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# Exploring Community College Faculty Involvement In Assessment of Student Learning

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## Exploring Community College Faculty Involvement in Assessment of Student Learning

Exploring Community College Faculty Involvement in Assessment of Student Learning

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

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## **Abstract**

This narrative research study was conducted to explore the experiences of full-time community college faculty members involved in assessment of student learning beyond the course level. The participants in this study were employed at public two-year institutions of higher education regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission that had been recognized for their work in assessment. All participants in the study were involved in program or institutional level assessment during the time of the study. The central research question this study addressed was: What factors influenced community college faculty members to become involved with assessment of student learning beyond the course level and what are their recommendations for increasing faculty participation in institutional or program level assessment? To answer the research question the researcher conducted one-hour, semi-structured interviews with nine participants working at three different institutions. All nine participants were asked the same 14 open-ended interview questions that were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Prior published research documented the need for more community college faculty involvement with assessment at the program and institutional levels; however, there was little research based on faculty experiences with assessment at these levels. This study adds to the body of literature about community college faculty participation with assessment by sharing the perspectives of faculty members who had participated with either program or institutional assessment on their campus. The shared experiences of the participants in this study revealed that faculty commitment to assessment for the purpose of improving programs or the institution

was largely influenced by the actions of the leaders at their institutions. This study also provides recommendations to institutional leaders, policy makers, and other faculty who want to increase faculty involvement with assessment beyond the course level.

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## **Dedication**

This manuscript is dedicated to my husband, Tommie, and to my grandmother, Olive  
Via.



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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Various stakeholders including federal and state lawmakers, accreditors, parents, and taxpayers are demanding that higher education institutions be more accountable and transparent about student success (Nunley et al., 2011). Rising costs, coupled with low graduation rates and the inability of graduates to find full employment, have created a growing interest in calculating return on investment in higher education (Alexander, 2000; Eaton, 2010; Kanter, 2011; Wellman, 2008). Furthermore, public policy in the U.S. promotes mass access to higher education by providing substantial funding directly to students and higher education institutions and intensifies the demand for accountability (Alexander, 2000; Bok, 2006; Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004). These increased expectations have resulted in increased pressure for higher education institutions to demonstrate student success through the assessment of learning outcomes (Nunley et al., 2011). Responding to these external demands for accountability is essential for two-year institutions and presents challenges distinct to the community college environment.

Community colleges educate about half of the nation's college students (Nunley et al., 2011) and 60% of community college students receive some type of financial aid (Community College Times, 2013). Further, state allocations constitute significant portions of community college operating and capital budgets. Consequently, community colleges are under significant pressure to meet the increased external demands for more accountability. Unfortunately, these strong external pressures for accountability can cause a shift from assessment for the purpose of improving student learning to assessment for the purpose of meeting external demands (Alexander, 2000; Eaton, 2010; Kanter, 2011; Wellman 2008). As a consequence, faculty

members often view assessment strictly as a concern of management (Hutchings, 2010). Research shows that if assessment is perceived by faculty to be focused strictly on accountability rather than improvement, faculty are less likely to become involved (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). However, accrediting bodies are clear that the purpose of assessment should be to demonstrate how institutions are improving teaching and learning (Middaugh, 2009). It is difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate how assessment is being used to improve teaching and learning without substantial faculty involvement in the process.

Since accreditation agencies require all institutions to document effective assessment of student learning in order to comply with new standards, institutions that lack a systematic approach to design, implementation, and documentation of assessment of student learning outcomes are at risk of losing both funding and accreditation (Alexander, 2000; Stivers & Phillips, 2009). Developing and implementing effective, strategic assessment processes that demonstrate support for teaching and learning, meet wide-ranging demands for accountability, and involve faculty are particularly difficult tasks for community colleges given their multiple missions, limited funding, and the unique nature of community college faculty (Nunley, Bers & Manning, 2011).

The missions of community colleges are different from four-year institutions in that they serve students who have a wide range of academic skills levels from various educational backgrounds with dissimilar educational goals (Dowd, 2007; Nunley et al., 2011). Community colleges not only provide education to students for transfer to four- year institutions but also provide workforce development training, non-credit courses, and community enrichment programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). Multiple missions require multiple approaches to student learning that results in more time required for assessment (Nunley

et al., 2011). This is a significant hurdle for community colleges given that faculty at two-year institutions typically carry higher teaching loads than faculty at four-year colleges leaving them less time to train or participate in assessment (Nunley et al., 2011).

The funding for assessment is also a challenge for community colleges because they receive significantly less support per full-time equivalent than four-year colleges, research universities, or K-12 schools. The cost of standardized instruments for assessment is substantial as well as the cost of faculty stipends for participation and training in assessment (Nunley et al., 2011). Community college faculty members (like anyone else) do not do things they do not know how to do or have the time to do. The cost associated with the proper training of faculty in assessment design and implementation is substantial and many community colleges do not have the resources to support this professional development activity.

Finally, the unique nature of community college faculty makes designing and implementing assessment plans more challenging at two-year institutions. When hired, few community college faculty members are trained in assessment and training in assessment has not frequently been a key professional development activity for faculty at community colleges (Hutchings, 2010). Furthermore, 70% of faculty members at community colleges are adjunct faculty whose pay and availability are usually limited to teaching and meeting with (Nunley et al., 2011). Many part-time faculty members hold full-time jobs outside of the institution or teach part-time at multiple institutions and part-time faculty members are rarely provided with professional development opportunities by their institutions. Additionally, part-time faculty members often teach in the evenings where they have fewer interactions with other faculty members and that limits their opportunities for conversations about student learning and assessment (Nunley et al., 2011).

## **Statement of Problem**

Even though faculty members are frequently interested in and involved with assessment at the course level (Walvoord, 2010), community college academic administrators have expressed concern over faculty reluctance to be involved with assessment at the program or institutional level (Andrade, 2011). In a recent national survey conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) sent to 544 chief academic officers at two-year institutions, “more faculty engagement” was listed as the number one priority in furthering the institutional assessment processes at their institutions (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009, p.9). A second national survey conducted by the National Community College Council for Research and Planning (NCCCRP) completed by 101 researchers from 30 community colleges located in all six accrediting regions, found that only 29% of institutional researchers at two-year institutions agreed that assessment of student learning was a faculty driven process at their college. This survey also found that, overall, only 63% of full-time faculty and 14% of part-time faculty were involved with assessment of student learning outcomes (Nunley et al., 2011).

Numerous authors have stated that involving faculty in the design, implementation, and review of assessment plans is vital to the success of assessment initiatives (Andrade, 2011; Middaugh, 2010; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Suskie, 2004; Volkwein, 2009; Walvoord, 2010). Other writers emphasize that successful assessment plans must include meaningful faculty involvement, not just compliance with accreditation or institutional mandates (Hutchings, 2010; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Serban, 2004; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007; Stivers & Phillips, 2009; Walvoord, 2010). In short, faculty involvement is critical to successful implementation of assessment, requires a great deal of collaboration between faculty and administrators, and works best when the purpose and goals of assessment focus on improving student learning.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore what factors influenced community college faculty members to become involved with the assessment of student learning beyond the course level and to determine their recommendations for encouraging more faculty participation with institutional or program level initiatives. Sharing the stories and advice of community college faculty who have participated in successful campus-wide assessment programs will help other community colleges determine strategies they can use for recruiting and involving more faculty members in institutional and program level assessment.

## **Research Questions**

The central research question that guided this study was:

What factors influenced community college faculty members to become involved with assessment of student learning beyond the course level and what are their recommendations for increasing faculty participation in institutional or program level assessment?

Sub-questions related to this question are:

- a. Why did the participants become involved in the assessment of student learning?  
(Personal strengths, skills, and abilities, or specific people who influenced their decision).
- b. Were there any institutional programs or significant events that contributed to the participants' decision to participate in institutional or program level assessment?
- c. What do the participants say are the reasons why their colleagues are not involved with assessment?
- d. What factors do the participants see as critical to the successful implementation of student learning assessment initiatives?



- e. What do participants suggest that institutional leaders should do to increase faculty involvement in assessment?
- f. What would the participants like administrators, policy-makers, and other faculty to know about their experiences with assessment?

### **Significance of the Study**

Accreditation agencies are requiring all institutions to document effective assessment of student learning in order to maintain both regional and specialized accreditation (Stivers & Phillips, 2009). Additionally, assessment of student learning must encompass more than course level assessment and cannot be the exclusive concern of administrators (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Stivers & Phillips, 2009). Because “faculty are closest to students and have the most comprehensive knowledge about teaching and student learning” (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003, p.173), securing the trust and involvement of faculty in institutional and program level planning and decision-making are critical to successfully demonstrating effectiveness through the assessment of student learning outcomes (Andrade, 2010; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007).

In July 2013, five national higher education associations including the American Association of Community Colleges and all of the regional accrediting commissions endorsed a joint statement regarding effective assessment of student achievement (Higher Learning Commission a division of North Central Accreditation, 2013). The statement specifically requires all institutions to provide evidence of student learning that involves an evaluation of student academic performance (Higher Learning Commission a division of North Central Accreditation, 2013). The statement emphasizes that measures work best when they are “integrated into the teaching and administration of colleges and universities” (Higher Learning Commission a division of North Central Accreditation, 2013 p.1). Their joint statement makes

quite clear their expectation that faculty will be meaningfully involved in the assessment processes in their institutions and reinforces the standards held by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation that require a “strong faculty leadership role” as part of the criteria for defining campuses with exemplary assessment programs (Eaton, 2008, p. 23).

Even though community colleges have been specifically identified as lacking needed campus faculty participation in assessment initiatives (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Nunley et al., 2011; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007), there have been relatively few studies conducted that explored community college faculty perspectives about assessment beyond the course level. Further research about successful practices that obtain faculty involvement in assessment at community colleges will provide insights that might assist other institutions in their efforts to elicit more faculty participation. This study, exploring the perspectives of community college faculty involved in program or institutional assessment, can provide insight into the critical factors, potential barriers, and possible strategies faculty perceive relevant to the design and implementation of successful assessment plans.

### **Definition of Terms**

A number of terms associated with assessment of student learning were used throughout this study. They are explained and defined as follows:

1. Assessment The formal definition for assessment used to guide this study is defined by Palomba and Banta (2010, p.4) as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development.”
2. Course level assessment For the purposes of this study, course level assessment refers to assessment that takes place in a single classroom or course. The instructors

- of each course would be actively involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment tools used for the purpose of improving student learning in their course.
3. Program level assessment In this study, program level assessment encompasses assessment efforts that are designed to examine student learning across multiple courses to determine overall student learning taking place within a particular program.
  4. Institutional level assessment Institutional level assessment refers to assessment efforts that are designed to examine student learning across multiple disciplines not housed in one program or department. For the purpose of this study institutional level assessment of community colleges refers to the assessment of the general education curriculum that spans multiple disciplines and departments.
  5. Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) AQIP is one of three pathways for accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission. AQIP is founded on the principles of continuous quality improvement and is the foundation for affirming or reaffirming an institution's accredited status with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC, 2013).
  6. Higher Learning Commission (HLC) HCL is the commissioned member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools with legal responsibility for granting accreditation to post-secondary educational institutions in the North Central Region (HLC, 2013).
  7. North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) The NCA is one of six regional accrediting bodies recognized by the Department of Education as reliable

authorities concerning the quality of education offered by higher education institutions (Department of Education, 2013). The association has member colleges and schools from nineteen states and has given the HLC legal authority to conduct accrediting activities for post-secondary degree-granting higher education institutions (NCA, 2013).

### **Organization of the Study**

The following chapter reviews the literature that influenced this study. The literature review documents the importance of a strong faculty role in assessment. The review also reveals that existing research on community college faculty involvement with assessment is limited and community college academic administrators are critical of the level of faculty involvement with program or institutional level assessment. The literature review is divided into three sections that will provide an overview of assessment and accreditation, existing research on community college faculty involvement with assessment, and current recommendations for increasing faculty participation with assessment.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods utilized for the study including the rationale for purposive sampling of sites and participants, the data collection and data analysis techniques, and the steps taken to ensure the data collected and reported is trustworthy.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the nine participants involved in the study and presents their responses to each of the 14 open-ended interview questions. The chapter begins with a summary of the study's participant demographics, then proceeds with individual descriptions of each study participant and closes with detailed responses to the interview questions that were analyzed and summarized by the researcher.

Chapter 5 examines the data presented in Chapter 4 in light of the literature reviewed for this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the study and then proceeds to a presentation of the findings for each research sub question along with conclusions showing how the findings were similar to, or different from, previous research. The chapter concludes with limitations to the study, recommendations for improved practice, and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

This chapter provides an overview of the literature related to community college faculty involvement in assessment of student learning. The review is divided into three parts; section one provides an overview of accreditation and assessment of student learning; section two explores the gaps in existing research about community college faculty involvement with institutional and program level assessment; and section three examines existing literature recommendations for increasing faculty involvement with assessment at community colleges.

#### **Part I: Accreditation and Assessment of Student Learning**

The American Association for Higher Education, the National Association for Community Colleges, The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and the Department of Education (DOE) all recognize and value the accreditation process. Both CHEA and the DOE define accreditation in the United States as the ability to document quality in education (Eaton, 2010). At a minimum, accrediting agencies are required to develop evaluation criteria, conduct peer evaluations, and assess whether or not those criteria are met (Eaton, 2010). The CHEA website lists five fundamental purposes for accreditation in the U.S. that include assuring quality in education for the public, providing access to federal and state funding, securing financial support from the private sector, easing the transfer of credit for students, and ensuring confidence in U.S. institutions operating within and outside of the United States (Eaton, 2010).

Documenting the assessment of student learning outcomes is an essential component of institutional accreditation required by all six regional accrediting organizations in the United States. Since the focus of this study will be faculty at three community colleges in the North

Central Association, the review of accreditation and assessment of student learning standards will focus on the requirements established by The Higher Learning Commission (HLC)—the commissioned member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools responsible for accrediting degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions in the North Central region.

According to the HLC there are five criteria for accreditation designed to ensure standards of quality for both institutional accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation (Higher Learning Commission a division of North Central Association, 2013). Organizational strategies that document the effective use of assessment plans should be reflected in all five criteria; however, documentation related to student learning outcome assessment is specifically required under three of the five criteria (Higher Learning Commission a division of North Central Association, 2013). Criterion three requires the institution to document “high quality education wherever and however its offerings are delivered” (HLC, 2013). Criterion 3B specifically requires that courses and programs have appropriate learning goals and that students are awarded credit based on demonstrated accomplishment of those goals (HLC, 2013). Criterion 4B specifically requires that “the institution demonstrates a commitment to educational achievement and improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning” (HLC, 2013). Criterion 5C specifically requires that “the institution links its processes for assessment of student learning, evaluation of operations, planning, and budgeting” (HLC, 2013).

Institutional leaders must be able to define and demonstrate the educational achievements of students in order to meet the demands of external constituents (Alexander, 2000; Stivers & Phillips, 2009). Because the core function of any institution of higher education is the teaching and learning process, documenting how this activity transforms students is crucial for continued public and private support of higher education (Middaugh, 2009).

## **Part II: Faculty Involvement with Assessment at Community Colleges**

A review of the literature consistently revealed faculty involvement is critical for success in institutional assessment efforts (Hutchings, 2010; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Serban, 2004; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007; Stivers & Phillips, 2009; Walvoord, 2010; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a). However, much of the literature about faculty involvement with institutional *assessment* is interspersed with research about faculty involvement with institutional *effectiveness*. This makes sense given that one of the driving forces behind the assessment movement has been the requirements by regional accrediting bodies to document institutional effectiveness through student learning outcomes assessment. However, the research is clear that cultivating faculty support for assessment with a focus on institutional effectiveness can be difficult if faculty perceive the goal of assessment is for accountability and not improvement (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a).

When the literature review was delimited to community colleges, an extensive review revealed very few empirical studies or dissertations about faculty involvement with assessment at two-year institutions during the last twenty years. This section of the literature review evaluates the existing research about faculty involvement with student assessment at community colleges and documents the need for additional studies to examine faculty participation in and support for institutional and program level outcomes assessment.

In 2000 Welsh and Metcalf used a mailed questionnaire to survey faculty and administrators about their support for institutional effectiveness activities (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a). The survey was sent to 168 institutions that had been reviewed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools between 1998 and 2000 and included only faculty and administrators who had served on the accreditation review committees (Welsh & Metcalf,



2003a). This study was included in the literature review because it demonstrated how faculty involvement with student learning outcomes assessment is often comingled with studies about faculty involvement with institutional effectiveness activities. This is important because in their review of the literature Welsh and Metcalf (2003b, p. 34) noted “there has been little evidence that institutional effectiveness activities have actually improved institutions and there is evidence of barriers to faculty commitment and support for them.” There were several activities like strategic planning, performance scorecards, and benchmarking included in the researchers’ definition of institutional effectiveness for this study that are typically associated with accountability versus improvement. Student learning outcomes assessment was just one of several activities included in their definition of institutional effectiveness.

