

Adapting the Program Review for the Academic Library

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Purpose & Goals

Academic programs at Thompson Rivers University are evaluated every seven years through an intense, faculty-led program review process, which involves curriculum mapping, stakeholder surveys, a SOAR analysis, a collaborative self-study, and an external review. The TRU library had previously received external review reports in 2007 and 1998 but had never participated in the full program review process. However, in 2023-2024, the library took our first foray into the academic Program Review. It was considered something of an experiment, with acknowledgements by all involved that adaptations to the process would be needed. Unlike other academic programs that mainly support their own students, the library supports the entire university community. Our goals were the following:

1. To determine what adaptations would be needed to the academic program review process.
2. To holistically conceptualize and frame the library's services as an academic program and communicate this framing to relevant stakeholders
3. To determine if the program review process as it exists is valuable and worthwhile for the library and the university, in terms of quality assurance and continuous improvement.

Through our experience with academic program review, we found that not only did the process provide many opportunities for collegial discussion and collaboration, we were able to identify new ways to frame our services and to expand our own thinking. We also found ways to bridge our findings into new opportunities for connections with our communities. Though academic libraries do not often undertake this level of review to their programs and services, we were able to complete the process with minimal adaptations, and we emerged with many new ideas and information.

Literature Review

Academic programs are often reviewed on five- or seven- year cycles at Canadian postsecondary institutions.¹ At Thompson Rivers University, degree programs are required to be evaluated via a self-study conducted by program faculty members and an assessment conducted by external reviewers. These program reviews provide more reliable data than personal opinions.²

Program reviews can determine strengths and weaknesses of a program, locate areas of quality improvement, determine alignment with the institutional goals, and discover if the “institution has deployed appropriate human, financial, and material resources to the program”.³ Because of the amount of work that goes into a thorough program review, conducting a program review can take a great deal of time and effort for the faculty members involved.⁴

Notably, much literature regarding program reviews refers mostly to academic degree programs,⁵ with no articles on program review found which reference libraries or library departments conducting a formalized program review. Bowker discusses how libraries should be involved in the program reviews of other academic departments; however, this article does not discuss review of library programs.⁶ Similarly, Jayachandran et al. state that library staff are an “integral part of the [program review] process”⁷ but not the library’s own evaluation processes. Similarly, curriculum mapping, which is an integral part of program review,⁸ often focuses on mapping information literacy competencies to the academic programs of other departments,⁹ rather than to our own learning outcomes.

Atkinson discusses evaluation processes undergone by a library that are similar to program review.¹⁰ For example, they note using survey data to identify trends and developing “library plans that are closely aligned to university strategies”.¹¹ They also reference a study in which library staff contributed to a “self-assessment report” of the library in a different review process.¹² However, they do not discuss these processes in the same context as degree programs.

Fitting the library department program review into existing program review structures has its own challenges. Neufeldt points out that a generic program review policy and template may not work for every program.¹³ This is especially true when the department in question does not have many if any of the same structures as a degree program.

Design & Methodology

Thompson Rivers University has a robust procedure for their faculty-driven Program Review process that is designed to take place every seven years. The model uses a cohort-based approach that allows review teams to participate in learning communities with others throughout the 18-month process.¹⁴ In partnership with the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching and the Office of Quality Assurance,

the Library Program Review Team proceeded with the existing process, discussing necessary adaptations as they arose.

The standard academic program review process includes the following modules:

