The Accreditation Process

"How'm I doing?" The folksy words of Ed Koch, Mayor of New York City, capture the essence of the evaluation procedure of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools which was carried out in the Ramaz Upper School (Grades 7-12) during the academic year 1982-83. In large academic organizations, there are usually procedures for evaluation of facilities, faculty and services. In the Yeshiva high school arena, however, evaluation has generally been haphazard when attempted from within, and even resented. The "reputation" of a Yeshiva is generally based upon its religious position and the competence and/or charismatic qualities of its principal.

Twenty years ago, Ramaz, a modern Orthodox day school committed to quality education in both religious and general studies, and to the integration of both to the extent possible, elected to undergo the rigorous procedure of evaluation by the Commission on Secondary Schools of the Middle States Association. According to the Commission's bulletin, "voluntary accreditation has been recognized through the years as the catalyst that helped colleges and secondary schools maintain at least minimum levels of quality in their performance."

Membership in the Association, first established for colleges, was extended to include secondary schools in 1920, and is attained as a result of accreditation. Considered a significant achievement, accreditation "certifies that a school has met prescribed qualitative standards in terms of its own stated philosophy."

Needless to say, the uniqueness of a Yeshiva may raise the question of how relevant or productive an evaluation can be when the Association's experience is almost exclusively with public and non-denominational private schools. Utilizing elaborate evaluative criteria in order to assess the quality of a school, the Association's representatives focus on its every aspect—including such topics as school and community, philosophy and objectives, curriculum, school facilities, LEARNING MEDIA SERVICES (a.k.a. Library . . . ), student activities program, school staff, and administration.

"In order to be accredited ... a secondary school must convince the commission that it has met approved standards." Since there are no standards for dual curricula, it is perfectly acceptable to the Commission for the statements in the Evaluative Criteria reports to be adapted for the individual school in terms of its own educational goals. Obviously, this is the only way the procedure could be applicable to a Yeshiva. Each institution is accredited on its own merits, and not in comparison with other institutions. "Inherent possibilities" in a school are the concern of the accreditation process. This phrase inspired the faculty and administration of Ramaz to study, appraise, criticize, and contemplate the goals of the school, and how and whether they are being met. These questions were addressed in a demanding series of meetings and conferences held in preparation for the on-site visit of the representatives of the Association. At the very beginning of the school year, planning meetings were held in which faculty, administration members and parent representatives were assigned to various committees. These, in turn, scheduled a minimum of six hour-long meetings to examine each of the criteria in detail. The meetings resulted in the assignment of rating values ranging from poor to excellent, and including the possibilities of "Not Applicable" and "Missing but Needed."

While elaboration of the criteria of all topics could no doubt be instructive, the discussion here will be limited to the evaluation of the LEARNING MEDIA SERVICES (a.k.a. Library . . . ) and the administrative method set up to prepare the reports in an unbiased manner as possible.

The Library Evaluation Process

The library committee consisted of the Librarian, the Associate Librarian, and teachers of English and History, Bible and Computer. Thus the disciplines of the Humanities, Social Studies, Sciences, and Judaic Studies were all represented. (The librarian also served on two other committees.) Each committee member was given a 15 page booklet which included a statement of the Guiding Principles, and seven sections of Evaluative Criteria. An outline of the criteria follows:

I. Organization and Management
   A. Financial Provisions
   B. Selection of Materials and Equipment for Acquisition
   C. Classifying, Cataloging and Processing of Materials and Equipment
   D. Accessibility of Educational Media
   E. Maintenance of Collection

II. Facilities
   A. Environment
   B. Furnishings
   C. Equipment

III. Resources
   IV. Media Personnel
   V. Media Program

VI. Special Characteristics of the Learning Media Services

VII. General Evaluation

There was a checklist of very specific statements for each broad area, followed by a series of questions which required a choice of ratings. Narrative comments were encouraged on the checklist and evaluation form. Questions designed to elicit supplementary data were also included.
Under "Selection of Materials," for example, we were asked to respond to questions on whether a written Materials Selection Policy had been developed with input from administrators, faculty, students, community members and the board. Had it been approved by appropriate authorities? We were also asked whether appropriate subject materials are considered for acquisition regardless of form. Were specific criteria applied to the selection of all materials? Questions on factors considered in the selection of media focused on: the educational goals of the curriculum, content of the curriculum, learning styles, personal interests, instructional methods, review of existing resources, and materials that contribute and support efforts toward multi-cultural, multiracial education.

Under the rubric "Supplementary Data," the committee was asked to describe the process for selection of materials and equipment, to list the criteria employed in evaluation, to list and describe the evaluative tools, to describe the co-operative activities engaged in by the school and community agencies, and to attach a copy of the Materials Selection Policy.

Evaluation questions concentrated on the adequacy and effectiveness of these policies and procedures.

The above are sample questions from only one of the sub-sections of the outline on which the committee worked. There was a certain repetitiveness to the questions, but somehow this assured that no question would be glossed over; that each question would be discussed, considered, and evaluated conscientiously and deliberately. The library personnel were particularly gratified by the opportunity to meet with other faculty for such a concentrated effort. The self-examination required of the staff, which consisted of a head librarian, an associate librarian, and a clerk, was tedious and time-consuming. Inventories were described and categorized, utilization of resources analyzed, circulation and budget figures meticulously presented—all in preparation for the final report.

The Accreditation Visit

The on-site visit which brought nineteen people to our school for four days of intense scrutiny and interviews proved an interesting experience. Evaluators of Judaic Studies were recruited by the Association from schools in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York. Evaluators of secular studies were professionals from private and public institutions, some with administrative experience and others with classroom experience only. The library evaluators were, for better or for worse, not librarians, but supervisors responsible for the library in their schools. The Committee member who was charged with evaluating the Judaic collection had no library experience, and, while familiar with much of the Religious Studies collection, had little expertise when it came to Hebrew Literature. Furthermore, since he was from a school with a much smaller—and more recently established—library, he was perhaps overimpressed with the library’s Judaic collection.

After several unscheduled visits during which the library was observed in operation, the librarian met with two members of the Committee to discuss the library report. Some elucidation of responses was sought by the Committee but almost no point was contested.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we feel that self-evaluation is a rigorous discipline with its own rewards. While it was gratifying to receive the commendations, we could not help but feel that the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is not an agency that can adequately evaluate our dual curriculum—or the library collection supporting it. It remains for a Jewish educational agency to prepare guidelines for the evaluation of Jewish Studies programs and to establish a network of qualified Jewish educators who can be called upon to participate in the accreditation of secondary Jewish day schools and their unique libraries.

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