A total of 1,232 questionnaires were mailed to 794 faculty and 541 academic administrators with a response rate of 54.8% for faculty and 54.3% for administrators. Two additional studies were completed from this original study data. One of the additional studies examined the faculty data separate from the administrative data and the second study examined the two-year institution data separate from the four-year institution data. There were 58 two-year institutions included in the original study of 168 institutions.

The original study tested for differences between the attitudes of faculty and administrators toward the importance of institutional effectiveness activities and sought to determine the factors that influenced faculty and administrators support for these activities (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a). In the faculty only study, Welsh and Metcalf examined the extent of faculty support for institutional effectiveness activities and defined the factors that affected faculty support for these activities (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003b). In the study that examined the data specifically for two-year colleges the researchers tested for significant differences between

faculty and administrators' attitudes toward the importance of institutional effectiveness activities and defined what factors affect faculty and administrative support for these activities at two-year colleges (Welsh, Petrosko & Metcalf, 2003).

In all three studies the dependent variable used in their analysis was the level of importance attributed to institutional effectiveness activities and the four independent variables identified were (a) the perceived definition of quality outcomes; (b) the perceived internal versus external motivation for effectiveness activity; (c) the depth of implementation of the activity; and (d) the reported level of faculty involvement. All three studies indicated that faculty support is necessary for the success of effectiveness activities and that faculty support is dependent upon the primary motivation for the activity—i.e. improvement versus external mandates. The data from the two-year institution study also indicated that faculty members were more likely to support effectiveness activities—like program and institutional level assessment—if “they and their colleagues lead, own and participate in the process” (Welsh, Petrosko & Metcalf, 2003 p. 86).

The researchers acknowledged that two limitations of their studies were:

1. The studies were limited to faculty involved in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation process (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a).
2. The faculty included in the sample had been involved in the institution's accreditation process and might have been more predisposed toward effectiveness activities than faculty who were not involved in the process (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a).

These limitations suggested the need to examine faculty involved in student learning assessment activities (a necessary component to demonstrating institutional effectiveness) in other accrediting regions and to examine faculty who might be involved in student learning

outcomes assessment but not necessarily involved in institutional effectiveness activities specifically for accreditation.

In 2003 Grunwald and Peterson examined institutional factors that promoted faculty satisfaction with, and involvement in, the institution's assessment of student learning (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Four sub-questions of their study were developed around the dependent variables of external influences, institutional context, faculty characteristics, and institutional characteristics (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). This study used data collected from a national survey of all two-year and four-year degree granting institutions performed as part of the Institutional Support for Student Assessment (ISSA) research project at the University of Michigan for the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Grunwald and Peterson (2003) used data collected from the national ISSA survey to identify seven institutions that differed based on type, control, and accrediting region. To be selected for this study the institutions had to be using multiple approaches to student assessment through varying activities that supported and promoted assessment and had to demonstrate the assessments were used in academic decision making (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Two of the seven institutions selected for case studies were community colleges. The case studies were examined using a survey instrument developed by the researchers to assess the respondents' perceptions of their institution's assessment patterns and their own satisfaction with, and involvement in, student assessment efforts (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). The faculty response rate to the survey was only 30%; however, a total of 182 faculty members responded to the survey (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Regression analyses were performed on the survey data. The results of Grunwald and Peterson's study confirmed that faculty satisfaction with and

involvement in student learning assessment was not high even in institutions with a substantial record of supporting and promoting assessment (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003).

Three limitations acknowledged by the researchers in this study that warranted further examination were institutional characteristics, faculty involvement (different from faculty satisfaction), and faculty rewards. First, the results of this study suggested that the two variables, (1) faculty satisfaction and (2) faculty involvement in student assessment were different due to a correlation of less than .2 and had to be examined separately (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Second, Grunwald & Peterson noted that institutional characteristics may have played a larger role than they were able to identify due to the small number of institutions included in the study (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Third, two of the variables in their model related to faculty involvement with assessment were (1) using involvement in assessment for faculty decisions about salary, promotion, and awards and (2) faculty perceptions of the benefits of assessment (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). Institutional characteristics as well as salary and reward structures differ significantly in two-year institutions compared to four-year institutions; therefore, more research about how these variables impact faculty involvement with student assessment at two-year institutions is needed.

A second study by Gary Skolits and Susan Graybeal in 2007 was a mixed-methods case study of one community college in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. This study focused on faculty and staff perceptions of institutional effectiveness—including assessment and evaluation of student learning (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). The survey portion of the study included both faculty and administrators with a faculty response rate of 62% (61 faculty members). The interview portion of this study was limited to academic administrators. The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators and faculty perceive and practice

institutional effectiveness. This study indicated that faculty perceived a lack of time and resources as limitations on faculty involvement in the institutional effectiveness processes at their community college (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). In their literature review of institutional effectiveness studies, Skolits and Graybeal pointed out that while there are many studies on community college institutional effectiveness, these studies rely on the perceptions of campus leaders and senior staff members and lack the perspectives of faculty (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). Because regional accrediting bodies are increasingly requiring substantial documentation about student outcomes assessment at all three level—course, program and institutional—as a component of institutional effectiveness documentation, it is increasingly important to research faculty perspectives about this institutional effectiveness activity.

In 2008 the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was founded to help colleges and universities obtain, use, and share evidence of student learning for the purpose of improving student and institutional performance (NILOA, 2014). NILOA is based at the University of Illinois and Indiana University and is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education, The Teagle Foundation, and the College of Education at the University of Illinois. Since its foundation NILOA has conducted two national surveys examining the state of student assessment initiatives, four focus group sessions with campus leaders from two and four year institutions and nine case studies involving institutions who have been identified as exemplars in student outcomes assessment. NILOA also produced one report that specifically examined the status of learning outcomes assessment in community colleges.

In 2009 NILOA asked provosts and chief academic officers at all regionally accredited, undergraduate degree granting two- and four-year public, private, and for-profit institutions in the U.S. about assessment activities at their institutions (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). A total of

1,518 institutions responded, yielding a response rate of 53%. The purpose of the survey was to examine what higher education institutions are doing to demonstrate that students accomplish outcomes during college that yield personal, economical, and societal benefits (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). The survey results highlighted five pieces of data relevant to this study. First, 75% of all institutions have adopted common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students. Second, the most common uses for student learning data were for institution and program accreditation rather than day-to-day decisions about resources, admissions, policies, or faculty and staff performance. Third, community colleges reported that assessment is driven more in response to coordinating and governing board mandates (external pressures) rather than accreditation alone. Fourth, only 19% of two-year colleges reported having at least one person focused on outcomes assessment compared to nearly half (47%) of doctoral institutions. The fifth and most pressing issue arising from this study was that 66% of the chief academic officers and provosts stated that more faculty engagement is necessary for more effective assessment of learning outcomes and 61% said they needed more assessment expertise on their campus (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Researching faculty experiences at two-year institutions who have been involved in successful campus assessment initiatives will contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding faculty involvement with assessment.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, NILOA conducted four focus groups with academic deans, provosts, presidents, and directors of institutional research from a variety of two- and four-year institutions (Kinzie, 2010). The roundtable discussions were conducted at meetings of the Association of American Colleges and University, the American Council on Education, and the Association for Institutional Research. There were 45 participants representing a range of institutional types and regions. One of the issues they examined during

these focus group settings was the extent that faculty were involved in assessment activities (Kinzie, 2010). Some of the findings relevant to this study were that accreditation still drives assessment creating a situation where compliance is the primary motivating factor rather than discerning what is important to the institution about the quality of student learning (Kinzie, 2010). Additionally, some of the participants noted that student learning outcomes assessment results are rarely used to drive institutional improvement or resource allocation (Kinzie, 2010). The presidents, deans, and directors all agreed that faculty involvement is a major challenge for their institutions and that meaningful assessment requires in-depth and wide-spread faculty involvement (Kinzie, 2010). The participants in these focus groups characterized faculty as very interested in collecting assessment evidence that directly related to teaching and learning (course-level assessment); however, they were disinterested in other institutional effectiveness activities that they do not see as falling under the purview of faculty (Kinzie, 2010). These focus group studies confirmed the need to explore faculty involvement with assessment at the program and institutional level in more depth.

In 2009 NILOA published a paper presenting the survey results from their 2009 survey of chief academic officers and provosts (described earlier) disaggregated to show data for two-year institutions only. This paper also presented survey results from a recent survey of institutional research directors conducted by the National Community College Council for Research and Planning (NCCCRP). The NILOA survey was completed by 544 chief academic officers at two-year institutions. The second national survey conducted by the NCCCRP was completed by 101 researchers from 30 community colleges located in all six accrediting regions (Nunley, Bers & Manning, 2011). In the NCCCRP survey only 51% of the respondents identified improving undergraduate education as a motivating factor for assessment compared to 84% of the

respondents to the NILOA survey. This report identified several challenges associated with student assessment that are unique to community colleges; low faculty engagement is the one most relevant to this study. Some of the barriers identified in the NCCRP survey were: lack of time due to high teaching loads, lack of faculty knowledge about or training in assessment, lack of focus or sense of purpose for assessment, lack of follow-through from administrators, lack of funding for stipends or release time to work on assessment, and lack of support staff for assessment work (Nunley et al., 2011). Another interesting item in this report was the list of recommendations for increasing faculty involvement with assessment. Of the twelve items listed in rank-order by respondents to the NCCRP the twelfth item was “relate assessment to student learning—show how it can impact learning in the classroom” (Nunley et al., 2011). More in depth research with faculty actively involved in successful campus assessment at the program and institutional level is needed to provide additional insight into the barriers they perceived and actions they took to overcome them on each campus.

In 2010, NILOA administered a Web-based questionnaire to program heads at randomly selected departments and programs that were identified by their chief academic officer as knowledgeable or responsible for student learning outcomes assessment (Ewell, Paulson & Kinzie, 2011). The target population for the survey was all regionally accredited, undergraduate degree-granting two- and four-year institutions in the United States (Ewell et al., 2011). The survey yielded a 30% response rate with all programs adequately represented except Business (Ewell et al., 2011). The findings from this survey indicated that the primary driver for assessment at the department and program level was faculty interest in improving their program (Ewell et al., 2011). Only 44% of the respondents indicated that more faculty involvement was necessary to advance assessment compared to 66% of the chief academic officers NILOA



surveyed in 2009 (Ewell et al., 2001). The researchers surmised that either faculty involvement is less challenging at the program level than the institutional level or that faculty members are more involved at the program level than their chief academic officers believed (Ewell et al., 2011). Specialized accreditation also seemed to exert a significant influence on assessment at the program-level (Ewell et al., 2011). Faculty involvement with assessment was significantly higher in programs with specialized accredited than programs without specialized accreditation (Ewell et al., 2011). Due to the relatively low response rate and the complexity of the survey's implementation, the researchers cautioned against making estimates of actual frequency of activity for a particular type of program (Ewell et al., 2011). This survey was designed to elicit information about "what" was actually occurring at the program level with respect to assessment and not necessarily "why" it was occurring. This study, like those referenced earlier, demonstrate that more research is needed to explore why faculty choose to become involved with assessment at the program or institutional level.

Four dissertations related to community faculty involvement with assessment were identified during this literature review. Ebersole (2007) conducted a multiple-case research study of four community colleges to examine the relationship between the assessment policies and the impact of the processes on student learning. Ebersole (2007) noted that faculty involvement sometimes depends on the level of faculty understanding about assessment and that some level of faculty resistance existed at all four institutions in this study (Ebersole, 2007). Some of the barriers to faculty involvement noted in this study included fear of evaluation by the faculty member and their belief that time required for assessment would take away from time required for instruction (Ebersole, 2007).

Somerville (2007) conducted a Delphi Study with 22 panelists from 12 California community colleges that resulted in ten factors emerging as either critical or extremely important to effective assessment of student learning. One of the critical factors identified in this study was the involvement of faculty in assessment processes.

Fontenot (2012) studied full-time faculty at four Illinois community colleges using a descriptive and correlational research design. The purpose of her study was to examine the relationships between community college faculty attitudes about assessment and their level of involvement with assessment activities. Her findings indicated that faculty were moderately involved with student learning outcomes assessment at the course-level and were less involved at the institutional-level. This study was limited to faculty employed at institutions who were participating in the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. The author noted that studies of faculty employed at non-Academy institutions might produce different results. This study also showed some differences in the levels of involvement with assessment between disciplines and suggested that future research should be conducted to explore these differences.

Williams (2013) completed a non-experimental and comparative study of full-time and part-time faculty in the Colorado Community College System. The purpose of her study was to explore faculty and academic leaders' perceptions of faculty engagement with assessment practices at public two-year institutions in Colorado. Specifically, the study was designed to determine if faculty and administrator perceptions of the conditions that elicited greater faculty involvement with assessment were aligned and to provide more insight into faculty perceptions than was currently available in the literature. The study results confirmed that faculty members were highly involved in course level assessment although they were unsure how those assessments translated into broader program or institutional assessment processes.

To locate literature on community college faculty involvement with assessment I utilized the online databases through the University library. The databases I searched included Ebsco Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Research Library, Google Scholar and WorldCat for the years 1990 to 2013. The descriptors I used for my searches included: assessment, student learning outcomes, student learning, faculty involvement, faculty engagement, faculty participation, two-year colleges, community colleges and several combinations of those descriptors.

It is clear from the literature that administrator's in two-year institutions are concerned about the lack of faculty involvement in the assessment of student learning at the institutional and program level. It is also clear that community college faculties are unclear about how course level assessment translates into demonstrating institutional effectiveness (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007; Hutchings, 2010). The ability to involve faculty in institutional and program level plans needs to be explored further in order to determine ways to increase faculty involvement in assessment beyond the course level.

### **Part III: Recommendations for Increasing Faculty Involvement with Assessment**

This section of the literature review examined existing literature recommendations for increasing faculty involvement with assessment at two-year institutions. Four recommendations emerged during this review (a) provide faculty with appropriate training in assessment, (b) ensure that the institution's primary motivation for assessment is improving student learning, (c) involve faculty in the design, implementation and evaluation of assessment processes at all levels in the institution, and (d) provide faculty with resources for involvement with assessment and appropriate rewards and recognition based on their involvement.

## **Training**

One of the largest obstacles to more faculty involvement with assessment is that many faculty members have not had significant training in student learning outcomes assessment (Hutchings, 2010). Most faculty members were not exposed to outcomes assessment in their graduate programs (Shipman, Aloi & Jones, 2003) and assessment training has traditionally not been a priority professional development activity for faculty (Hutchings, 2010). Hutchings (2010) also pointed out that faculty value expertise and many who have not been trained in assessment would rather avoid involvement than attempt to be involved with an area in which they have no experience or training.

One of the recommendations made by Nunley, Bers & Manning (2011) to increase community college faculty involvement was to provide recurring professional development through formal assessment training, attendance at professional meetings, and hands-on faculty workshops. Grunwald and Peterson (2003) found that one of three significant variables in predicting faculty involvement with student assessment at the institutional level was their involvement with external influences. Grunwald and Peterson (2003) recommended involving faculty with external groups like accreditation and professional associations so they receive more exposure to assessment, including the benefits of assessment. Disciplinary and professional societies can provide significant support by helping faculty determine what should be assessed and why (Hutchings, 2010). Faculty members regularly assess student learning and have been referred to as some of the most innovative assessors on college campuses (Andrade, 2011; Wehlburg, 2010). It is not uncommon for faculty members teaching the same course to exchange ideas and information with colleagues in order to improve how they teach and gauge how well students are learning concepts. Formal assessment training helps faculty recognize that

the *informal* assessment practices they are already engaging in can be transformed into *formal* processes that can be documented, duplicated, and disseminated.

### **Institutional Motivation**

Ensuring that the institution's motivation for assessment is the improvement of student learning is another way to increase faculty involvement with assessment. This requires institutions to evaluate why they are conducting student assessments and to examine how they are using the assessment results. The data from the 2003 study completed by Welsh and Metcalf showed that faculty involvement with, and support for, institutional effectiveness activities—including student outcomes assessment—is dependent upon faculty members' perceiving that the institution's primary motivation for effectiveness activities is improvement (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003a). Peter Ewell also noted "the entire premise of assessment to improve instruction—especially if it is offered by outsiders—is that there is something wrong with instruction to begin with" (Hutchings, 2010). All faculty members need to be assured that the goals of assessment are to demonstrate student learning and improve the learning process; not to punish or impugn faculty.

Institutions demonstrate their motivation for assessment by how they use the assessment results. If assessment results are not used to inform the institution's decisions about curriculum, academic policies, and budgeting, then faculty are not likely to view the motive for assessment as improvement (Ebersole & Mince, 2007; Middaugh, 2009; Shipman et al., 2003). The data from the Welsh and Metcalf (2003) study showed that faculty support was dependent upon the institution's ability to promote outcomes-oriented activities that result in improved quality. Kinzie (2010) reinforced the belief that the institutions that were most successful in increasing

faculty involvement in assessment were the ones that supported assessment activities through the institution's planning, budgeting, and infrastructure.