1. Creating or revising Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs): This review process was the first time that the library had conceived of itself as an academic program with our own learning outcomes. Because of the library's position as a pan-institutional organization, we needed to conceptualize our learners as more than just students and direct our educational objectives towards the entirety of the TRU community.
2. Curriculum mapping: The next step in the regular program review process is to map PLOs to courses in the program. Since the library does not have courses, we first needed to map out our distinct work areas and then decide how they could or should be meeting the new PLOs.
3. SOAR analysis: A SOAR analysis looks at Program strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results from the point of view of the participating members. There were no library-specific adaptations needed in this module, which was facilitated by a faculty member from the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching.
4. Surveys: Because the library does not have its own students or alumni, we decided that rather than send out our own surveys, it would be more productive to use the Program Review cohort model to our advantage. We added library-related questions to other cohorts' surveys with the goal that every program review cycle, we would have a complete response set. Librarians collaboratively developed the questions that we most wanted to ask students, faculty, and alumni.
5. Collaborative self-study: Much of the original self-study template was based on enrolment rates and student figures, so we needed to adapt to identify and discuss the data that would be most relevant to our unique program.
6. External reviewer visit: Like other academic programs, the Library Program Review team identified a list of potential reviewers for the program. Three of these reviewers attended a site visit in April 2024 to make recommendations.

Results

Program Learning Outcomes

Like many departments undergoing program review, we found ourselves in the position of developing program learning outcomes (PLOs) for the first time. These

learning outcomes needed to account not just for our explicit teaching activities, but for all library resources and services, such as collections, inter-library loan, and research data management services. We decided to base our PLOs on the six frames identified in the [ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#), which is already the basis for much of our teaching and reference services. The PLOs we settled on are the following:

1. Learners will be able to analyze the politics of information and information infrastructure to critically evaluate claims of authority.
2. Learners will be able to engage with interconnected knowledge communities and systems, recognizing the differing roles and responsibilities in various stages of the information cycle.
3. Learners will articulate how TRU Library values (e.g., accessibility, decolonization, sustainability, ethic of care) are enacted through their encounters with Library resources, systems, services, spaces.
4. Learners will be able to acknowledge the contextual value of information as it pertains to resource impact, cost, ownership, and intellectual effort.
5. Learners will be able to apply iterative and exploratory methods to formulate increasingly nuanced questions, critically analyze complex subjects, and plan towards achieving a novel research or creative outcome.
6. Learners will be able to participate in specific knowledge communities by engaging in contextually appropriate practices of acknowledgement, evaluation, sharing, and discourse.
7. Learners will be able to navigate deliberately chosen information systems, platforms, repositories, databases, tools, services, and spaces in the pursuit of suitable information.
8. Learners will be able to identify information needs and create strategies to fulfil those needs.

Each of the six frames from the ACRL framework maps onto at least one of the above learning outcomes.

Curriculum Mapping

After identifying the PLOs, we mapped these outcomes to our work areas to show how the various ways our program delivers learning. Some of these areas were immediately evident, such as the library information literacy program, which has always had explicit learning outcomes. However, we had never before defined learning outcomes for other library work areas. As a concrete example, “Learners will be able to engage with interconnected knowledge communities and systems...” is

easily one of the more prominent goals of the TRU library instruction program. However, when we viewed this goal from the lens of curriculum mapping, we were able to realize that this is also a key goal of our acquisitions policy, our scholarly communications services, and the Makerspace, to give just a few examples.

However, completing the curriculum map left a lot of us feeling like there was something missing. It showed us a piece of our work, and certainly highlighted the outcomes for the TRU learning community, but did not fully succeed in describing the work of the department in maintaining key library functions. My own (and many others') research into librarian labour has previously discussed the problem that established metrics of library value often traffic in superficial numbers, while much of the essential labour remains invisible. For many, both in libraries and in education generally, the amount of invisible labour increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when much of education moved from happening directly in the classroom to creating and maintaining asynchronous learning objects while continuing to support students synchronously.¹⁵ Though classroom teaching has largely returned to in-person, many of the videos and tutorials, as well as support for virtual research consultations, has remained, without new staff or funds to help maintain these new services.

One of the key differences between librarians and other faculty members is that librarians support and educate students, but we also support a massive amount of educational infrastructure that is essential to the programs and services we provide. This infrastructure is maintained by our faculty, because the choices we make in configuration and support are tied to the learning outcomes we want our students to achieve; they are also tied to our philosophy of service, informed by values, such as promoting access and operating with an ethic of care for our community. Technology alone cannot support learning outcomes, because technology is a tool whose ends are determined by those in control.

