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How Faculty Perceive Their Role in Student Learning Assessment and Program Improvement

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Adult and Lifelong Learning

by

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Abstract

Student success is inextricably linked with the assessment of student learning, and the literature cites the need for faculty engagement in the assessment process. However, many issues related to the assessment process may be considered demotivators by faculty.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether faculty motivation to participate in student assessment was influenced by the accreditation status of the faculty member's academic field. Data collection for this qualitative case study included individual interviews with participants and a review of documents related to the assessment process.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline how academic program accreditation may influence faculty engagement in student learning assessment. I discuss how accreditation relates to student learning assessment in theory and how it is applied in practice. I define concepts related to student learning assessment, program accreditation, and faculty engagement and describe the problem that guides this research. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on the scope and limits of this study.

Background and Context

According to the United States Department of Education (U.S. DOE), Accreditation is the recognition that an institution maintains standards requisite for its graduates to gain admission to other reputable institutions of higher learning or to achieve credentials for professional practice. Accreditation aims to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.

Accrediting Council for Independent Schools and Colleges, accreditation in higher education began as a promise "to protect public health and safety and serve the public interest." Regional accreditation started as early as the 1880s, by 1918, the American Council on Education began as an initial form of the practice, and by the 1930s in America, Accreditation was common. The landscape of higher education accreditation has changed over time to accommodate significant movements such as the GI Bill, racial integration and the Civil Rights Movement, and more recently, government funding shifts. According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), within the last 35 years, both legislature and public demands have necessitated a move to prove student learning assessment and a culture

of continuous improvement in higher education. The movement truly began much earlier, in the 1950s, with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Currently, AAC&U suggests that faculty's involvement in the student learning assessment process guided by accreditation practices is more focused than ever.

Assurance of student learning has become a significant initiative of higher education in the United States in the last half-century. Emil and Cress (2013) write quality assurance that comes from program / institutional accreditation is essential in higher education. Continuous improvement of educational programming necessitates strong faculty involvement in the assessment process. Stakeholders, including students, their parents, and future employers, expect post-secondary institutions to offer the skills and knowledge that enhance career readiness. Assessment to provide proof of educational quality has been used more heavily in the last decades, but as a process of continuous improvement to reach accreditation is a new and more minor well-implemented undertaking (Emil and Cress, 2013).

Many academic programs and institutions offer assessment and accreditation documentation to validate their relevance and legitimacy. Mathers, Finney, and Hathcoat (2018) define student learning outcomes assessment, or student assessment, as the in-the-moment or longitudinal measure of a student's skill or knowledge. Assessment typically measures content-specific knowledge and skill acquisition. However, Barrette and Paesani (2018) suggest that accrediting bodies value a holistic assessment of how equipped students can transfer limited content knowledge to broader applications. The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) defines accreditation of higher education programs as "a voluntary activity initiated by the institution that requires a rigorous self-evaluation and an independent, objective appraisal of the overall educational quality by peers. Accreditation emphasizes quality assurance

and a commitment to continuous quality enhancement. The function of assessment goes beyond identifying student achievement data. Ultimately, assessment should provide a pathway for continuous improvement of institutional capacity. When successful, students, parents, faculty, the program, and prospective employers' benefit from student learning outcomes assessment. Khine and Areepattamannil (2016) note the importance of assessing students' cognitive and non-cognitive preparation. While more challenging to measure, non-cognitive skills are critical to success outside academia. Khine and Areepattamannil (2016) suggest that authentic student assessment should include cognitive and non-cognitive measures to evaluate student growth holistically.

Types of Accreditation

National Accreditation.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) defines accreditation as a “‘review’ of the quality of higher education institutions and programs (2022).” CHEA goes on to explain that accreditation is a requirement for some federal and state funding and is used for employer assurance (2022). Drexel University (2022) distinguishes national accreditation from other types, as specifically accrediting career and vocational schools and programs. Some national accreditors also accredit religious-based educational offerings. (Drexel University, 2022) National Accreditation is often less expensive than other accrediting types, is predominantly used by for-profit institutions and accepts student credits from both other nationally accredited and regionally accredited schools (Drexel University, 2022).