Faculty members are focused on assessments that improve student learning. Improving faculty involvement in institutional and program level assessment requires that these assessment activities also demonstrate that student learning is ultimately improved because of faculty involvement in the assessment process. Faculty members have many competing demands for their time and energy and when assessment processes fail to demonstrate sufficient evidence that assessment is making a difference, faculty members may decide not to be involved with the processes (Hutchings, 2010).

### **Faculty Input**

Involving faculty in the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment processes at all levels in the institution is necessary to improve faculty support. Welsh and Metcalf's (2003) study showed that faculty support for assessment is dependent upon personal faculty involvement in all stages of the process. When assessments are developed without faculty input there is little faculty support for implementing the assessments and even less support for evaluating and interpreting the results. It is important for institutional research staff to provide resources for faculty to improve assessment; however, it is also important for the processes to be faculty-driven (Kinzie, 2010; Nunley et al., 2011).

Institutions are advised not to select an assessment tool, like a standardized test, prior to determining the outcomes to be measured because the tool may not measure what the institution values or what faculty are teaching (Nunley et al., 2011). To ensure that the institution is measuring and evaluating what the institution wants students to learn from any given course or program the assessment design, implementation and evaluation should always be a faculty-

driven process (Nunley et al., 2011). Effective assessment plans are the ones that are built around what faculty members are already doing in the classroom. Creating multi-layered, bureaucratic assessment processes that require multiple approvals will deter faculty involvement in assessment because it takes away from time spent preparing and teaching classes (Nunley et al., 2011).

One additional item noted in the literature was that, while widespread faculty involvement in course-level assessment is often recommended, faculty involvement at the program and institutional level may not require as much widespread faculty participation (Nunley et al., 2011). Recruiting a few key faculty groups to create quality, effective assessment at the program and institutional level might be more realistic, particularly for two-year institutions that have a large percentage of adjunct faculty (Nunley et al., 2011).

### **Resources, Rewards, and Recognition**

Providing faculty with resources for involvement in assessment and appropriate rewards and recognition based on their involvement is also a proven technique to increase faculty participation, especially at the program and institutional level (Ewell, Paulson & Kinzie, 2011; Hutchings, 2010; Hutchings, 2011; Nunley et al., 2011). Faculty members need time for assessment training, financial support to attend conferences, and campus spaces that allow for interaction with other faculty (Hutchings, 2010). Time at department meetings or multidisciplinary committee meetings could provide additional opportunities for faculty to network and discuss assessment (Hutchings, 2010). Other resources might include stipends or reduced teaching loads for work on assessment that is outside of regular course assessment (Nunley et al., 2011).

## Summary

Accrediting bodies and assessment experts are clear that assessment is not a task that can be ignored and that faculty involvement is critical. Demonstrating the value of assessment in advancing student learning is a necessary prerequisite to more faculty participation. Fredrick Herzberg's two-factor theory on motivation explains how important it is for high-level motivators like responsibility, recognition, and challenge to be in place before employees will be motivated to excel at their work (Daft, 2008). It is clear that assessment represents a challenge for faculty at many institutions; therefore, allowing them to take responsibility for the processes and then recognizing their work is essential.

This chapter provided an overview of the existing literature on faculty involvement with assessment relevant to this study. Section one provided an overview of accreditation and assessment as well as the documented need for more meaningful faculty involvement with assessment at the program and institutional level. Section two explained that existing research on community college faculty involvement with assessment is limited and that many studies lack the perspectives of faculty. Section three explored some of the recommendations for increasing faculty involvement in assessment that have been expressed by assessment experts and researchers on this topic. By exploring the perspectives of faculty members involved with successful community college institutional and program level assessment, this study will add to the existing body of literature related to faculty involvement with assessment. The following chapter identifies the research methodology and procedures used for this study.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of community college faculty who had been involved with successful assessment of student learning initiatives on their campuses. This chapter begins with a rationale for selecting a qualitative narrative research design for this study. A description of the process used to identify research sites and participants follows. The chapter closes with an explanation of the procedures used for conducting the open-ended semi-structured interviews and a description of the methods used for interviewing participants and analyzing their responses to the interview questions.

#### **Selection of Research Design**

Even though the literature review documented the need for more faculty involvement in assessment at the program and institutional level, there was little research examining the perspectives of faculty who had actually been involved with assessment at the program or institutional level. To explore the perspectives of faculty members actively involved in program and institutional level assessment at their institutions, a qualitative narrative research design was selected. As Yin (2011, p.8) pointed out, qualitative research allows the researcher to present the “views and perspectives of the participants in a study...under real-world conditions.” The participants’ personal experiences are presented for the purpose of contributing to emerging opinions about faculty involvement with assessment. Yin also noted that this type of research design allows the participants to “say what they want to say” rather than limiting participants’ responses to those that were pre-established by the researcher (2011, p.8). The fourteen open-ended questions used in the study were designed to allow participants an opportunity to share

their unique experiences without being constrained by pre-determined answers. This design encouraged the participants to discuss any personal factors they believed influenced their decision to be involved with assessment beyond the course level. The interviews were all scheduled for one hour and were conducted face-to-face with each participant on their campus with the exception of one participant who was unable to meet in person on the scheduled date. The interview with this participant was conducted using a video call service and was audio recorded.

### **Selection of Research Sites**

Purposive sampling was used to identify the research sites and the research participants so that the participants and sites selected would yield the most pertinent data for this study. Yin (2011, p. 88) stated “The goal or purpose for selecting the specific study units is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data, given your topic of study.” The research sites selected for the study included three community colleges that had been recognized for their institutional or program level student learning assessment processes.

All three research sites selected for this study were institutions accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Three sites were initially identified based on their AQIP Systems Portfolio Feedback Report. When one of the sites initially selected for the study was unable to participate, another HLC accredited site that had received national recognition for their institutional assessment processes was selected as the third site. Although the replacement site had not participated in the AQIP accreditation pathway, this institution had received a Bellwether finalist award for their institutional assessment program.

Institutions using the AQIP pathway for accreditation or reaccreditation submit a Systems Portfolio every four years and receive a third-party independent review providing feedback on

the institution's strength and opportunities related to each of nine pre-determined categories presented in the portfolio (HLC, 2013). The written review, called a Systems Appraisal Feedback Report, addresses each AQIP category and codes specific items according to their strengths and opportunities for improvement (HLC, 2013). A rating of S or SS identifies strengths, with the double letter signifying important achievements or capabilities upon which to build by deploying approaches more broadly or using them to stimulate similar approaches in other areas of activity (HLC, 2013). A rating of O or OO indicates opportunities where more attention may result in more significant improvement or avoid potential risks (HLC, 2013). AQIP Category 1 is titled *Helping Students Learn* and the Systems Appraisal Feedback Report must provide at least eight substantive comments to Category 1. Two sites selected for this study were identified by receiving a rating of S or SS on at least two of three questions in Category 1 on their most recent Systems Appraisal Feedback report. The three questions in Category 1 identified as most relevant for site selection were:

- 1P1. How do you determine which common or shared objectives for learning and development you should hold for all students pursuing degrees at a particular level? Whom do you involve in setting these objectives?
- 1P2. How do you determine your specific program learning objectives? Whom do you involve in setting these objectives?
- 1P18. How do you design your processes for assessing student learning?

These three questions were selected because institutions are required to answer them by providing evidence of student learning outcomes assessment at all three levels—course, program and institution— and by demonstrating how they define the outcomes, who is involved in the process, how the data is collected, and how it is used to inform decision making. Institutions

who received an S or SS rating on at least two of these three questions would have clearly demonstrated faculty involvement in assessment initiatives and the faculty involved in assessment at these institutions would have experiences and perspectives they could share with others.

The Bellwether awards are presented annually at the Community College Futures Assembly (CCFA) to institutions that have implemented outstanding and innovative programs other colleges might want to replicate (University of Florida College of Education, 2013). The CCFA is sponsored through the University of Florida's Higher Education Institute and the Bellwether awards are co-sponsored by the National Council of Instructional Administrators, the Council for Resource Development, and the National Council of Continuing Education and Training (University of Florida College of Education, 2013). The Bellwether Selection Committee includes judges from the co-sponsoring organizations and awards are based on program materials and presentations (University of Florida College of Education, 2013).

Initially three institutions were selected for this study based on their Carnegie classifications. The Carnegie classification system classifies two-year institutions based solely on full-time equivalent student enrollment. There are five categories in the Carnegie classification system for two-year colleges: (1) Very Small Two-Year with FTE enrollment of fewer than 500 students, (2) Small two-year with FTE of 500 to 1,999 students, (3) Medium two-year with FTE of 2,000 to 4,999 students, (4) Large two year with FTE of 5,000 to 9,999 students and (5) Very large two year with FTE of at least 10,000 students (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2013). The original research sites selected consisted of one small, one medium and one large institution. Because the third site, selected due to its national recognition for

assessment, was not the same size as the site it replaced; the final study included two small two-year institutions and one large two-year institution.

### **Selection of Research Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants for this study. The participants selected were faculty members employed full-time at sites previously identified for their work in assessment. The participants were identified by the Chief Academic Officer or the Institutional Assessment Coordinator at their institution because of the participants' involvement in assessment of student learning outcomes at the institutional and program level. According to Creswell (2012), purposeful sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies because it allows the researcher to identify people who "can best help us understand our phenomenon" (p. 205). Intentionally selecting participants who were known to be involved in program or institutional assessment allowed the researcher to provide a "voice" for faculty members whose perspectives were lacking in previous studies (Creswell, 2012 p.206). Three participants from each site were selected for a total of nine participants. The size of the study was limited to nine participants so that an in-depth exploration of each participant's experience with assessment could be provided (Creswell, 2012). In order to encourage each participant to provide open, honest answers to the research questions all participants were assigned a random numerical pseudonym to protect their identity.

### **Securing IRB Approval**

Approval to conduct interviews on human subjects is required by the University of Arkansas. The procedures required by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed and the appropriate request form was submitted. The IRB protocol form was used to inform the University that human subjects would participate in the study, that the participants'

identity would be kept confidential, and that there were no anticipated risks associated with the participants' participation. After appropriate review, approval to conduct interviews on human subjects was received from the Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). All participants were asked to sign a participant consent form (Appendix B) prior to participating in the interviews.

### **Interview Protocol**

In qualitative research “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p.15). Understanding human behavior is the goal of the research; therefore, using a human instrument that can be adaptive and responsive is appropriate (Merriam, 2009). Being the instrument allows the researcher to clarify information and check with the participants for accuracy and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009, p. 15) explained that, rather than eliminating biases, the researcher should “identify and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data.” Additionally, Yin (2011) noted that it is important for the researcher to be methodical in qualitative research so that the research will be able to withstand close scrutiny by others. The researcher followed an orderly set of research procedures that included developing neutral, open-ended research questions designed to allow the participants to share their unique experiences with assessment. Yin (2011) recommended the researcher followed the same procedures at each site with each participant in order to ensure a rigorous field routine. To assist in conducting methodical, orderly research the researcher developed a data recording protocol form (Appendix C) to record information during the interviews (Creswell, 2012). The interview protocol form included an overview of the study and a reminder to have the participants sign the consent form (Creswell, 2012). After the header, the open-ended questions designed for this study were listed with space between each question to record notes about the participant's responses (Creswell, 2012). All of the participants were

asked the same set of open-ended questions and they were assured that their confidentiality would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The interview protocol form was constructed with the following questions:

1. What do you believe to be the value of assessment?
2. What personal factors influenced your decision to become involved in assessment of student learning? (If necessary, follow-up with questions about personal skills and abilities, strengths in assessment, personal feelings about assessment, prior work with assessment, was it a career choice for a possible move into administration or assigned as part of an administrative workload?)
3. What were some of the personal factors you considered to be potential barriers to your involvement with assessment? (for example, time, training, work/life balance issues)
4. Would you describe what your institution has done to help change faculty perceptions of assessment from something they “have” to do to something they “want” to do?
5. Were there any people or events that significantly influenced your decision to participate in assessment at a level other than the course level? (Administrators, other faculty members, students, external influences).
6. What does “faculty-driven” assessment mean to you?
7. Once you decided to be involved with assessment at the program or institutional level, how did you go about getting involved? (Did you request committee assignments, release time, course reductions?)
8. How did you feel about assessment after your first semester of involvement with assessment at the program or institutional-level? (Were you encouraged by the work you

saw; did you feel you needed more training; did you understand the purpose of assessment at these levels?)

9. What factors do you feel influenced the success of assessment initiatives at the program and institutional level at your institution?
10. How would you describe your colleague's attitudes about assessment? (Are there enough involved? Is there any faculty resistance to assessment?)
11. Would you describe some of the barriers to involvement with assessment your colleagues have mentioned? (Training, fear of intended use of data, does it make a difference, input from faculty about design, resources, rewards, compensation?)
12. What has your institution done with assessment that you believe makes a differences in faculty participation with assessment at the program and institutional level?
13. What evidence do you see of assessment being used in institutional decision-making about budget, resources and curriculum planning at your institution?
14. What thoughts or feelings about your experiences with assessment would you would like to share with policy-makers and educators that might encourage more faculty participation with program and institutional level assessment?

Table 1, illustrated on the following page, shows how the interview questions aligned with the central research question and the six sub questions.



Table 1

*Research sub questions and corresponding interview questions*

Research Sub Question	Corresponding Interview Questions
a. Why did the participants become involved in the assessment of student learning?	1, 2, 7
b. Were there any institutional programs or significant events that contributed to the participants' decision to participate in institutional or program level assessment?	7, 5,
c. What do the participants say are the reasons why their colleagues are not involved with assessment?	3, 4 , 10, 11
d. What factors do the participants see as critical to the successful implementation of student learning initiatives?	6, 8, 9
e. What do participants suggest that institutional leaders should do to increase faculty involvement with assessment?	12, 13
f. What would the participants like administrators, policy makers and other faculty to know about their experiences with assessment?	14

**Pilot Test**

Both Seidman (2013) and Yin (2011) strongly recommend pilot testing before the researcher completes any field work. Pilot tests allow the researcher to refine the fieldwork procedures and the data collection instrument (Yin, 2011). Pilot testing also allows the researcher to experience the practicalities of “establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interviews” (Seidman, 2013 p. 42). The researcher pilot tested a draft of the interview questions with faculty members who had been involved with institutional assessment on the college campus where the researcher worked. Based on feedback from the faculty in the pilot test, two additional interview questions were added and one interview question was rephrased. Feedback from faculty in the pilot test indicated it would be helpful to provide each participant with a copy of the interview questions prior to the scheduled interviews. This gave

the participants time to reflect on their own experiences and write down any specific items they wanted to share during the scheduled interviews. The pilot test confirmed that one hour was sufficient time to cover all of the interview questions.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected from participants at three separate two-year institutions identified through purposive sampling. The Chief Academic Officer (CAO) from the institution where the researcher worked made the initial introductions between the researcher and the CAO of the proposed research sites. A letter of introduction and a description of the proposed study were e-mailed to the CAO's at each selected site. Having a gatekeeper helped the researcher gain entrance to the sites, locate participants at the sites, and identify a place to conduct on-site interviews (Creswell, 2012). The CAO's at each site referred the researcher to the Institutional Assessment Coordinator who acted as a gatekeeper for the study in order to minimize disruption to the research sites (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the coordinator at each institution helped identify the participants interviewed for the study. Because purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study, the coordinators were asked to identify participants who had been actively involved with program or institutional level assessment at their institution. Two studies in the literature review (Ewell et al., 2011; Fontenot, 2012) indicated that faculty involvement varies between academic disciplines; therefore, the researcher also asked the coordinators to select participants from different academic disciplines when possible. Each participant was e-mailed a letter of introduction and a description of the proposed study. The data was collected from research participants during a one day on-site visit arranged by the coordinator at each institution. The times and locations for the interviews were arranged for the convenience of the participants. Each participant was asked the same set of open-ended

questions. The researcher took notes during the interview and kept a reflective journal to record initial reactions to the interviews. Keeping field notes and a reflective journal helped maintain a methodical approach to the study and helped with verification of the data collected (Yin, 2011). The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data was analyzed in order to identify recurring themes (Merriam, 2009). Once the interviews were transcribed and the participants had an opportunity to verify the data, the audio recordings were destroyed. The trustworthiness of the data, limitations of the study, and data analysis are described in the following sections.

### **Trustworthiness**

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 2009). However, in a qualitative study the traditional terms used to describe validity and reliability are often difficult to describe given the unique nature of a qualitative study. Merriam (2009, p. 211) stated that in qualitative research the terms credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (coined by Lincoln and Guba in 1985) are used to define trustworthiness and have become “widely adopted in qualitative research.”

### **Credibility**

Merriam (2009) suggested several ways the qualitative researcher could increase the credibility of the findings—triangulation, member checks, and adequate engagement in data collection. Triangulation in this study involved using multiple sources of data by comparing and cross-checking the data collected from different participants and different sites. The researcher also used member checking throughout the study to actively solicit feedback from each participant and to avoid misinterpreting the meaning of the participants’ comments (Merriam, 2009). Prior to selecting each college the researcher spent extensive time reviewing institutional documents to support the selection of the research sites.

