

# SPEC

SYSTEMS AND PROCEDURES EXCHANGE CENTER

## Flyer 229

### Evaluating Academic Library Directors

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#### INTRODUCTION

Performance evaluation is a widely acknowledged tool for monitoring and promoting effective leadership, an essential ingredient for success in any library organization. In 1997, ARL directors were surveyed as part of a larger study of director review processes that was inrequested by ARL's Leadership and Management Committee. The full report of that study, including a report of follow-up telephone interviews and a checklist for evaluating local review processes, is available as ARL Occasional Paper #21. The 1997 survey updates a 1980 survey of this topic contained in SPEC Kit #72, *Executive Review in ARL Libraries*.

#### SURVEY RESULTS

The survey was sent to all 121 ARL directors. Seventy-six directors (63%) responded. The survey asked about factual attributes of director review processes, including frequency of review cycles, participants, and outcomes, as well as about satisfaction with the processes.

**Frequency.** Sixty-four (84%) of the responding directors reported having some sort of formal performance review. Respondents were asked to choose the cycle that was most critical in their view if there was more than one cycle. Out of 70 responses to this question, 32 (46%) identified the five-year cycle as the most critical, while 24 (34%) identified the annual cycle. Together, these responses accounted for 81% of the total. Six directors (8%) reported never having been reviewed, and eight (11%) reported other frequencies (biennial, every four years, every seven years, and "irregularly"). Twenty-one directors (30%) reported having more than one cycle, typically an annual review and a five-year review.

**Lead Responsibility.** For 36 institutions (59%), the provost of the university was the review initiator. For nine (15%) it was the vice-president for academic affairs, and for five (8%) it was the vice-president for information systems. Other review initiators included the university president, vice-provost for personnel, a board, and the faculty senate. In most cases, the review initiator also conducted the review (43 respondents or 70%), but in fifteen cases (25%) this responsibility was given to a committee.

**Participants.** Twenty directors (32%) indicated that no one other than the review initiator—the person's direct supervisor—participated in the review, while 42 directors (68%) indicated a variety of participants in the review process (respondents were asked to note all categories that applied):

Librarians:	39 (93%)
Library support staff:	34 (81%)
Other deans	27 (64%)
Non-library faculty	25 (60%)
Student representatives	24 (57%)
Library committee	24 (57%)
Peers in the profession (outside the library)	17 (40%)
Faculty senate committee	12 (29%)
Alumni	4 (10%)

**Guidelines and Criteria.** Fifty-eight directors responded to a question about process guidelines. Twenty-four (41%) noted that guidelines were formally established and documented, typically in a faculty or administrative handbook. Eighteen (31%) indicated that the review initiator developed ad hoc process guidelines for the review. Sixteen (28%) responded that no specific guidelines for reviews existed. Fifty-four directors responded to a question about evaluative criteria used in the review process. Twenty (37%) reported that criteria were formally established and documented. Nineteen (35%) said that criteria were established ad hoc by the review initiator or by the director working with that person. Fifteen (28%) reported no specific criteria in use.

**Related Decisions.** Thirteen responding directors (21%) reported that a salary decision was related to the review. Forty-four (72%) said there was no related salary decision. Related decisions concerning contract renewal or reappointment, however, were much more common. Out of 54 directors responding, 28 (52%) indicated that such decisions were part of the process and 26 (48%) indicated that they were not.

**Satisfaction with the Process.** Forty-four directors responded to a series of seven items related to various aspects of the helpfulness of the review process. Most of the responses indicated that directors found the processes at least somewhat useful in helping to understand areas for growth and performance improvement and in helping them set goals for the library. A majority also found the present frequency of reviews satisfactory, though a sizable number of those reviewed only on five-year cycles were inclined to want more frequent feedback on their performances.

On several issues, directors were inclined to be less satisfied with the review processes. Many felt that reviews could

be significantly more useful in providing them with appropriate, thoughtful input; in helping them understand institutional goals and priorities; and in enabling them to convey key messages to their parent institutions. The least satisfactory aspect of reviews for respondents was that many processes did not indicate a sufficient appreciation of the special problems and issues related to the director's library.

#### CHANGES, IMPROVEMENTS

Though a few directors were happy with their review processes just as they were, several commented on improvements that could be made in four key areas: measures, context, participants, and feedback.

*Measures.* Several directors commented on the need for measurable criteria in their review processes, as well as clear goals that they would be evaluated against. In some cases, this was a plea for clearer institutional goals within which the library could not only evaluate the director's effectiveness but also its planning and budgeting. Overall, directors who commented wanted to be measured against realistic expectations—expectations that had been discussed and negotiated. For many, the quality of the discussions leading to those expectations was just as important as the expectations themselves. Directors therefore wanted sufficient time, especially with those to whom they reported directly, to develop effective expectations.

*Context.* Several contextual issues were presented in the comments. One common theme was that many processes were too generic—typically developed for all university deans—and not suitably applicable nor very useful for directors of libraries. Another theme was the confusion often found in the participants (confusion that appears to grow as the process becomes more inclusive), concerning who or what is being evaluated. Is the director's performance being reviewed? Or is it the library's performance? How closely are these two related? Do participants understand the fiscal and policy constraints the director is working within? Do they understand the goals and expectations for the performance? Do they have sufficient contextual information to make a reasoned judgement about what is attributable to the director's leadership and what may be unavoidable about the total context?

*Participants.* Comments on this aspect of the review process varied greatly according to the directors' experience of reviews in their institutions. Three respondents expressed interest in outside participation, either a visiting committee or a single peer reviewer. Several directors felt another dean with similar responsibilities might be an important addition to the process, especially someone who understood the challenges of administrative leadership; one felt that all participants should indicate the knowledge basis for their assessments of the director—the frequency and nature of contact. Several comments reflected on the less than useful—even counterproductive—

outcomes of anonymous participation in the review process, especially when poorly managed.

*Feedback.* A few directors commented on the quality and usefulness of the feedback received in the review process. The principal problem identified was feedback that is too general or vague, sometimes including lists of comments from participants without any indication of trends or areas for concern.

#### CONCLUSION

Formal evaluation of the directors of ARL Libraries is an established and growing fixture of campus human relations programs. In 1980, few directors had formal reviews and only about half of respondents were reviewed informally. Today, a sizable majority of directors (84%) have formal reviews, and a significant number have two review cycles, typically one and five-year cycles.

Like most people in the world of work, ARL directors value fair and effective performance evaluation processes that give them useful data about how they have been doing and what they might do to improve. Several process changes are suggested by the results of this survey. Formal director review processes should have formal written process guidelines and criteria; ideally, these should not be generic but should relate to the responsibilities of the library director. Evaluation should be conducted against clear goals and related performance expectations. Contributors to the evaluation should be aware of performance context, especially when there are special circumstances over which the director has had no control, and they should be educated about the roles and responsibilities of library directors as well as the problems and issues they face. Infrequent performance reviews should be supplemented by interim reviews, either formal or informal, so that the director can make course corrections if necessary.

*This Flyer and Kit were prepared by George J. Soete, ARL/OLMS Organizational Development Consultant, as part of a larger study of director review processes in ARL libraries.*

See also: *Performance Evaluation of Library Directors: A Study in Current Practice and a Checklist of Recommendations*, published as OLMS Occasional Paper #21.

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