Regional Accreditation.

Regional accreditation occurs at the institutional level. Regional accreditation covers various institutional interests, including budgeting, planning, staffing, and student learning

through assessment. Unlike specialized program accreditation, which is responsible for accrediting a specific discipline, regional accreditation is an umbrella accreditation that maintains the institution's accreditation status as a whole. Regional accrediting bodies include the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

Specialized Accreditation.

Programs that subject matter experts in their field accredit also fall under regional accreditation. Specialized accrediting bodies include Counsel for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), and National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). The United States Department of Education (U. S. DOE) describes program accreditation as responsible for assessing academic programming quality, emphasizing faculty involvement from programmatic planning to execution. Specifically for program or specialized accreditation, and the stakes are high. Programs that are not a part of specialized accreditation or who have failed to be recognized by an accreditor often do not have viable programs as this status affects students' ability to sit for licensing and certification exams.

The Role of Assessment in Accreditation.

An essential component to specialized accreditation at the post-secondary level is student learning assessment. Specialized or program accreditation such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) is highly prescriptive. Experts in the content field often, but not consistently, set learning outcomes and benchmarks for programs to use and achieve to meet the accrediting board's demands (2019). Regional accreditation, for example, Higher Learning Commission (HLC), is less concerned with discipline-specific goals and is most

concerned that assessment efforts are being undertaken within the institution so that students and the curriculum as a whole are working most effectively (2020). In both specialized and regional assessment levels, faculty engagement is essential. Smith (2005) suggests that faculty engagement is critical at all stages of the assessment process. This engagement includes collecting and documenting student data at the course level, relating data to the program goals, and providing continuous improvement strategies based on the information.

Faculty Perceptions of Assessment

For success, assessment must be supported as a campus-wide initiative regardless of individual programs' accreditation status. However, a significant factor in the perception of faculty engagement in student learning assessment is the program's accreditation goals and status. Faculty work in the specialized accreditation process can be extensive. If specially accredited, the unit being reviewed is subject to the accreditor's rules and regulations that require a workload that demands faculty participation throughout. Participation does not imply buy-in regarding faculty's engagement in assessment but does promote it. Wang and Hurley (2012) conducted a study with various faculty members at a Liberal Arts college where faculty positively correlated engagement in student learning with increasing teaching and learning. Additionally, Wang and Hurley (2012) reported that viewing student learning assessment as a scholarly activity significantly increased faculty engagement in assessment.

Problem Statement

The process of assessing student learning is often viewed negatively by faculty. Fuller, Skidmore, Bustamante and Holzweiss (2016) state that there are two major assessment cultures among faculty: fear and compliance. A culture of compliance, Fuller et al. (2016) define as a culture that values rules and regulations over student learning. The authors add that a culture of

fear was related to the loss of control of the faculty's personal and professional control in regards to their work (Fuller, et al., 2016). Common concerns about student assessment include increased workload, reduced time for research and other scholarly activity, decreased faculty autonomy, and check-box competencies in place of accurate student performance measurement (Cummings et al., 2008). Faculty often cite academic freedom when citing resistance to participating in the process (Emil and Cress, 2013). The primary goal of assessment and accreditation is to ensure continuous student learning and improve the program's quality (Burbano et al.). Banta (2007) notes that implementing assessment for programmatic and curricular changes has been tedious. Emil and Cress (2013) note that often individual instructors are not well informed on how to apply assessment measures to such revisions throughout the curriculum.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to compare faculty engagement in student learning assessment between programs that are specially accredited and programs that hold no specialized accreditation. The purpose of examining faculty engagement in assessment and accreditation is to improve the processes and outcomes that ensure faculty are active in enhancing student learning opportunities regardless of the program's accreditation status in which they teach.

With accrediting bodies more focused on successful student learning assessment where courses, programs, departments, and institutions can effectively prove that their education is meaningful, research and literature have become more focused on strategies to assist with this. Koslowski (2006) explains that due to “increasing competitive pressure, finite individual and institutional resources, and increased demand for universal access...” higher education quality has become a concern, and student learning outcomes assessment has become a solution to ensuring quality.