## **Transferability**

Transferability in a qualitative study refers to generalizability—whether or not the findings in a study could be applied to other situations (Merriam, 2009). In a qualitative study the reader is responsible for deciding whether findings would be applicable to a different situation (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) recommended using highly descriptive and detailed descriptions to enable transferability. In order for the reader to make an informed decision about transferability, thorough descriptions of each research participant and detailed descriptions of their experiences with assessment at the program or institutional level were provided. Significant quotations were also included to provide comprehensive answers to the interview questions and to support the data presented.

## **Dependability**

Merriam (2009) asserts that two methods for ensuring dependability are triangulation and the audit trail. Creswell (2012, p. 259) describes triangulation as a “process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection.” The researcher used triangulation to compare multiple points of view from multiple sites and participants in this study. Additionally, field notes, interview transcriptions, and various institutional documents were compared for triangulation in this study. A research journal was maintained in order to construct the audit trail. The research journal included the researcher’s reflections after each interview and site visit, details about how the data was collected, and information about how category descriptions were derived (Merriam, 2009).

## **Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) include confirmability as one of the four areas that enhance trustworthiness. The extent to which the results could be corroborated or confirmed by others

defines the study's confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulating the data, keeping a reflective journal, recording field notes, and following a methodical research design were all methods used in this study to enhance the study's confirmability.

### **Researcher's Lens**

Generalizability, reliability, and validity issues are all associated with qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Since the researcher is the instrument in qualitative studies, and the human instrument could have shortcoming and biases that might impact the study, Merriam (2009) suggests that researchers help reduce these biases by identifying them and monitoring how they could be affecting the collection and interpretation of the data. Ethics is of primary concern in qualitative studies because researchers "select" from available data and the researchers decide what data is illustrated (Merriam, 2009, p.52).

Because the researcher was the primary instrument in this research study it is important for the reader to know that the researcher is a faculty member with fifteen years of full-time teaching experience who has been employed at a community college in the HLC using the AQIP pathway for accreditation. Additionally, the researcher works in a discipline that participates in specialized accreditation for certain programs of study. The researcher spent the year prior to this study working on the college's institutional-level assessment committee and the institution's AQIP Systems Appraisal Portfolio.

To enhance the trustworthiness and integrity of this study the researcher was very deliberate in selecting the research design, data collection tools, and methods for analyzing the data. Creswell (2012) noted that all research is interpretive and it is important for the researcher to be self-reflective about the role the researcher played in both gathering and interpreting the data. To enhance the validity of the findings in this study, the researcher maintained detailed

field notes, member checked the data summaries, and kept a reflective journal to assist with follow-up questions for clarification. Furthermore, the researcher found that having a substantial background as a community college faculty member and experience working with course, program, and institutional assessment allowed the researcher to quickly establish rapport with the participants during the interviews and encouraged the participants to provide open and honest descriptions of their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing and continued until all interviews were completed and all members had the opportunity to check the interpretations of the data. Analysis of the data began with reading the first documents and field notes obtained from the first site. The analysis continued with each transcribed interview and continued through all of the field notes and reviewed documents (Merriam, 2009). It is recommended that data in a qualitative study be analyzed simultaneously with data collection (Merriam, 2009). Hand analysis and coding were used to analyze the data (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) asserts that this method is appropriate for analyzing small databases when the researcher wants to be “close to the data” (p. 240).

The researcher transcribed the data from audio recordings and reviewed the recorded interviews for consistency. The transcriptions were compared against the field notes for accuracy and the summarized paragraphs were sent to the participants for verification. Member checking and auditing the data are recognized methods for checking the validity and accuracy of the findings reported in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012).

The researcher reviewed the purpose of the study and the research questions just before reading and analyzing each interview with the purpose of making notes and identifying themes

(Merriam, 2009). The goal of the data analysis is to “make meaning of the data” by consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what the participants have said (Merriam, 2009 p. 176). Each interview was analyzed and coded using brackets, code words, and phrases and then all of the codes were reduced to major themes following the guidelines outlined by Creswell (2012). The themes represent major ideas that recurred throughout the data (Merriam, 2009).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the study’s methodology and explained the rationale for selecting a qualitative narrative research design. The chapter began with an explanation for choosing purposeful sampling for the research sites and research participants, followed by the procedures used to conduct the interviews. The chapter closed with a discussion of the methods used for interviewing the participants and the procedures used to collect and analyze the data.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Presentation of Data**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perspectives of community college faculty members who were involved with the assessment of student learning at either the program or institutional level and to identify critical factors, potential barriers, and possible strategies they perceived as influencing their decision to participate with assessment initiatives beyond the course level. Nine faculty members who were involved with either program or institutional level assessment were identified and one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The faculty members were each asked the same 14 open-ended interview questions.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the characteristics and assessment experiences of each faculty member and to present their answers to the interview questions. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the demographics of the participants in the study collected during a pre-interview survey. Next, a more detailed description of each participant's personal characteristics and individual experiences with assessment is presented. The chapter concludes by presenting the participant's answers to each of the study's 14 interview questions. The interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

#### **Participant Demographics**

Of the nine participants included in the study six were female and three were male. The participant's full-time experience with teaching in higher education ranged from 1 to 34 years and their experience with assessment at the program or institutional level ranged from 1 to 30 years. Seven of the nine participants also had some experience as a part-time faculty member



prior to their employment as a full-time community college faculty member. Two of the study participants had less than five years of full-time faculty experience, three had between 5 and 15 years of full-time faculty experience, and four participants had more than 15 years of full-time faculty experience. Of the nine study participants, three worked in disciplines that participated in specialized accreditation and six worked in disciplines that did not participate in specialized accreditation. Two of the participants received some type of compensation for their work with program level assessment and one received compensation for work done with institutional level assessment. All of the participants had a Master's degree in their field and five of the nine participants had received some type of formal training in education in either their undergraduate or graduate work. The participants taught in the following disciplines: math, science, education, allied health, business, and social science.

### **Assessment Experience**

Participants were asked to reflect on their involvement with assessment at the program or institutional level. They were asked to identify any personal characteristics they believed influenced their decision to participate with assessment beyond the course level and to identify any institutional characteristics that might have changed their perception of assessment from something they "had" to do to something they "wanted" to do. The goal of these questions was to identify personal traits the participants possessed that naturally drew them to participate in assessment and to determine institutional characteristics that may have caused them to either embrace assessment or view it as an act of compliance.

Five of the nine participants described personal traits like organization, analytical skills, problem solving, or a desire to work with numbers as personal reasons for their involvement with assessment. Four of the nine participants described data driven institutional decision-making or

improved programs as personal reasons for their involvement with assessment. Four of the nine participants also had experience at the program level prior to volunteering to serve on the institutional assessment committee. Five participants believed that assessment data could be used to drive institutional level decision making; however, they were unable to describe any changes they had witnessed as a direct result of their involvement with institutional level assessment.

At the time of the study four participants were serving as either chairs of a program or chair of the institutional assessment committee or they worked in an area that participated in specialized accreditation. Because of their ability to see how program and institutional assessment directly influenced program and institutional decision making, four participants seemed to genuinely embrace and champion assessment while five seemed to explain that their involvement with program or institutional level assessment was done to fulfill their service commitment to the college.

The participants were also asked to share some of the barriers they had experienced during their involvement with assessment and to identify any potential barriers their colleagues had described to them. Eight of the nine participants expressed their belief that faculty did not understand the purpose or benefit of assessment. Seven of the nine participants mentioned time as a potential barrier to other faculty members' involvement with assessment. Six of the participants thought that most faculty members did not understand the value of assessment at the program or institutional level because they did not see the connection between course level assessment and assessment at higher levels. Four of the nine participants expressed their belief that a lack of faculty training about assessment was a barrier to more faculty involvement. Four participants explained that the misunderstandings faculty had about assessment contributed to the

fear some faculty expressed over how assessment results might be used. For example, they feared how their evaluation might be impacted if their assessment data showed poor student performance. Two participants expressed some concern about the validity of the assessment data due to either a lack of training by those who would be interpreting the data or inconsistent data due to the low number of faculty participating in data collection.

### **Participant Descriptions**

This study focused on the experiences of nine full-time community college faculty members who were involved with either program or institutional level assessment during the time of the study. The participant descriptions that follow are intended to help the reader become familiar with each individual participant's personal characteristics, their background and experience with assessment, and their own perceptions about the ability of assessment to be used as an effective tool for improving higher education programs and institutions.

Participant 1 was a faculty member with over 15 years of community college teaching experience. She was nearing retirement and had spent the better part of her career involved in assessment through a program that participated in specialized accreditation. This participant had been actively involved with assessment of student learning at the course, program and institutional level for over 15 years. Through the interview it became clear that this participant viewed assessment as not only necessary for accreditation but also necessary for improving courses, programs and the institution. She explained:

Regardless of the discipline we teach, if we don't do assessments then we don't know how well our students are achieving our objectives. We assess to see how well we are doing and to identify our strengths and weaknesses. The beauty of assessment is that if students are confused or they are not obtaining our goals then we know right then that we need to change—we need to do some type of review or remediation. That feedback is very important to their success and it's important to my success too.

This participant also spoke very passionately about the work environment at the institution and how it had influenced her involvement with assessment initiatives:

I think we've always had a very good working environment here. Our faculty and staff are very close knit and when we first started working with assessment we had very good leaders who helped us get assessment off the ground. If they needed participation, or even now if our institutional committee needs something, we are all close enough that when you send an e-mail or make a phone call... you get a good response from faculty. So I really think it is the environment that we have here that makes a difference—many of us have been together for a long time.

This participant genuinely embraced assessment and believed assessment could be used as a tool to improve teaching and learning at all three levels—course, program and institutional.

Participant 2 had less than five years of full-time community college teaching experience; however, the participant had six additional years of teaching experience as a part-time faculty member and ten years of experience outside of higher education as a practitioner in his field. He served on the institutional assessment committee and taught in an area that did not participate in specialized accreditation. While, this participant did not actively seek to be involved with institutional level assessment, he did feel it was a good fit for him because of his professional background. When asked why he became involved with institutional level assessment he explained how he ended up on the assessment committee almost by accident. He said, “Our committee has a representative from each academic area and the person who had served for our academic area couldn't be on the committee anymore and since I was the new person then I got the position.” He went on to say, “It actually worked out fairly well since I have such a big background in assessment...I felt a little bit more comfortable going into that with the background that I have.” After serving on the committee for a year he described his experience with higher education institutional level assessment like this:

It's a different sort of assessment than I'm used to. In my field we have a lot of standardized testing where you have a normative basis to compare results to and say “oh,

you're right where you should be, you're better than you should be, or you're worse than you should be." Here we don't really score anything—we just get reams of raw data and there's no comparative basis. We (the institution) are starting to get better at looking at why we are collecting data. We are having conversations more recently about how we can really use this information to benefit everyone—actually make it mean something instead of just having a huge amount of data on the portal.

While this participant was a strong believer in the value of assessment, he was struggling to see the connection between institutional level assessment data and improved student learning. He was optimistic about how the data could be used and confident that the institution was moving in the right direction.

Participant 3 had over 15 years of full-time community college teaching experience and had served as chair of a program that participated in specialized accreditation. This participant had been involved in assessment of student learning her entire academic career. She believed that her educational background in teaching was a significant personal factor that influenced her decision to embrace assessment. When describing what she valued about assessment she said, "It is very obvious to me why we do assessment—my background in education helped me to see that it (assessment) wasn't difficult." She also described the personal sense of accomplishment she experienced when students succeed:

Personally, I just absolutely love to see a student come in here that is scared about going to school...maybe they've been working in a factory all their life and they want to make a life change. They come in here really not knowing much about anything and then I, as an instructor, get to see them progress well in a course, then they go on and take other courses, and then all of sudden when they walk across that stage at graduation—it's a feeling you can't describe. They were successful.

While her formal training in education helped her understand assessment, it was her personal experiences with student success that truly motivated her to embrace assessment as a way of documenting and demonstrating the success of higher education. Participant three's experience as a department chair also gave her insight into the role of assessment with respect to funding

and accreditation. She explained how her program maintained specialized accreditation and that they prepared annual reports that demonstrated assessment of students and programs. The researcher determined that this participant embraced assessment because she understood the value of assessment through both formal training and personal use. She was personally motivated by student success but she also understood that assessment was necessary for documenting program and institutional success.

Participant 4 had seven years of experience as a full-time community college faculty member and had also taught part-time for two years. His department did not participate in specialized accreditation. Both his undergraduate and graduate degrees were in his discipline. He had served on the institutional assessment committee since he was hired and he described his personal motivation for becoming involved with assessment at the institutional level as follows:

Initially, no personal factors contributed to my involvement with assessment at the institutional level. At a community college when you are hired you know that you are hired for both teaching and service. I think that teaching is primary and service is secondary but because of the service requirement everyone (faculty) is required to serve on one committee. So when I was hired...I told my dean that I'd prefer to work on a committee with a little more "meat" to it. I wanted to serve on one that had some value—so that is why I chose the assessment committee. Initially—when I walked into the first meeting—I had no idea what the assessment committee members were talking about. Seven years later, I now see the connection between our primary goal of teaching and our secondary goal of service. Any faculty on campus can tell you what we should be teaching and why we should be teaching it. Assessment tells us if we are really doing it or not. That's the reason I continue to work with assessment—because I think it is the core of what we do here.

This participant also described a significant event that influenced his view of assessment. He stated, "The institution decided to spend some money—I suspect it was a pretty good chunk of money—to send assessment committee members to the HLC annual conference." He described the different breakout sessions and explained, "The one thing I brought away from that conference was the emphasis and importance of assessment for the entire institution. They had

multiple breakout sessions on how different schools have done institutional assessment...and I was kind of in awe. He went on to say, “I think seeing the national trends and national standards gave me a little more motivation to try to make that happen here.” The researcher determined that while this participant initially started working with assessment as part of his service commitment to the college; he continued to work with institutional level assessment because he believed assessment could be used as a vehicle for demonstrating student learning and institutional success.

Participant 5 had over ten years of experience as a full-time community college faculty member and had worked for four years as a part-time faculty member. She had eight years of experience with assessment of student learning, several years of experience on the institutional assessment committee, and she had also worked on the institution’s AQIP systems portfolio report. This participant had a master’s degree in her discipline and taught in a department that did not participate in specialized accreditation.

She described her personal experiences with institutional assessment as both rewarding and frustrating. She said, “I like numbers and I like to put concrete behind what I’m saying. I like to analyze things and I like puzzles. I think of assessment as a puzzle—like, where do these pieces fit?” She went on to say:

I like change and I like to progress. I get frustrated sometimes because things in higher education can sometimes take too long to change. If you have good data then you are definitely able to say this is why we are doing this and this is why it is not working. In my opinion, assessment doesn’t move as fast as it should. That is my concern...I think we should be a lot further than we are.

This participant had been at an institution that had undergone a change in administration (two of the three institutions in this study had undergone significant administration changes). When she discussed her involvement with the institutional assessment committee she explained:

We have to talk about different time periods in the college's history. Our committee was kind of the black sheep committee—it was a significant time commitment. Most people said “No, you do not want to be on that committee because of the time it requires.” At that time, we were just doing assessment at the course level and not the program level. We had a lot of reports to review and papers to read. We also did not have an adequate system to keep track of and record the data. We started with pencil and paper, then we bought some software but it was implemented very poorly. There was little training and not everyone could use it. There were huge challenges to trying to get data. I think we are now in the process of change.

It was clear to the researcher that this participant wanted to embrace assessment as a vehicle for change and progress; however, her past experiences with assessment had been less than rewarding for her. She continued to serve on the institutional assessment committee as part of her contractual service commitment to the college and remained hopeful the new administration would serve as a catalyst for change.

Participant 6 was a faculty member with over 15 years of community college teaching experience. Her entire career was spent working in a program that participated in specialized accreditation. This participant had been actively involved in the assessment of student learning at the course, program and institutional level throughout her teaching career. She had significant formal training in assessment in her undergraduate and graduate education. Of the nine participants in this study, this participant had the most comprehensive knowledge of assessment and its potential for improving courses, programs and institutions. She described the value of assessment like this:

Assessment guides instruction and quality of teaching. It should also guide the curriculum and the design of curriculum. Assessment informs how you design assignments, choose textbooks and perform qualitative analysis. Assessment is personal for me. It has always been a goal for me to use assessment correctly—to use it as a tool to get where I wanted to be personally. That's been my influence on the institutional assessment committee. When I was asked to serve I did so because I wanted to be able to help change the reputation of the institution in our community. I want people to see that we are a quality institution and that we are producing students that are ready to enter the workforce. Also, for our next generation of students—to see that we are serving them to the best of our ability.