In response to this identified gap in curriculum mapping, we developed an infrastructure mapping tool, to show that aspect of our work and to demonstrate the ubiquity of the technological infrastructure we provide. The infrastructure mapping crosswalk mapped library systems and software to program work areas. As an example, our calendar software is used in Reference Services, Instruction, Study Space booking, Outreach, and for displaying our hours on our website. Without a librarian working with technicians, vendors, and IT services to configure and maintain the software, we would not be able to achieve the same learning outcomes from those work areas. Additionally, each of our work areas is supported by not one but many systems and software.

SOAR Analysis

Unlike some of the other Program Review modules, the SOAR Analysis did not require any adaptation to work for the library. However, we were able to collectively

identify themes in each of these categories that we had not been able to express before.

Themes emerging from the SOAR analysis included the following:

- **Strengths:** Our uniqueness, in the services and support we provide, and with that, our centrality on campus and our ability to share and collaborate with others on campus.
- **Opportunities:** Emerging technologies, new programs, and the increasing research profile of the university have all increased demand for library services. However, funding constraints have limited our ability to innovate.
- **Aspirations:** We would like to expand the support we provide in various ways but also to increase our role in institutional governance and in advocacy for library services and for our professional values.
- **Results:** Indicators of our success in achieving our aspirations would include a positive library brand, effective information literacy, increased resources and capacity and clear and effective governance structures.

Surveys

Library survey questions were inserted into the surveys of other programs in the cohort. However, since Program Review is on a seven-year cycle, we will continue to collect these responses from future cohorts until we have a full set. It would be a mistake to form any conclusions based on the few responses we have received so far.

External Reviewer Visits

Three external reviewers visited the TRU library in April 2024 to speak to various stakeholder groups and to look at the library facilities and context. We found that the External Reviewers' perspectives validated many of the themes emerging from other Program Review modules. Recommendations received from the External Review Report included:

- Hiring more librarians and library technicians;
- Increased collections budget;
- Increased institutional governance representation, including Senate Representation for librarians and a mechanism for Library Council to report to the University Senate;
- Increased alignment and communication with other programs.

While some of these outcomes are outside of our control as a department, it was both informative and validating to see an external perspective on our situation.

The external reviewers also gave commendations to aspects of the program that were working well. These included:

- Information literacy program structure;
- Service provision;
- Library role in student achievement;
- Faculty status of librarians;
- Engagement with evolving scholarly ecosystem.

The next step is for the TRU Library Program Review team to write an Action Plan detailing our response to the various things we have learned about our program, its priorities, and its growth.

Implications & Value

Overall, we would encourage more academic libraries to engage in these methods for the goals of identifying values and priorities, and pursuing continuous improvement. As the lack of literature on the topic suggests, there are not currently many libraries regularly undertaking program review for their own betterment outside the context of other degree programs. External review on its own may not properly emphasise the experiences of the librarians involved, nor does it provide the associated benefits of collegial discussion and collaboration.

Similarly, we are not aware of many other libraries who have established PLOs for their department. We found it to be a worthwhile exercise that helps align work priorities to educational value. It can also help educate other departments about the educational goals of the library program. For us, the PLOs established through Program Review were immediately useful in launching a new information literacy program in partnership with the English Department.

Another opportunity for community collaboration came when deciding on a process for conducting the program review surveys. Adding tailored questions about the library can be far more valuable than attempting to survey the entire community yourself. Though it will take a full program review cycle to have complete survey data, the partnerships will ensure that we have feedback from a full range of university programs. We will also have the potential to target our services to specific programs based on the feedback.

Finally, the reflective component of coming together to have these conversations helped unite our vision of what the library is and does. There were many disagreements, but we were able to come to a hard-won consensus in most areas of our program review work. When I am called upon to explain the difference between librarians and other faculty members, I generally sum it up as such: librarians support and educate students, but we also support a massive amount of educational infrastructure that is essential to the programs and services we provide. This infrastructure is maintained by our faculty because the choices we make in configuration and support are tied to the learning outcomes we want our students to achieve; they are also tied to our philosophy of service, informed by values, such as promoting access and operating with an ethic of care for our community. Technology alone cannot support learning outcomes, because technology is a tool whose ends are determined by those in control. Having this holistic vision of the library can be extremely helpful in understanding and communicating what we are and what we do.

