectives

Standard II Curriculum

Standard III Faculty

Standard IV Students

Standard V Financial Resources

Standard VI Physical Resources and Facilities

The ALA COA is a leading force in accreditation, having evaluated educational programs to prepare librarians since 1924. The Council for Higher Education (CHEA) recognizes ALA COA as the authority for assessing the quality of education offered by graduate programs in the field of library and information studies.

WHAT DOES THE COMMITTEE ON ACCREDITATION DO AT MEETINGS?

The Committee on Accreditation (COA) meets two to two-and-a-half days each quarter. The COA meeting schedule provides dates of upcoming meetings. Summer and winter meetings are held at ALA national conferences. The COA travels to ALA headquarters in Chicago for the spring and fall meetings. Accreditation decisions are usually made during the summer and winter meetings. Because of the confidential nature of accreditation (to ensure candid reporting), COA meetings are closed. Request to meet with the COA are accepted if received 30 days in advance of a scheduled meeting. One month before every meeting, the Office of Accreditation sends each COA member a package with meeting materials.

So, what actually happens during a typical COA meeting? After the Chair calls the meeting to order, the minutes for the prior meeting are approved, and the Director of the Office for Accreditation provides and update on the budget and other administrative matters. Members declare any conflicts of interest with the programs being discussed at the meeting. If a member has a conflict, s/he leaves the room during any discussion, meeting, or vote concerning that program.

Accreditation decisions are what most people associate with COA. These decisions follow a standardized process. First, COA members discuss areas in the Program Presentation and External Review Panel report in need of clarification or more information. Next, the COA meets with the program CEO and Chair of the External Review Panel to close the review process. During this meeting, the program has the opportunity to apprise the COA of developments since the site visit and to clarify areas noted in the Program Presentation or External Review Panel report. The COA asks questions based on their preparatory discussion.

Throughout the process, the focus is on the program’s compliance with the Standards for Accreditation. Ony after carefully considered, standard-by-standard deliberation does the committee take a vote. Accreditation decisions require a two-thirds affirmative vote to pass. Part of the process is the writing of a Decision Document, in letter form to the program. In addition to the accreditation decision and date of the next comprehensive review, the letter may note areas of concern to be addressed relative to the Standards and provides a schedule for future reports. The minimum start-to-finish time for one accreditation decision is about 2.5 hours. More complicated decisions take much longer.

The COA fall and spring meetings focus on strategic planning, review and revision of the Standards and the Accreditation Process, Policies, and Procedures (AP3) manual, and development of COA programs held at ALA conferences . At the spring meeting, the COA reviews and responds to reports from every accredited program as well as programs with pre-candidacy or candidacy status. Each program must submit a detailed annual statistical report. Accredited program submit narrative reports every other year that describe how they are continuing to meet the Standards and provide updates on changes. Programs with conditional, candidacy, or pre-candidacy status are required to submit progress reports annually.

At any meeting, COA may need to review and respond to special reports, meet with program representatives (by request of either COA or the program), and to consider applications from programs for pre-candidacy or candidacy. Other COA responsibilities include approval of External Review Panelists and Chairs for specific reviews and oversight of reviewer training.

COA meetings are long and intense, and members report that they spend 20 or more hours in preparation for each meeting. But the COA’s work to develop standards and execute the accreditation process means that students, employers, ALA members, and the public can be assured that ALA-accredited programs are continually striving to offer the highest quality education in library and information studies, continuous improvement of MLIS programs.

Joyce C. Wright

Member, ALA Committee on Accreditation

SOURCE: PRISM, The Office for Accreditation Newsletter