This participant was encouraged by the changes she saw taking place in the institution. She explained, “I think the first thing we have done that makes a difference with assessment is having a new administration...having new people who are trying to clear some of the old ways.” She went on to say that the changes were sometimes met with opposition and described the current environment as somewhat of a “rocky boat.” However, her enthusiasm and commitment to change became clear during the interview. She said:

I believe with a new leader you either pick up your oar and start rowing in the same direction, or you get off the boat. Otherwise you are just keeping the boat running around in a circle. I think there are many committee members that are willing to just roll up our sleeves and get going—we are heading in the right direction.

This participant understood that assessment was all about change and improvement and she was willing to help others embrace the change.

Participant 7 had seven years of experience as a full-time community college faculty member and had an additional five years of part-time faculty experience. She had seven years of experience with institutional assessment and was currently serving on the institutional assessment committee. This was the only participant in the study who received compensation for her work with institutional level assessment. She had a master’s degree in her discipline and taught in a department that did not participate in specialized accreditation. This participant had completed additional graduate courses in education because she wanted to pursue a career in higher education administration.

This participant viewed assessment as a tool for improvement. She explained, “The value of assessment is being able to identify student success and being able to identify areas where I need to alter my behavior as an instructor to ensure that students succeed.” Participant seven also believed that her institution used assessment effectively at the institutional level in their assessment of general education outcomes. When I asked her to describe how? She replied:

Over the years, we have accumulated data and developed a map that helped us identify specific course outcomes that relate to a general education outcomes and we use that data to support or demonstrate the institution's achievement of that general education outcome. Once when we noticed that the success level of one of our general education outcomes was going down we had a college-wide faculty workshop dedicated to learning how we could improve our students' ability to achieve this outcome...faculty came up with ideas and agreed to implement them in the classrooms.

What was interesting about this participant's perspective was that she perceived that most faculty members at her institution were doing assessment primarily to maintain accreditation. She explained, "Our new administration was charged with making the assessment of student learning better. They were forced to make a culture change at this institution in a very rapid time period. The new administration did not feel like they had time to spend on faculty who were resistant to the idea of assessment." She went on to say that faculty had agreed to negotiate assessment as part of their labor contract and it was not specified as course, program or institutional level assessment—just assessment duties. She explained it like this:

In some cases there are still faculty members who submit reports because they have to and not because they really believe in the process. I don't personally believe that many of our instructors want to do it or embrace it. I embrace it—I guess I drank the Kool aid. Most faculty members who have been here a while know that we have to do it but I don't know if they were given an option if they would do it voluntarily.

The researcher determined that this participant really believed in the value of assessment; however, she was working in an environment where she sensed many faculty members did not embrace assessment.

Participant 8 had less than five years of experience as a full-time community college faculty member; however, she had significant experience with assessment during her undergraduate and graduate education. She had a background in education and had participated in the program review for her department. She thought her work on the program review helped her see how assessment worked. She explained, "As a full-time instructor it was invaluable to

me to see where we have grown and what we have done.” She thought her work at the program level helped her to see where future resources needed to be placed and where the program could improve. She said, “It’s like bits and pieces of a puzzle that you want to fit together—kind of like improving a recipe.”

This participant believed that assessment was part of the culture at her institution; however, like some of the other participants in the study she described her work on the institutional assessment committee as challenging. She explained:

I was placed on the institutional assessment committee last year. It was interesting, a little bit different than what I expected. A little bit of a slower process than what I expected. As a new faculty member, I was unfamiliar with how committees worked. There was some confusion between the program review committee work and the institutional assessment committee.

This participant seemed to embrace and understand assessment personally, but as a newer faculty member she was still learning about the role assessment played at her institution.

Participant 9 was a faculty member with over 15 years of full-time community college teaching experience. He was nearing retirement and had spent over ten years working with assessment at his institution. This participant had a master’s degree in his field and had experience in teacher education very early in his career. He referred to his involvement with assessment as a requirement and a “headache.” Through the interview it became clear to the researcher that this participant valued assessment personally; however, he did not always agree with the way assessment was implemented institutionally. He explained, “I believe in the value of assessment; however, I don’t believe we need to be quite as obsessive about assessment as we are right now. I don’t personally believe that we need to assess every student on every outcome in every course every semester for the assessment data to be valid.” He was convinced that

faculty members see the value in assessment just not the obsession with it. He said, “I think we could assess more judiciously and not be paranoid about missing a class or a section of data.”

He went on to explain his view of assessment and its purpose:

It’s always rewarding when you crunch the numbers and realize that you may have actually taught something or students may have actually learned something. However, one of the issues I have with our (institutional) assessment is that we are supposed to provide narratives about our proposed changes from last semester’s assessment reports that we incorporated this semester and suggest changes for next semester. People seem to like for things to change *all the time*—I don’t disagree with change, I just think there ought to be a real purpose for change because it requires energy, it’s stressful, and it keeps people in turmoil. I understand that change is necessary...but what’s wrong with giving you time to implement the change and then performing a statistical analysis to see if that change actually made any difference.

The researcher concluded that this participant believed in the value of assessment; however, he was not convinced that assessment was currently being done as effectively as it could be.

The next section of this chapter presents a summary of the participant’s replies to the study’s 14 open-ended interview questions. The researcher analyzed all of the participants’ answers and provided a collective response that reflected the views and experiences of the group. To aid the reader, the rationale for each interview question is provided to explain the connection between the interview question and the research purpose.

### **Responses to Interview Questions**

#### **Question 1: What do you believe to be the value of assessment?**

This question was asked in order to gain insight into the personal motivation each participant had for being involved with assessment of student learning. The participants’ responses to this question indicated that they believed assessment was valuable because it provided a mechanism to evaluate the success of courses, programs or institutions and because it allowed faculty to evaluate the success of students within a course or program. Six of the participants specifically talked how assessment provided them with tools they used to evaluate

and improve their own performance and success in the classroom. Four of the participants also mentioned the importance of assessment for evaluating the success of programs. Two of the participants explained how assessment could be used to evaluate the success of the institution. Seven of the nine participants talked about how important assessment is for evaluating student success.

### **Course, Program, and Institutional Evaluation**

Even though the focus of this study was faculty involvement with program or institutional level assessment, six of the nine participants immediately related the value of assessment to their success in the classroom. It was only through additional probing that the researcher was able to elicit a response about the value of assessment for programs or institutions. Participant 4 explained it this way:

I always relate assessment with quality control where we set our student learning outcomes, we do our teaching strategies, and then we measure to see if the students met the outcomes. So to me the value of assessment is that part in the middle—the teaching strategy—seeing whether or not it worked...and if it's not working, revamping your strategy so you can meet the goal.

Participant 6 added, “The desire to be effective in reaching all of my students, improve the quality of my teaching, and gain insights into adapting or changing assignments and materials that are used for instruction—that is what I value about assessment.”

Four of the participants also mentioned the value of assessment for evaluating programs. One participant stated, “Most campuses probably have three or four instructors teaching different subject areas and if you don't have a centralized assessment process you have no way of beginning to determine if they are being consistent with meeting your goals.” Participant 3 added, “...from a program standpoint we want to make sure our entire program is assessed so

that we know when our students graduate from our program with a certificate or degree they are getting exactly what they needed to be successful in the workplace.”

Only two participants really talked about how assessment could be used to evaluate the institution’s success. Participant 9 said, “It can be a way of assessing whether or not the courses in a program are meeting program outcomes.” He then added, “In a broader context assessment can help you determine whether or not your institution is meeting your general education outcomes or other stated curricular goals.”

### **Student Success**

Evaluating the success of students was the response seven of the nine participants provided when reflecting on the value of assessment. Participant 1 said, “I think we all do assessments to improve student learning.” Participant 3 said, “...to make sure the students are getting what they need.” Participant 5 added, “It’s to improve what students are doing.” Participant 7 summed up the group when she said, “Our job is to educate students...to identify how well the students have achieved goals in a class.” During the interviews, each of the participants spoke passionately about the success of their students. Student success and the ability to measure that success was a priority for almost all of the participants in the study.

### **Question 2: What personal factors influenced your decision to become involved with assessment of student learning?**

The goal of this question was to determine if there were any personal skills, abilities or experiences that influenced the participants’ decision to become involved with assessment at the program or institutional level. Five of the nine participants mentioned personal skill sets they possessed that influenced their decision to be involved with assessment. Three of the nine participants talked about how their prior experiences with assessment had influenced their

decision to work with assessment at the institutional level and five of the nine participants said they were involved with assessment because it was part of their service commitment to the college or a part of their faculty contract.

### **Personal Skills and Abilities**

The personal skills sets most frequently referred to by the participants were organization, analytical thinking, problem solving or a desire to work with numbers. Participant seven's response to this question really summarized the responses for the participants in the group who discussed personal characteristics they believed helped them in their work with program or institutional assessment. She said:

I can analyze data and I'm a critical thinker—it also helps that I am a quick learner with respect to computer software. I have learned how to use Microsoft Access and Excel to make graphs and charts that help present assessment data. I think that is one of the strengths I have—being able to analyze and present data. Also, I'm not an expert in statistics but I know the basics and that helps.

The other participants in this group believed they had an innate desire to work with numbers and analyze data.

### **Prior Experience with Assessment**

Three of the nine participants thought their prior work with assessment really helped them with institutional-level assessment. Participant 6 said, "It [assessment] has been a passion of mine for all the years I've been teaching. I've always been involved with assessment and I've had formal training in assessment. I've been a curriculum designer and I've had extensive training." Participants 1 and 3 also talked about their prior experience with assessment. All three of these participants had been actively involved with assessment since beginning their teaching careers.

**Question 3: What were some of the personal factors you considered to be potential barriers to your involvement with assessment?**

Saturation was reached very early in the study for this question. The most frequently cited barrier to involvement with assessment was time. Seven of the nine participants started their response to this question with the word “time.” Many of the participants explained that other faculty would do anything to avoid serving on the institutional assessment committee. One participant explained, “Sometimes it is nothing but time—trying to juggle all of the things that you have to do.” Another said, “Time is the biggest barrier. I have split responsibilities, responsibilities in the classroom and administrative responsibility and I don’t feel like I can be 100% in both areas. I can’t spend 100% of my time on assessment and 100% in the classroom.” Two of the participants also mentioned the timing of assessment reports as a potential barrier to involvement. One of the participants summarized it this way:

We are trying to do assessment reports for all of our classes at the same time we are grading final exams for five classes. All of my final exams have written essays that need to be graded and then final grades have to be submitted within two working days of the last final exam. So, all the grading has to be done and recorded along with preparing assessment reports that require narratives about our strengths and weaknesses.

There were two participants who also mentioned a lack of understanding or misunderstanding about assessment as a potential barrier to their involvement. Both of these participants spoke about their confusion regarding the role of the institutional assessment committee. These two participants worked at two different institutions. One of the participants stated, “We do not have formal training in campus-wide or institutional assessment here. We are sort of reforming the make-up of the committee and discussing exactly what role we want the institutional assessment committee to have going forward.”



**Question 4: Would you describe what your institution has done to help change faculty perceptions of assessment from something they “have” to do to something they “want” to do?**

The rationale behind this question was to help the researcher understand the culture of assessment at the institution and to determine if there were specific institutional characteristics that influenced the participants’ decision to become involved with assessment beyond the course level. Only one of the nine participants in the study indicated that the institution had made the transition from assessment being something faculty had to do to something they wanted to do. This was somewhat surprising given that the institutions included in this study were chosen because they had been recognized and rewarded for their work in assessment. The researcher incorrectly assumed the culture of assessment on these campuses would be based on strong faculty desire to engage in assessment. Three of the participants said straightforwardly that assessment was done to maintain accreditation either for a program or for the institution. Participant 7 stated, “I would say that all faculty members at our institution are doing assessment mainly because we must have assessment to maintain our accreditation. A previous HLC visit indicated this was a weak area for us and something we had no choice but to improve.” Another participant at a different institution said it like this, “I think it all started when North Central came in and we were dinged on assessment because it did not look like we had very much assessment going on. Actually everybody was assessing, we just weren’t reporting it well.”

**Question 5: Were there any people or events that significantly influenced your decision to participate in assessment at a level other than the course level?**

This question was asked so that the researcher could determine if there were any internal or external influences these participants’ recalled that could be replicated at other institutions to

increase faculty involvement. Two of the participants mentioned specific administrators who had influenced their decision to be more involved with assessment. Both of these participants mentioned their Vice President for Learning as a significant individual who influenced their involvement. One participant talked about the influence of some of the guest speakers they had brought to campus to conduct workshops on assessment. Participant 1 explained, “We had speakers come to campus and talk to us about assessment. They taught us about what we could do and how we could do it. They also showed us how it would be a benefit to us if we got on board with it.”

Other participants talked about how their undergraduate or graduate preparation in education had helped them understand assessment more. One participant mentioned a specific conference the institution had funded that really helped him understand the value of assessment at the institutional level. Participant 3 explained how their program’s decision to pursue specialized accreditation really influenced her involvement with assessment. She was excited when she recalled this event:

When we decided to go above and beyond and seek specialized accreditation everybody in the department jumped in and said this is what we are going to do. It was obvious to us that we were all going to have to pitch in and become a part of the whole assessment process. I’m the type of employee where if they tell me this is what’s important to the institution then no matter what it takes I’m going to do it. It becomes important to me.

**Question 6: What does faculty-driven assessment mean to you?**

This question was added based on feedback from faculty in the pilot and field tests. The researcher was concerned that the words “faculty-driven” were often misinterpreted by faculty and administrators and that rather than encouraging more faculty involvement they often discouraged faculty involvement. They were added to help the researcher gain a greater

understanding of what faculty-driven means to faculty with respect to program and institutional assessment.

All nine participants agreed that assessment needed to be faculty-driven. They varied greatly in the way they explained their rationale; however, it was clear that the main reason most of the participants were in favor of having a faculty-driven, rather than administrative driven-process, was because faculty were the ones who have to create change in the classrooms and in programs. One item of interest in this data was that while all nine participants believed that assessment “should” be faculty-driven, there were three participants who did not feel like the assessment processes on their campus were in fact faculty-driven. Participant 9 explained it this way:

They used to tell us that assessment is faculty-driven but what I’ve come to determine that really meant was that faculty members were given the privilege of doing the assessment that the administration wanted us to do. In fact, it wasn’t faculty-driven at all. The initial force behind assessment here was administrative. We [faculty] were the energy that drove the process I guess, but the emphasis came from administration. We’ve been doing assessment here for so long that it has become expected. It is just a part of what we do—like turning in grades. Ideally faculty would decide their own assessment methods, strategies, and schedules.

Participant 3 said:

We [faculty] don’t need an administrator telling us that we have to assess. We need to realize that we need to on our own. I think faculty should collect the data and they should write the reports. It helps them to see what is being done school-wide with all of our students—transfer and those going straight to work. When all the faculty members are involved they can see the big picture.

Participant 5 expressed the sentiments of the group when she said, “We are going to have to be the ones who implement any changes.” All participants were convinced that without faculty involvement in assessment, change was unlikely to occur.

**Question 7: Once you decided to be involved with assessment at the program or institutional level, how did you go about getting involved?**

This question was asked to help the researcher understand whether or not the participants' involvement with assessment beyond the course level was something they actively sought or something that was asked of them. The researcher also used this question to probe into whether the participants were receiving any additional compensation or workload reduction because of their involvement with institutional or program level assessment.

All of the participants in this study were involved with institutional or program level assessment work; however, five of the participants were involved primarily to fulfil their service commitment to the college. Community college faculty members are frequently required to serve on committees as part of their faculty contract. Two of the nine participants in the study were involved with program level assessment only at the time of this study and they indicated that they did not receive any additional compensation for the work they did at the program level. Two of the nine participants were involved with both program level and institutional level assessments and they indicated that they did receive additional compensation for the work they did at the program level but not for the work they did at the institutional level. Only one participant in this study received additional compensation for work done with institutional level assessment. All additional compensation received was in the form of course release time or stipends.

Despite the fact that some of the participants were involved with institutional assessment to fulfill their service commitment to the college, four of the participants indicated that they chose the institutional assessment committee intentionally. These four participants chose this committee specifically because they wanted to serve on a committee that made or could make a difference. Participant 6 shared, "The passion for my institution has motivated me to want to serve on the institutional committee. My reputation at the institution is probably why I was

asked to serve.” She also said, “People know I am active in doing assessment and that is it a passion of mine. I wasn’t told I had to serve—I wanted to do it.”

**Question 8: How did you feel about assessment after your first semester of involvement with assessment at the program or institutional level?**

By asking this question the researcher hoped to gain some insight into the reasons why assessments initiatives at these institutions had been successful. The researcher asked each participant if they were encouraged by the work they saw with assessment.

Four of the participants in the study were encouraged by the assessment work they saw at their institution and five of the participants said there was significant room for improvement.

Participant 1 explained:

I think I saw a more direct impact with the program level assessment because that’s immediate for me and every year I submit an annual report to my accrediting agency. With the institutional level assessment I did participate in collecting the data but I was just kind of watching and seeing what was going on. I was looking at others who had served for a few years and wondering how they got faculty to participate so much—how did you get them to tell you all that. To me, that is sometimes the hardest part of assessment. It’s not because faculty don’t want to, it’s just that there is always something to do and the committee members have to do a lot of follow up to collect data. People are like “oh yes, I meant to get that to you...I’ll get that to you right away.” Reminding people and then reminding them again is the time consuming part.