Conclusions

We were pleasantly surprised at how few adaptations were needed to make the academic program review work for the library. Furthermore, the adaptations that we had to make were inventive and generally helped reveal aspects of assessing our work that we have struggled with identifying.

The process so far has been highly valuable. It has been a forum for many difficult but productive conversations as a department about determining our values, priorities, and directions. Our newly established PLOs have already been well-used to align and direct our work. The self-study was a rare opportunity to reflect deeply on many aspects of our program as a whole. While we focused in this round on adapting the existing review elements, we may have missed opportunities to explore if there are any additional elements specific to the library that we would want to add in future program review years. We would also acknowledge that TRU is a mid-size program with only 14 faculty librarians at the time of the review. The depth of collegial conversation we were able to take part in would certainly be more difficult for larger libraries.

Having our services framed and communicated as an academic program essential to the academic mission of the university is often something libraries struggle with, when administrations over-focus on resources, to the exclusion of library services and other work to steward these resources. Developing our curriculum map and PLOs was a succinct way to summarize and communicate the educational value of our services.

¹ Alana Hoare, Catharine Dishke Hondzel, Shannon Wagner, and Shelley Church, “A Course-based Approach to Conducting Program Review,” *Discover Education* 3, no 1 (2024).

² D Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) quoted in John Jayachandran, Colin Neufeldt, Elizabeth Smythe, and Oliver Franke, “Practical Measures for Institutional Program Reviews: A Case Study of a Small Post-secondary Institution,” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education/La Revue Canadienne d’enseignement Supérieur* 49, no 2 (2019): Article 2.

³ Colin Neufeldt, Elizabeth Smythe, John Jayachandran, and Oliver Franke, “Cyclical Program Reviews at Smaller Post-secondary Institutions: Can the Time and Effort be Justified?” *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 14, no 2 (2023): 2.

⁴ Neufeldt, Smythe, Jayachandran, and Franke, “Cyclical Program Reviews.”

⁵ John Jayachandran, Colin Neufeldt, Elizabeth Smythe, and Oliver Franke, “Practical Measures for Institutional Program Reviews: A Case Study of a Small Post-secondary Institution,” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education/La Revue Canadienne d’enseignement Supérieur* 49, no 2 (2019): Article 2

⁶ Lynne Bowker, “Towards a More Meaningful Involvement of Librarians in Academic Program Reviews,” *Quality Assurance in Education: An International Perspective* 26, no 1 (2018): 131–148.

⁷ Jayachandran, Neufeldt, Smythe, and Franke, “Practical Measures for Institutional Program Reviews,” 62.

⁸ Jayachandran, Neufeldt, Smythe, and Franke, “Practical Measures for Institutional Program Reviews.”

⁹ Heidi Buchanan, Katy Kavanagh Webb, Amy Harris Houk, and Catherine Tingelstad, “Curriculum Mapping in Academic Libraries,” *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 21, no 1 (2015): 94–111.

¹⁰ Jeremy Atkinson, “Academic Libraries and Quality: An Analysis and Evaluation Framework,” *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 23, no 4 (2017): 421–441.

¹¹ Atkinson, “Academic Libraries and Quality,” 427.

¹² H Fallon, and J Purcell, "Self and Peer Assessment at Maynooth University Library," (2016) quoted in Atkinson, "Academic Libraries and Quality," 433.

¹³ Neufeldt, Smythe, Jayachandran, and Franke, "Cyclical Program Reviews."

¹⁴ Alanna Hoare, Catharine Dishke Hondzel, and Shannon Wagner, "Program Review Handbook: A Course-based Approach to Conducting Program Review." (2022) <https://programreviewhandbook.pressbooks.tru.ca/>

¹⁵ Amy McLay Paterson, and Nicole Eva, "'Always at Work': Canadian Academic Librarian Work during COVID-19," *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 17, no 2 (2022).