Participant 2 was encouraged by the work he saw with institutional assessment but thought they could do more. He explained, “I think there is some room for improvement. I want someone to quantify the data. I do think assessment is serving its purpose but I think it can be more than it is.” Participant 4 shared his experiences with the institutional assessment committee at his institution like this:

I was a little disappointed when I initially started working with assessment at the institutional level. The assessment committee would say it is time to submit your assessment results and we got maybe 50% participation. There was no accountability—no one was really encouraged to turn in their assessment reports. Because there was no accountability for turning in the reports the number submitted dwindled and the

assessment committee actually disbanded. That has changed with our new administration and my feelings about assessment are a lot more promising than they used to be. I have high hopes for where assessment is going to go. It's encouraging and where committee attendance used to be sad and pathetic, we now have 100% committee attendance every month. I have positive feelings now.

**Question 9: What factors do you feel influence the success of assessment initiatives at the program or institutional level at your institution?**

By asking this question, the researcher hoped faculty involved with program and institutional assessment would identify factors they viewed as necessary for success with assessment. Five of the nine participants said that having strong administrative support and leadership was instrumental to the success of assessment initiatives on their campuses. Participant 1 explained, "The Vice President of Learning was a long time faculty member and has been very supportive of assessment. This administrator was very involved in assessment prior to becoming an administrator. When you have leaders who know assessment is important and don't let it get too far on the back burner... it kind of becomes a part of who we are—it's just what we do." Another participant said, "Our president has been very good at publicizing our strategic plan. We know where we are headed and assessment ties into our plan. Everyone can see how the departmental strategic plans tie into the institutional plan—it's not a strategic plan that just sits on the shelf." Participant 4 shared:

Having a full time assessment coordinator who has the full support of the administration encourages faculty participation with assessment. Back when the institutional assessment committee was just the responsibility of faculty it faltered. I don't blame the committee...because faculty did not feel like they had the authority to make people turn assessments in. That is a little different now. While our new assessment coordinator doesn't have any real authority either, that person does have the support from the administration, especially the vice-president of learning and the college President. They are standing behind that person and saying "yes, this will happen.

Two of the participants specially talked about faculty involvement and collaboration. Participant 5 said, "You have to have goals and objectives and a plan of action that everyone

understands. It's not one person's job—everyone needs to be involved because everyone has different expertise.” Participant 9 echoed that sentiment when he said, “You need to have interdepartmental and inter program collaboration. You have to agree on the outcomes and the competencies.” He went on to say, “You need collaboration with an eye toward supporting the broader institutional goals.”

For two of the participants, having good assessment examples was necessary. Participant 2 said, “I feel like using assessments that were already developed and accessible gave us a leg up over trying to develop our own processes.”

**Question 10: How would you describe your colleagues' attitudes about assessment?**

By analyzing the participants' responses to this question, the researcher hoped to be able to identify reasons why more faculty members were not involved with assessment at the program or institutional level. Eight of nine participants responded to this question by saying that faculty participation was limited due to a lack of understanding about the purpose or benefit of assessment as it was currently being conducted on their campus. One participant said that all of the faculty she knew were involved with assessment and one indicated that some faculty might fear how assessment results could be used against them in their evaluation.

Participant 8 shared, “I think we have faculty on both sides of the fence with assessment. Some who absolutely hate doing the reports—they don't see the connection or consider it a waste of time.” She went on to explain, “There are some in the middle who will do the reports to get them done...but dread the five year report. Then there are some like me who are like “go assessment all the way!” Participant 6 believed that a lack of education about assessment prevented more faculty involvement. She said, “They don't understand what the purpose of assessment is and they just look at it as more work.” She went on to explain how some faculty

members have a negative view of assessment. She explained, "...they look at it as if you are evaluating them [faculty] and not as a way of helping them to do their job better or easier. For most on this campus I think there is a negative association with assessment."

**Question 11: Would you describe some of the barriers to involvement with assessment your colleagues have mentioned?**

The researcher analyzed the responses to this question in order to determine additional barriers to faculty involvement with assessment. All nine of the participants indicated that faculty did not see enough benefits from assessment at the program or institutional level to warrant the amount of time they had to spend on assessment. Participant 7 shared, "My colleges have expressed concern that assessment data doesn't make a difference." Participant 5 explained, "I think faculty members don't understand what they are going to do with the data." Participant 4 had significant insight into this question when he shared:

First of all I think faculty members still have a misunderstanding about what assessment is. Some faculty fear comes from academic freedom because there's a misunderstanding that if they do assessments and the results are not favorable that somebody is going to come back and tell them how to teach their class or have them make changes to their teaching strategies. That is not what assessment means at all but that doesn't mean that faculty know that. Part of it [lack of involvement] is fear that you are going to lose your academic freedom. Also, there are definitely no monetary rewards for doing it.

Participant 3 thought that a lot of instructors were confused about assessment. She said, "All instructors assess but they just may not be calling it assessment. I think that is the barrier—they don't understand that yes, they are doing this everyday—they just didn't know what it was." She added, "Also, they may not have an understanding of what to do with the data once they have it."

**Question 12: What has your institution done with assessment that you believe makes a difference in faculty participation with assessment at the program or institutional level?**



The rationale for this question was to help the researcher understand what these three institutions had done that made a difference with faculty involvement. Four of the nine participants in this study believed that teamwork at the program and institutional level was essential for successful assessment initiatives. Two of the nine participants talked about the importance of faculty workshops and faculty development in assessment. One participant specifically talked about the importance of recognition.

Participant 2 said, “There is a lot of teamwork here. We had a task force design a program review template that serves as a guideline for all program reviews. This template was approved by the faculty and the Cabinet and will streamline the program review process and provide the institution with quality program reviews.” Participant 6 explained, “We [the institutional assessment committee] are reaching out to our colleagues and we are not keeping it all internal. It’s not “this is what we’ve decided.” We have vetted everything and we have gathered input from administration and faculty.”

Participant 4 talked about the importance of faculty development and faculty workshops. He said, “The presentations at faculty development are attended by faculty and given by faculty. I think if you are a faculty that is misunderstanding the assessment process and you see another faculty member that is doing it correctly that is a positive influence.”

Participant 1 explained how recognition was important to faculty morale. She believed it was important to give a lot of recognition and she shared how academic leaders at her institution recognized individual and team successes at the beginning of each semester. She indicated that recognition in front of peers was a strong faculty motivator for work with assessment.

**Question 13: What evidence do you see of assessment being used in institutional decision-making about budget, resources, and curriculum planning at your institution?**

The assessment literature suggested that when faculty see assessment driving institutional decision making they are more likely to be involved with assessment. This question was designed to explore how faculty at these institutions saw assessment results being used in decision making.

Five of the nine participants indicated that they could see how assessment was being used to make decisions about budgets and the strategic plan. Four of the nine participants indicated that they were not aware of any specific examples of how assessment was impacted decision-making at the institutional level; however, they did indicate that they thought it could be.

Participant 9 shared:

On our end of semester assessment reports we are asked to explain how assessment should impact budgets. We are asked to do that in our program reviews as well. We are allowed to make suggestions to the budget based on our assessment results and program reviews. We have an opportunity to tell them what we need—video programs, reference books, etc. I've seen those requests fulfilled sometimes.

Participant 7 explained that through their institutional assessment database they are able to query the assessment reports specifically for budget related requests. She also said that faculty members are involved in program level budgeting. Participant 3 said, “Budgets are tight right now but student retention and success are all part of the strategic plan. I think the institution realizes the importance of providing support and funding for us to be able to do assessment and for programs that are showing success.”

Four of the nine participants indicated that they did not see evidence of assessment driving institutional decision making; however, as Participant 2 shared:

It's not something I hear about every day. It is just far removed from my day-to-day work life unless I seek out the information. I have so much I have to get done...that I don't have a lot of time to seek out that information. I'm sure that information is available, it's not like they make decisions in secret, it's just that I'm trying to balance my workload and balance how involved I can be with my sanity.

**Question 14: What thoughts or feelings about your experiences with assessment would you like to share with policy-makers and educators that might encourage more faculty participation with program and institutional level assessment?**

The literature about faculty involvement with assessment at community colleges revealed that faculty involvement beyond the course level needs to improve. This interview question was designed to allow the participants an opportunity to share their personal achievements with assessment as well as some of their frustrations. The researcher hoped that these responses would provide insight for other institutions.

Participant responses to this question varied greatly. Almost every participant in the study had a different recommendation based on their personal experiences with assessment. Participant 1 was concerned about compensation. She said, “I think we have gone for a long time without compensation for the chair of the institutional assessment team. I think allowing that person some time to do their duties is important. Participant 2 suggested the assessment processes were too disconnected. He explained, “When it comes to assessment to a certain extent I feel like we focus on one thing over another... I think we need to be looking at all of our assessment combined.” Participant 3 responded by saying how important it was to provide opportunities for professional development. Participant 4 thought the institution did not spend enough time publicizing their success. He said, “I think we should use assessment as evidence to motivate others by sharing what we’re doing here at our school.” Participant 5 liked the idea of having institutional assessment days. She explained, “You need to set aside time to have conversations with your faculty members because in some departments or multi-site campuses that doesn’t happen often.” Assessment is important because it is one of the ways we, in higher education, can clarify and show what we are actually doing.” Participant 6 stressed the need for

more faculty members to be actively involved in the process. She said, “Faculty need to realize that assessment is their vehicle to encourage change instead of just talking and fussing about things.” Participant 7 had very strong feelings about the role of policy-makers with respect to assessment in individual institutions. She was a strong supporter of guidelines but not strict directives about how assessment should be conducted or evaluated. Participant 8 believed faculty needed to be more informed about the purpose of assessment. She reasoned, “I think people perform better when they see the purpose behind what we are doing or what we are asking them to do.” Participant 9 said institutions needed to do a better job of designing and implementing their assessment processes. He stated, “Make sure we are assessing smarter and not just more. Don’t confuse quantity with quality. Understand how sampling can help give you the data you need.”

Every participant had a suggestion about how policy-makers could improve faculty involvement with assessment at the institutional and program level. They each provided open and honest answers as they reflected on their personal experiences with assessment.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the nine participants involved in the study and to present their responses to each of the 14 open-ended interview questions. The chapter began with a summary of the study’s participant demographics, then proceeded with individual descriptions of each study participant and closed with detailed responses to the interview questions that were analyzed and summarized by the researcher. The researcher provided the rationale for each interview question in order to demonstrate how the interview questions would be used to answer the sub questions to this research study. Each interview question was presented along with the participants’ responses. Individual quotations were

included to provide a richer depiction of the participants' descriptions and to highlight themes that emerged from their responses.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter compares and contrasts the data presented in Chapter 4 with the literature reviewed for this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the study and then proceeds to a presentation of the findings for each research sub-question along with conclusions showing how the findings were similar to, or different from, previous research. The chapter concludes with limitations to the study, recommendations for improved practice, and suggestions for future research.

#### **Overview of the Study**

This narrative research study was conducted to explore the experiences of full-time community college faculty members involved in assessment of student learning beyond the course level. The participants in this study were employed at public two-year institutions of higher education regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission that had been recognized for their work in assessment. The participants were identified by their chief academic officer or institutional assessment coordinator based on the participants' involvement with assessment at the program or institutional level. To answer the research questions the researcher conducted one-hour, semi-structured interviews with nine participants working at three different institutions. All participants were asked the same 14 open-ended interview questions that were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Prior published research has documented the need for more faculty involvement with assessment at the program and institutional levels; however, there is little research based on faculty experiences with assessment at these levels. This study adds to the body of literature

about community college faculty participation with assessment by sharing the perspectives of community college faculty members who had been recognized for their participation with either program or institutional assessment on their campus. This study also provides recommendations to institutional leaders, policy makers, and other faculty who want to increase faculty involvement with assessment beyond the course level.

## **Findings**

The central research question guiding this study was: *What factors influenced community college faculty members to become involved with assessment of student learning beyond the course level and what are their recommendations for increasing faculty participation in institutional or program level assessment?* Six sub-questions were developed to provide a more comprehensive answer to this research question. A discussion of the major findings for each research sub-question is follows.

### **Sub Question A**

#### **Sub question A: Why did the participants become involved with the assessment of student learning?**

This question was developed to allow the researcher to identify any personal characteristics the participants believed they possessed that caused them to naturally embrace assessment. To accomplish this, the participants were asked to reflect on what they valued about assessment and to share any personal skills or abilities they believed influenced their decision to become involved with assessment, particularly at the program or institutional level. All nine participants explained that the primary value of the assessment process was its ability to improve teaching and learning. Six of the nine participants shared how they used assessment to not only evaluate their students' performance but also measure their own success as an instructor. One

participant explained, “Personally I like formative assessment received during the semester because I get direct feedback from the students and I can adapt my teaching a lot quicker than I can with summative assessments that come at the end of the semester...by that time it’s too late to help any students in that class.” Another participant shared a similar story, “When things are going well after I’ve taught something or had students participate in an activity and I use an assessment tool that shows me the students “got it” then I know I’m okay—if not, then I know I need to do some type of review or remediation.”

As the responses cited above show, most of the participants initially referred to course level assessment when they responded to this question. However, when I asked them to explain the value of assessment at the program or institutional level, only four of the participants described how assessment could be used as a mechanism to improve a program or institution. One participant shared, “I volunteered to serve on the institutional assessment committee because I thought it would increase my knowledge about assessment and that it would enhance what I do in my program with assessment...maybe that was a personal reason for serving on it, because it would improve my program.” Four participants had prior experience with either institutional accreditation or specialized program accreditation and they believed an important value of assessment at the program or institutional level was that it was essential for maintaining accreditation.

Five of the nine participants mentioned specific skill sets like organization, analytical thinking, problem solving, or a desire to work with data as personal characteristics they possessed that they believe influenced their decision to be more involved with assessment. As one participant shared, “I’ve always been, to a certain extent, a math nerd. I like data to begin with so it’s a pretty good fit for me to be doing assessments...It’s always been rather interesting



to me to play with the data and see what you are doing and what you need to be doing.”

Another participant stated, “Organization is a personal strength of mine...I like to see how my assignments align with course outcomes and how I’m going to assess them.”

Three of the nine participants shared how their educational background and experience with assessment had influenced their decision to be more involved with assessment at their institution. One participant stated, “I have a background in education and I’ve always been very assessment minded. Making sure my curriculum was aligned with course and program outcomes. Assessment gives you a big, broader picture.”

### **Sub Question B**

**Sub question B: Were there any institutional programs or significant events that contributed to the participants’ decision to participate in institutional or program level assessment?**

The participants in this study struggled to recall events or programs that contributed to their decision to be more involved with assessment. All of the participants explained that their involvement with program or institutional level assessment was primarily for the purpose of either helping to maintain accreditation for their program or fulfilling the service commitment portion of their faculty contract. When asked to describe a specific event that influenced their participation in assessment, two of the participants shared how attending a conference on assessment had influenced them and three of the participants mentioned the value of campus-wide workshops on assessment done during faculty development. One participant shared, “I had no prior work with assessment in my undergraduate or graduate education...what I’ve learned about assessment has been through conferences and other people.” Another participant spoke passionately about how much he had learned from attending a conference at the Higher Learning

Commission paid for by the institution. He explained how being able to see what other institutions were doing with assessment really helped him understand how assessment could be done more effectively at his institution. One participant explained how guest speakers brought on campus to talk about assessment motivated her. She said, “We’ve had guest speakers come on campus and explain how assessment could really benefit us...that it doesn’t have to be all drudgery—we can actually utilize the information and maybe even make it somewhat fun.”

### **Sub question C**

**Sub question C: What do the participants say are the reasons why their colleagues are not involved with assessment?**

The participants’ responses to this question revealed three primary barriers to more faculty involvement with assessment at the program or institutional level (a) unclear purpose or benefit; (b) lack of time; and (c) not understanding what assessment involves or means.

#### **Unclear Purpose/Benefit**

Eight of the nine participants believed their colleagues did not participate more in assessment because they did not understand the purposes or benefits of assessment as it was currently being done at the program or institutional level. Six participants struggled to see how their course level assessments related to program or institutional level assessments. As one participant noted, “When it comes to campus-wide or even department wide comparison, I’m not sure how generalizable or comparable assessment results are.” Another participant said, “Some faculty view their assessment work as busywork and I don’t blame them because while there might be a little feedback from the institutional assessment committee—nobody does anything with the information...you put a lot of effort into a document that goes nowhere.” This participant went on to explain that he did not feel that faculty necessarily resisted assessment at

the program level, they just didn't see any reward for doing it with the exception of programs that participated in specialized accreditation. One participant offered some encouragement for the value of assessment beyond the course level when she said, "I think the more involved you are, the more relevant and important it [assessment] all becomes. If you don't have that involvement then you begin to question what the benefit of it is because you are not seeing anything that is really helping you or your students."

### **Time**

Seven of the nine participants explained how faculty members in community colleges have so many competing interests for their time that program or institutional level assessment is not a responsibility they value enough to add to their already demanding schedules. One participant explained it like this:

I am a full-time faculty member and we don't currently have release time for service on the institutional assessment committee or for chairing the committee. I am also a program director so I not only tend to my full-time teaching load but also perform my administrative duties as a program director. I receive compensation for being a program director but it is still a lot of juggling of time. I think the biggest challenge for me this year has been just trying to teach my classes and make sure they are going well; make sure I'm doing everything with my program director duties; and then also getting the institutional assessment reports together, reviewing the reports, and setting up committee meetings. So for me, time has been the biggest factor.

### **Lack of Understanding about Assessment**

Four of the nine participants said their colleagues did not fully understand what assessment really meant at the program or institutional level. One participant said, "I don't think faculty fear assessment, I think they avoid it because, other than the areas that have specialized accreditation, most faculty don't understand it." Another shared this:

We need clear expectations. Faculty need to know what outcomes are expected, what methods of collection you should use and how to aggregate the data [at the program level]. They don't understand how to do that and it creates a barrier. Sometimes the barrier is generational. Some faculty members don't understand the tools we have

available now to aggregate data for us. Faculty ask why they can't just give grades and if they [the students] pass that means I [the faculty] am doing good and if they fail then that means I'm not doing good. Here in our meeting that is where the line is drawn in the sand almost—it's like well, this is the way we have always done it. There is a group that doesn't want to change.

## **Sub Question D**

### **Sub question D: What factors do the participants see as critical to the successful implementation of student learning assessment initiatives?**

This question is one that participants in the study seemed to take extra time in answering. As noted earlier, many of the participants in this study personally embraced assessment and believed strongly that assessment could be used to improve courses, programs, and institutions. While the participants' responses varied based on their personal experiences, the two major themes that emerged from their responses were collaborative faculty involvement and strong administrative support and leadership.

### **Faculty Involvement**

All nine participants believed faculty involvement was critical for any successful assessment initiative. Two participants talked about how faculty like autonomy and need academic freedom to teach their classes in ways that help students learn. However, they both acknowledged that faculty members operate within guidelines and institutions need to have some form of "quality control" or "course consistency." Several participants shared their observations that involving more faculty members in the design of program and institutional outcomes was critical for creating faculty "buy-in." One participant said, "Faculty are hired for their content knowledge—they know what their students need to know; therefore, the faculty need to be the ones setting the goals for courses and programs." He went on to share how faculty are the ones who have to evaluate the students' success at achieving program goals, so they need to be

involved in determining those goals. Another said, “We need faculty to interpret what is going on.”

Several participants explained how important faculty collaboration was for program or institutional success. One participant said it was critical to get faculty members to agree on the outcomes with “an eye toward supporting the broader institutional goals.” Six of the nine participants believed that over 50% of the faculty at their institution participated in assessment at either the program or institutional level—at one institution the percentage of faculty involvement was estimated at eighty to ninety percent by all three participants from that institution.

### **Academic Administrative Support**

Five of the nine participants in the study shared their belief that strong academic leadership and support were critical to successful program and institutional assessments. Academic administrative leadership was cited by two participants as a contributing factor in their decision to become involved with assessment at the institutional level. The participants shared how important it was for academic leaders to provide strong leadership for assessment in the form of creating a “vision” or “culture” of assessment and a workable plan. One participant said, “You have to have goals, objectives, and a plan of action...everybody has to understand what it is. You have to create a culture and once it is there it [assessment] will take off on its own.” Another said, “Attitude is the factor that most influences assessment. Faculty attitude and their buy-in are critical. They have to understand the purpose of assessment and how to use it effectively.” One participant explained the delicate balance between leadership and management of assessment when she said, “Assessments that are administrative driven become more of something that faculty have to do rather than creating an environment where faculty have a large investment in its success.”

## **Sub Question E**

### **Sub question E: What do participants suggest that institutional leaders should do to increase faculty involvement with assessment?**

The interview questions designed to answer this research question asked the participants to share what their institution did to increase faculty involvement with assessment beyond the course level. The participants were also asked to share how their institution used assessment to guide budgeting, resource allocation and curriculum.

Teamwork was frequently cited as the reason for more faculty involvement at these institutions. Through the interviews I perceived that faculty at these institutions enjoyed working together. One participant shared how he and a colleague had developed a substantial common assignment they encouraged students to spend significant time working on and then allowed the students to submit the same assignment for credit in both classes with different assessment criteria for each course. This participant also explained how the departments seemed to have common goals aligned with institutional goals. He shared, “To a certain extent there is an understanding that we are not fighting department against department for students. I’ve worked at other institutions where there was a competition for students and I don’t see that here.” Two participants shared how the institutional assessment coordinator was having one-on-one meetings with each department to work on program goals and program assessment plans. One participant shared her perception of faculty involvement as follows:

Not everyone can be on the institutional assessment committee so not everyone feels like they are making decisions about assessment. I guess the committee size could be seen as a potential barrier to more faculty involvement; however, I can tell you 100% that if somebody said they wanted to be on that committee we would try to make that happen or at least visit with them and talk about their ideas.

Another example of more faculty involvement on one campus involved assembling the entire faculty to develop a plan to improve one of the general education outcomes. A workshop was held to discuss the outcome and then faculty members were asked to provide ideas that could be implemented to improve the outcome. Once the plan was approved and several solutions were developed, faculty members agreed to implement the ideas into the classroom.

Several of the participants also referred to the “culture” of assessment they sensed at their institution. One participant shared, “I think there is a lot of encouragement and support here. Our coordinator does a really good job of encouraging us and providing us with data. We are not left up to our devices. We very much have a culture of assessment here.” Several other participants echoed her sentiments when they explained “It [assessment] is just what we do here.”

#### **Sub Question F**

**Sub question F: What would the participants like administrators, policy-makers and other faculty to know about their experiences with assessment?**

There was considerable diversity in the participants’ responses to this research question. The participants provided reflective responses that varied depending on their personal experiences with assessment. The participants’ responses revealed actions institutional leaders could take to either eliminate barriers to involvement or provide incentives for involvement beyond the course level. For example, the barrier of “not enough time” could be eliminated by reducing teaching loads to accommodate assessment work or the issue of “time” could be addressed by providing incentives, like stipends, to compensate faculty for work on assessment. The three largest barriers to faculty involvement discussed by the participants were a lack of

time, lack of clarity about the purpose of assessment, and lack of training to know how to do it well.

### **Lack of Time**

Managing time between teaching classes and performing administrative duties was a barrier discussed by seven of the nine research participants. Five of the nine participants explained how important compensation or release time was for faculty work with program or institutional assessment. Two of the participants explained that although they did receive compensation for their work with program level assessment there was no compensation for their work with institutional level assessment. Three participants believed it was important to have an institutional assessment coordinator who received compensation for work with institutional assessment in order to have consistent data and to reduce the amount of time it takes for committee members to aggregate and analyze assessment data. Many of the participants in the study explained that committee membership often rotated and that there needed to be one person who provided consistent faculty leadership and was responsible for compiling and tracking institutional data on a regular basis.

One participant explained, “I think that allowing a person time to do their duties is important. Without release time, faculty members are reluctant to take on the responsibility for institutional assessment.” Another shared, “It is the institutional committee chair that really needs release time or some sort of compensation because once all of the course level assessments come in they are the ones responsible for compiling those reports. We’ve discussed distributing the work to the committee members but decided that would just be confusing...you could have too many cooks in the kitchen.” One other participant said, “Having a person dedicated and passionate about assessment who advocates for assessment is essential to an effective assessment



program.” The one participant in the study who did receive compensation for her work with institutional assessment provided this insight:

I feel like I completely understand the purpose of assessment. I feel like I need to be the one giving more training—it’s not that I don’t need to learn more but I have mastered our system. I’m still learning about other schools and how they are doing assessment and different tools available but I feel good about assessment here. I feel proud of some of the changes we’ve made based on our assessments.

One participant in the study summarized the group feelings about the work of assessment beyond the course level when he said:

I don’t believe that as a classroom teacher writing a program review is my responsibility. I am okay with providing course assessment data but compiling all that data and looking at the broader goals is an administrative function and not a faculty responsibility. I think that a monetary stipend for writing a program review would be appropriate. The problem is that faculty members are always developing new courses, improving existing courses, teaching courses and grading assignments as part of their teaching workload. In addition faculty are asked to prepare budgets, conduct academic advising and prepare course level assessment reports...then it’s like oh, by the way we also need you to write the program review.

Many of the participants in the study believed program and institutional assessment was beyond the scope of their traditional faculty contract.

### **Lack of Purpose**

Eight of the nine participants in this study believed institutions could improve faculty involvement by being clearer about the role and purpose of assessment beyond the course level.

One participant said, “I think the one thing to remember is to provide opportunities for professional development to allow folks to understand what assessment is. This would allow them to go through training and see examples of how assessment is used.” She went on to share this:

Faculty might be thinking that it will reflect badly on them if their assessment doesn’t look great...we need to show them that this is not what assessment is about. It is about making sure our students have what they need when they leave our courses and programs to further their goals in life. At our institution we’ve made curriculum changes based on

feedback from employers who employ our graduates and from our advisory committee. The problem we have is finding good assessment tools for some programs.

While most of the participants in this study did not think faculty at their institution feared how assessment data would be used, they did believe there was the potential for misunderstanding if institutions were not clear about the purpose or role of assessment.

Three of the study participants talked about how sharing individual and institutional successes was motivating and encouraging for faculty. One participant said:

Assessment is one of the ways that we in higher education can clarify and show what we are actually doing—especially right now when it is high stakes money. Personally, I don't like some of the ways they [legislators] are looking at our success—in terms of graduation rates but you can contradict them and say yes, this person may not have graduated but they were successful here—they went on to use this [education] in their jobs.

Another participant explained, “I think the word I would use is brag. Part of program assessment is looking at what happens when students leave here—are they successful in the workplace and are employers happy with them? I think we need to use that data to either recruit more students or as a public relations bragging point.” Another participant in the study believed it was important to recognize the contributions of individual faculty members. She said:

We give a lot of recognition at our institution. It might just be a little celebration of punch and cookies...it's not that you get a big bonus but just recognizing that these individuals have worked hard and this is what they've accomplished. Good leaders make people aware that assessment is vital to your institution. So getting that support and reward for the good work that you are doing with assessment is important. It's important to get that pat on the back and be recognized. Getting that thank-you or appreciation, and applause doesn't buy supper but it does make you feel very good and it makes you feel like oh, I can do more...I'll do this again!

### **Lack of Training**

Four of the nine participants expressed concern over the lack of faculty training about how to do program or institutional assessment. One participant said, “I think that if you find one program faculty member that is doing excellent assessments then those assessment processes

could be shared with people who are struggling with developing their assessment plans.”

Another participant explained how the institution places examples of assessments on the portal for all faculty members to access. She said, “If I’m thinking that I don’t know what I need to do or how to do it I can log into the portal and see what others have done and think about how I could use that in my program. I think that has been very beneficial, especially for new faculty who are not used to doing assessment.”

All of the participants in this study indicated that their course level assessments were aggregated to demonstrate institutional assessment. One participant believed that institutions could do a better job of assessing programs and the institutions without creating more work for classroom faculty. He expressed his concern like this:

I just don’t think we have to assess as much as we do to be effective at assessment. Let’s give our classroom teachers a break every now and then and give them time to think about changes they want to make and the best way to implement them. It’s not just about reporting data—faculty need time to develop assessment tools, to implement them, to collect data and to evaluate whether or not the data showed what you wanted it to show.

Another participant shared this:

I get that we need to solve transfer issues...but bringing faculty together who have content expertise without assessment expertise and then mandating what needs to happen with assessment is not the way to solve the problem. I also do not think policy makers should try to rank institutions based on assessment results. Institutions need to be demonstrating progress and showing that assessment data is being used effectively.

This next section presents conclusions drawn from an analysis of the research findings and shows how the findings compare to the existing literature.

## **Conclusions**

This study explored the experiences of community college faculty members who were involved with assessment beyond the course level. The assessment movement in higher education has clearly been driven by external demands for more accountability. The Higher

Learning Commission and all five of the other regional accrediting bodies require institutions to provide documentation of faculty-driven assessment of student learning for continued accreditation. Leading experts on assessment call for faculty involvement beyond the course level and many community college leaders have expressed a desire for more faculty participation at the program or institutional level. The shared experiences of the participants in this study revealed that faculty commitment to assessment for the purpose of improving programs or the institution was largely influenced by the actions of the leaders at their institutions. The findings of this study led to the following conclusions:

1. **Faculty involvement with assessment beyond the course level is positively influenced by their acceptance of assessment as a mechanism for improving a program or an institution.** All nine of the participants in the study indicated that the primary value of assessment was that it could be used as a tool for improving courses, programs, and institutions. Seven of the nine participants in this study indicated that while their initial involvement with assessment was to help maintain accreditation or fulfill their faculty contract, their reason for continued involvement in assessment was to improve their program or their institution. This is consistent with the research findings in the Welsh & Metcalf (2003a) study that indicated broad faculty support is dependent upon the institution's primary motivation for the assessment activity. This is also consistent with the 2010 NILOA survey that found the primary driver for assessment at the department or program level was faculty interest in improving their program (Ewell et al., 2011).
2. **Faculty collaboration on assessment goals contributed to increased faculty support for assessment at the program and institutional level.** All nine of the

participants indicated that broad faculty involvement was critical for successful assessment initiatives. The participants discussed the importance of faculty involvement at all levels of decision making and explained how important collaboration and teamwork were for successfully setting department and program goals. These findings were consistent with the findings in the assessment literature that stress how important it is for faculty to be involved in the processes in order to generate faculty support (Nunley et al., 2011; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Participants in the study were adamant that assessment processes determined and driven by administration are not effective and not generally supported by faculty.

**3. Unclear understanding about the role of assessment at the program or institutional level resulted in decreased faculty motivation for involvement.**

Eight of the nine participants indicated that their colleagues did not participate more in assessment because they did not understand the purposes or benefits of assessment as it was currently being done at the program or institutional level. These eight participants believed institutions could improve faculty involvement by being clearer about the role and purpose of program and institutional assessment. These findings were consistent with the Williams (2013) study that examined the perceptions of community college faculty and administrators to determine if faculty perceptions about institutional conditions necessary for eliciting more faculty involvement in assessment aligned with administrators' perceptions. The study results confirmed that faculty members were highly involved in course level assessment but unsure about how those assessments supported broader program or institutional assessment processes.

4. **Lack of evidence demonstrating how program or institutional assessments were being used to improve programs or institutions contributed to faculty reluctance to embrace assessment beyond the course level.** All of the participants in this study indicated that their program and institutional assessments were built from course-level assessments; however, several of the participants indicated that while they understood how course level assessments *could* support program assessment and the broader institutional goals they did not see evidence of how assessments actually *did* support program or institutional assessment goals. These findings were consistent with the assessment literature findings that faculty are not likely to support assessment activities if they do not see how they are being used to inform decisions about curriculum and budgeting (Ebersole & Mince, 2007; Middaugh, 2009; Shipman et al., 2003).
  
5. **Exposure to evidence of assessment processes that resulted in improvements either on their own campus or at other institutions positively influenced faculty motivation for assessment work at the institutional level.** Two of the participants in the study shared how their attendance at a conference or workshop on assessment improved their motivation for working with assessment beyond the course level because they saw evidence of assessment working at other institutions. This is consistent with Hutchings' (2010) suggestion to higher education leaders to provide more resources for faculty to attend conferences and workshops where examples of good assessments are demonstrated and where exposure to the benefits and value of assessments could occur. This is also consistent with the findings in the study conducted by Grunwald and Peterson (2003) where one of the significant variables in

predicting faculty involvement with assessment at the institutional level was found to be the faculty member's involvement with external influences.

Three of the participants explained how sharing program and institutional successes motivated and encouraged them. Welsh and Metcalf (2003b) noted that faculty participation is often low because institutions have failed to demonstrate how assessment improved programs and institutions. Institutional leaders could increase faculty involvement with assessment by sharing assessment results that demonstrate program and institutional success or improvement. This is consistent with the assessment literature that reveals how institutions can improve faculty participation in assessment by demonstrating the institution's primary motivation for assessment is improvement (Ebersole & Mince, 2007; Middaugh, 2009; Shipman et al., 2003).

6. **Training in assessment improved faculty members' motivation to participate in assessment beyond the course level.** The participants in this study believed that faculty members are hired to be content experts and they frequently do not have undergraduate or graduate training in education or assessment. Three of the nine participants in this study shared how their educational background and prior experience influenced their decision to be involved with assessment beyond the course level. Four of the nine participants expressed concern over the lack of faculty training about how to do program or institutional assessment. These findings were consistent with several experts on assessment who noted that faculty involvement with assessment is limited due to a lack of faculty training (Hutchings, 2010; Shipman, Aloi & Jones, 2003). Participants in this study who had received training in assessment were more confident about their involvement with assessment beyond the

course level. Assessment experts recommend faculty involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of assessment processes at all levels and Welsh and Metcalf's (2003) study showed that faculty support is contingent upon faculty involvement in all stages; however, the participants in this study indicated that some faculty declined to get involved because of a lack of training in assessment.

- 7. The barriers faced by participants in the study were comparable to the barriers described in the literature on assessment.** The barriers identified by participants mirrored those described in the literature. The first of these was a lack of time for assessment. Participants explained how lack of time and lack of rewards for participation in assessment activities beyond the course level were barriers to more faculty involvement. Seven of the nine participants in the study struggled to balance time between teaching classes and performing the administrative duties of assessment. The participants indicated that even though they believed assessment was important, they found it difficult to find time to research effective tools, to implement them in classes, to compile and analyze the results, and discuss them with their colleagues. These participants explained the importance of having time at department meetings and college-wide meetings to discuss assessment. This finding was consistent with the Skolits and Graybeal (2007) study on faculty and staff perceptions of institutional effectiveness activities, including student learning assessment. Their study found that faculty at their community college perceived a lack of time as a major limitation to their involvement with institutional effectiveness processes (Skolits & Graybeal, 2007). This finding is also consistent with other assessment experts who assert that giving faculty time for assessment work is a



proven technique for increasing faculty involvement at the program or institutional level (Ewell, Paulson & Kinzie, 2011; Hutchings, 2010; Hutchings, 2011; Nunley et al., 2011).

The second most commonly mentioned barrier was a lack of compensation for assessment work. Five of the participants believed compensation was necessary for effective faculty involvement beyond the course level. Participants in the study who had or were serving as program chairs indicated that although they received compensation for their assessment duties as a program chair, they did not receive any compensation for their assessment responsibilities at the institutional level. Only one participant in this study received compensation for work done with institutional assessment. Rewarding faculty for their work with program and institutional assessment is strongly recommended in the assessment literature (Ewell, Paulson & Kinzie, 2011; Hutchings, 2010; Nunley et al., 2011).

The third barrier that was frequently cited was a lack of consistent faculty leadership for work on institutional assessment. Five of the nine participants were involved with institutional level assessment primarily because their faculty contract required service on an institutional committee. Although several of the participants volunteered to serve on the institutional assessment committee because they had a passion for assessment, they expressed concern about how frequently the committee membership rotated due to the amount of time the committee required. Frequent rotation of committee membership made it difficult to have continuity with institutional assessment plans. Three participants shared how important it was to have consistent faculty leadership in the form of a coordinator who received

compensation for work with institutional assessment. This finding was consistent with the 2009 NILOA report that showed only 19% of two-year colleges had at least one person focused on outcomes assessment compared with 47% of doctoral institutions (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Other assessment experts also support faculty resources in the form of stipends or reduced teaching loads for work on assessment that is outside of their regular course assessments (Nunley et al., 2011).

8. **The timing and frequency of assessment reports were two additional barriers shared by participants in this study that were not considered barriers in the assessment literature.** Two of the participants in this study explained that they were asked to submit assessment reports at the end of each semester—a time that coincided with grading final exams and research papers. These participants believed that assessment results could be aggregated to support program and institutional goals without requiring multiple assessments in every course, every semester and that the timing of assessment reports could be changed so that it did not occur at the end of the semester. Although assessment needs to be an ongoing process, assessment experts caution against creating complex assessment systems that gather too much data to be analyzed effectively (Suskie, 2004; Walvoord, 2010). Institutional leaders are also advised to consider other faculty responsibilities when scheduling assessment meetings and determining assessment report due dates (Walvoord, 2010).
9. **Individual skills and abilities proved to be a factor influencing faculty involvement with assessment at the program or institutional level.** Five of the nine participants in the study discussed individual skills and abilities they possessed that motivated them to work with assessment. They considered themselves to be

problem-solvers, analytical thinkers, and organizers. They liked to work with data and numbers and they liked to solve puzzles. Figuring out how course-level assessments supported program and institutional assessment was a personal challenge that motivated them to volunteer to serve on their institutional assessment committee. Grunwald and Peterson (2003) included faculty characteristic of gender, rank, tenure, number of years worked at the institution and in higher education as control variables in their study of faculty satisfaction with assessment of student learning; however, they did not research individual skills or abilities. Grunwald and Peterson (2003) suggested the need for further research exploring the impact of faculty characteristics on faculty satisfaction with and involvement in student assessment. They believed faculty characteristics, faculty role, career development, and personality might be important dimensions in understanding faculty involvement with student learning assessment (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003).

### **Limitations**

In the course of this study, a couple of limitations were identified. These should be considered by the reader when examining this research:

1. This study was limited to the experiences of full time community college faculty working at institutions accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. While virtually all of the findings in this study were consistent with the assessment literature, it is unknown if the experiences of faculty who are not full-time or not working at institutions in the HLC region would be comparable.
2. When I created the interview questions I assumed that because these institutions had received recognition for their work with program and institutional level assessment that

faculty working in these institutions would have different experiences than faculty working at other institutions. Early in the interview process I realized the barriers and limitations identified and discussed in the literature on assessment also existed on these campuses. After the first two interviews I was mindful to listen for responses that indicated whether or not the faculty at these institutions believed they had overcome those barriers and if so, how. This preconceived idea was the reason the participants' responses to the interview questions did not follow the exact order of the research questions. Several of the interview questions I incorrectly assumed would have contributed to participants' involvement were actually discussed as potential barriers to more involvement. Table 1 in Chapter 3 demonstrates how the interview questions aligned with the research questions.

### **Recommendations for Improved Practice**

In his book the *Heart of Change* John P. Kotter, a renowned expert on leadership, provided examples of successful implementation of the eight-stage change process he advocates for creating large-scale organizational change. Kotter said, "Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the most fundamental problem in all stages is changing the behavior of people" (Kotter 2002, p.6). The actions institutional leaders take to elicit more faculty involvement have the ability to either create change in their institution or increase faculty resistance. In light of Kotter's examples and the findings presented in this study the following recommendations are offered.

#### **Recommendations for Institutional Leaders**

1. Leaders need to create a culture of assessment that is focused on improvement in order to generate faculty buy-in. All nine participants in this study believed that large-scale

faculty involvement was critical to successful assessment initiatives at the program and institutional level. Several of the participants specifically used the word “culture” when referring to assessment on their campus.

2. Institutional leaders need to clearly communicate the goals and objectives of assessment at the program and institutional level. Unclear goals and objectives create confusion and contribute to reduced faculty involvement.
3. Institutional leaders can influence faculty motivation to participate in program and institutional assessment by providing funding for faculty to attend conferences where they will have opportunities to hear how other institutions are using assessment data for improvement. Attending conferences is one way for faculty to experience first-hand successful assessment initiatives at other institutions. Institutional leaders should also publicly share the successes of programs on their own campuses. Sharing program and institutional successes motivates and encourages faculty involvement with assessment.
4. College administrators should recognize that acknowledging and rewarding faculty involvement with assessment at the program or institutional level encourages faculty participation. Public recognition, stipends, or workload reductions are examples of how this can be accomplished.
5. Institutional leaders need to provide faculty with adequate time to do assessment activities. Faculty need time to study and learn about assessment at the program and institutional level. Faculty need time to develop program and institutional goals and time to design effective tools for measuring success.
6. When selecting new community college faculty, institutional leaders should look for prior experience or training in assessment in addition to any personal skills and abilities that

might influence a faculty member's decision to work with assessment data. Several of the participants in this study chose to work with assessment either because of their background and training in assessment or because they possessed skills and abilities they found useful in analyzing assessment data.

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers**

1. Policy makers need to provide clearer guidelines about what institutions need to do to demonstrate successful program and institutional assessment. Many of the participants in this study expressed a desire to work with program or institutional assessment; however, they were frustrated with the lack of guidelines for demonstrating success. Several participants gave examples explaining how program assessment was easier in programs that participated in specialized accreditation because they understood the expectations and because the specialized accrediting agencies provided guidelines that enabled them to set clear, measurable goals and objectives for their programs.
2. Policy makers need to clearly define the term "program." The definition of program by the participants in this study varied greatly by discipline and department and several of the participants expressed some frustration because of this. Unclear guidelines about what constitutes a "program" make it more difficult for institutional leaders and faculty to establish clear, measurable goals and objectives.
3. Policy makers need to be mindful of the unique nature and multiple missions of community colleges and should consider establishing accreditation guidelines specifically designed for two-year institutions. The multiple missions of community colleges require multiple approaches to assessing student learning. Because community college faculty typically have heavier teaching loads than faculty at four-year colleges and do not have a

research component in their faculty contract, finding time to spend on assessment is a major problem.

### **Recommendations for Faculty**

1. Faculty need to view assessment as an opportunity to create change. Many of the participants in this study embraced assessment as a vehicle for improvement. They expressed a sincere desire for other faculty to understand how assessment can be used to document the need for change and how it can be used as a voice to encourage changes in both internal and external decision making.
2. Faculty need to look for opportunities (presentations and publications) to share examples of successful assessments at the program and institutional level that could be used as models for other programs and institutions. Several participants in this study had benefited from shared best-practices from faculty colleagues. The participants were encouraged by successes they saw in their own programs and at other institutions.
3. Faculty who value teamwork and collaboration need to seek out opportunities to work with assessment at the program or institutional level. Participants in this study described many ways collaboration in designing effective assessment programs beyond the course level was helpful.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The background and experiences of the researcher in this study allowed the researcher to quickly establish rapport with the participants during the interview. This encouraged the participants to provide open, honest responses to the interview questions. However, the qualitative design of this study limited the number of participants that could be included. There are many issues surrounding faculty involvement with assessment beyond the course level that

could be examined further. With this in mind, the following suggestions for future research are provided.

1. This study was limited to full-time community college faculty members who were identified as involved in program or institutional level assessment. The participants were asked to describe potential barriers expressed by colleagues who were not involved with assessment beyond the course level; however, further examination of faculty members who choose not to participate in assessment at the program or institutional level could reveal additional barriers that were not identified by these participants.
2. This study was limited to faculty working at community colleges accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Because the research on community college faculty involvement with assessment of student learning is limited, studies examining faculty involvement in other accrediting regions should be conducted to explore commonalities. These could be used to build a model of best practices of community college faculty involvement with program and institutional level assessment.
3. This study revealed a set of individual characteristics participants believed influenced their decision to work with assessment beyond the course level. A quantitative study could examine the generalizability of these characteristics to faculty involved with assessment.
4. The findings showed that participants in this study believed that faculty involvement with assessment beyond the course level was outside of the traditional faculty contract and should be rewarded with some form of additional compensation. Only one participant in this study received additional compensation for assessment work. These findings were consistent with the literature on assessment. A quantitative study should be conducted to



examine other community college faculty beliefs about compensation for assessment work beyond the course level.

### **Closing**

I am grateful to the participants in this study who willingly shared their experiences with assessment. The struggles and triumphs they discussed with assessment at the program and institutional level allowed me to reflect on my own experiences with assessment at the community college where I work. Their stories served as a bridge that helped me understand the collective experiences shared by colleagues on my campus and provided me with valuable information I used to draw conclusions and make recommendations for improved practice.

I am convinced there are community college faculty members who not only embrace assessment as a mechanism for improving courses but also believe assessment could be used as an effective tool for improving programs and institutions. They are willing to accept the challenges associated with assessment and they are looking for institutional leaders to support them as they attempt to engage other faculty in the process. I hope the conclusions and recommendations in this study will provide institutional leaders, policy makers, and other faculty members with information they can use to collectively respond to the call for more accountability in higher education through assessment of student learning.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A - IRB Protocol Approval

February 26, 2014

### MEMORANDUM

TO: LeAnn Caudle  
James Hammons

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 14-02-511

Protocol Title: *Exploring Community College Faculty Involvement in Assessment of Student Learning*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 02/26/2014 Expiration Date:  
02/25/2015

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Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 9 participants.** If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).



## **Appendix B - Participant Consent Form**

### **Exploring Community College Faculty Involvement in Assessment of Student Learning**

Principal Researcher: LeAnn Caudle

#### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a research study about faculty involvement with assessment of student learning in community colleges. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a full-time community college faculty member with experience in assessment of student learning at the program or institutional-level.

#### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY**

*Who is the principal researcher?*

LeAnn Caudle, M.B.A., CPA

Business and Computer Information Division

Northwest Arkansas Community College

1 College Drive

Bentonville, AR 72712

479-619-4379

lcaudle@nwacc.edu

*What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of this study is to explore why community college faculty members choose to become involved with the assessment of students learning and to determine the factors that influenced their decision to participate with institutional and program level initiatives.

*Who will participate in this study?*

Faculty members at each research site who have been identified by the Chief Academic Officer as actively participating in program or institutional level assessment of student learning will be asked to participate.

*What are the participants being asked to do?*

Participation will require answering an initial demographic questionnaire and participating in a one hour one-on-one semi-structured interview with follow-up emails to confirm the researcher's interpretations of the data.

*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts from participation.

*What are the possible benefits of this study?*

Hopefully, sharing stories of community college faculty who have participated in successful campus assessment initiatives will help other community colleges determine the environment necessary for recruiting and involving more faculty members in institutional and program level assessment initiatives.

*How long will the study last?*

An initial contact email with a request for participation will be sent in advance of the on-site interviews. The on-site interview will be scheduled for one hour. Follow up emails will be sent to allow the participants an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the interpretation of the data reported from their interview.

*Will I receive compensation for my time if I choose to participate in this study?*

No additional compensation will be provided for participation in this study.

*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*

If you do not want to be in this study you may choose not to participate. You may also refuse to participate at any time during the study.

*How will my confidentiality be protected?*

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by and applicable to University Policy, State law and Federal law. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. All recordings of interviews will be destroyed once the data is transcribed and verified by the participant. All data from the study will be stored on a password protected computer. Data will be analyzed and reported using pseudonyms assigned to each participant by the researcher.

*Will I know the results of the study?*

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher, LeAnn Caudle. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

LeAnn Caudle

Northwest Arkansas Community College

1 College Drive

Bentonville, AR 72712

479-619-4379

[lcaudle@nwacc.edu](mailto:lcaudle@nwacc.edu)

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP

Institutional Review Board Coordinator

Research Compliance

University of Arkansas

210 Administration Building

Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201

479-575-2208

[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns that have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings as a results of this research will be shared with participants upon request. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

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X

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Name

## **Appendix C - Interview Protocol Form with Interview Questions**

### **Interview Protocol Form** (Creswell, 2012 p. 226)

**Study:** Community College Faculty Involvement in Assessment of Student Learning

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer:**

**Participant:**

**Study Overview:** The purpose of this study is to explore what factors influenced community college faculty to become involved with assessment of student learning beyond the course level and to explore the recommendations they have for encouraging more colleagues to participate in institutional and program level assessment. Data will be collected from document reviews and from one-on-one interviews with participants. The interviews will be audio recorded and participants will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The interviews will be conducted on-site and are scheduled for one hour each. The participants are asked to read and sign a consent form.

#### **Questions:**

The participants will have an opportunity to respond to and discuss each question. They will be thanked for their participation in the study. I will follow-up with each participant via email to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations. I will assure the participants that I will protect their anonymity.

1. What do you believe to be the value of assessment?

2. What personal factors influenced your decision to become involved in assessment of student learning? (If necessary, follow-up with questions about personal skills and abilities, strengths in assessment, personal feelings about assessment, prior work with assessment, was it a career choice for a move into administration or assigned as part of an administrative workload).
3. What were some of the personal factors you considered to be potential barriers to your involvement with assessment? (for example, time, training, work/life balance issues)
4. Would you describe what your institution has done to help change faculty perceptions of assessment from something they “have” to do to something they “want” to do?
5. Were there any people or events that significantly influenced your decision to participate in assessment at a level other than the course level? (administrators, other faculty members, students, external influences).
6. What does “faculty-driven” assessment mean to you?
7. Once you decided to be involved with assessment at the program or institutional level, how did you go about getting involved? (Did you request committee assignments, release time, course reductions?)
8. How did you feel about assessment after your first semester of involvement with assessment at the program or institutional-level? (Were you encouraged by the work you saw; did you feel you needed more training; did you understand the purpose of assessment at these levels?)
9. What factors do you feel influence the success of assessment initiatives at the program and institutional level at your institution?

10. How would you describe your colleague's attitudes about assessment? (Are there enough involved? Is there any faculty resistance to assessment?)
11. Would you describe some of the barriers to involvement with assessment your colleagues have mentioned? (Training, fear of intended use of data, does it make a difference, input from faculty about design, resources, rewards, compensation?)
12. What has your institution done with assessment that you believe makes a differences in faculty participation with assessment at the program and institutional level?
13. What evidence do you see of assessment being used in institutional decision-making about budget, resources and curriculum planning at your institution?
14. What thoughts or feelings about your experiences with assessment would you would like to share with policy-makers and educators that might encourage more faculty participation with program and institutional level assessment?