The primary research question that guides this study is: Does faculty engagement in student learning assessment differ between accredited programs and non-accredited programs? The following sub-questions include:

1. How do faculty describe the assessment process?
2. How do faculty describe their role in the assessment process?
3. What motivates faculty to participate in the assessment process?
4. What inhibits faculty from participating in the assessment process?

Overview of Research Design

This qualitative case study will interview faculty members from accredited and non-accredited programs to ascertain their perceptions of student assessment. Faculty representation include long-standing accredited programs and those with no external accreditation at a regional R2 university. All programs are required to participate in student learning assessment by the university regardless of specialized accreditation status. Faculty who will be included are full-time tenure or tenure-track appointments with various involvement levels in assessment and accreditation (i.e., faculty leaders of assessment efforts to clinical professors in the program). The goal is to include a faculty perspective with various leadership and experience levels in student learning assessment. Because the focus of this study is on program assessment, instructors responsible for course-level assessment are omitted.

Data analysis for this study will include notes, transcripts, and audio recordings of interviews, qualitative coding of responses, resources such as websites and current literature to dissect trends and discrepancies amongst the data. Faculty engagement trends in student learning assessment will emerge from this data analysis.

Conceptual Framework

This study approaches faculty engagement in student learning assessment through the focus of Faculty Autonomy. Baldrige et al. (1973) describe Faculty Autonomy arising due to the convergence of several factors including: “expanding enrollments, a public belief in the ability of education to solve social problems, generous financial support, the growth of large-scale research demanding more faculty experts, and a shortage of personnel that placed faculties in a powerful bargaining position.” Hamilton (2007) writes that the work of higher education faculty "requires a high degree of autonomy." The author goes on to add that through academic freedom, shared governance, and peer review, a "social contract" is formed to contribute to the "common good" from the nation's universities and colleges (Hamilton, 2007). This framework serves to shape the view of faculty autonomy both inside and outside of the classroom, including endeavors of the profession such as teaching, service, and research. Hamilton (2007) describes the AAUP's 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure as a social contract that grants the profession the rights of academic freedom and peer review. The rights, however, are dependent on two things: all professional competencies and ethical conduct must be met as a part of assigned duties, and the enforcement of the above mentioned is undertaken by the faculty (Hamilton, 2007). Just as faculty have considerable flexibility within their classrooms in delivering content, freedom in how that content is assessed is vital to meaningful data. Jumonville (2014) describes that while faculty certainly can seek help with best practices in assessing student learning, it is important that the development of instruments for their own course's goals is left to them with collegial support. (p. 543) Assessment professionals, when assisting faculty in specialized and non-specialized accredited programs have to encourage this level of autonomy, and as the author explores, it can make data aggregation and analysis

difficult, but not untenable and is important to the integrity of teaching and learning (Jumonville, 2014).

One difference between faculty teaching in programs that are externally accredited and those who teach in programs that lack formal accreditation is that summative learning assessment measures are often standardized and mandated by that external accreditor (Stanton, 2011). Stanton describes that assessment that is culminating in nature and accreditor-driven can lead to impaired autonomy depending upon individual faculty member beliefs (2011). Faculty autonomy in this case is the opposite of being driven by an outside force, specifically external accreditation, where the faculty member is bound to presenting student learning assessment processes that are demanded by the accreditor and not their own interest in the continuous improvement of their students' learning. This is not to say all autonomy is left unconsidered in accreditation. Prados, Peterson, and Lattuca (2005) describe Engineering accreditor Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) as loosening accreditation standards to give faculty and institutions more freedom in defining student learning in their contexts. Developmental control in the processes of student learning assessment is of the utmost importance to faculty and administrator engagement, and accreditors are now incorporating this factor in their policies (Foxxe, 2018). Faculty engagement in student learning assessment can be achieved within or without external accreditation and alongside faculty autonomy.

Significance

Few studies have investigated the phenomenon of faculty engagement in the student learning assessment and accreditation processes in higher education. Even fewer studies focus specifically on regional public universities and their unique characteristics. Regional institutions typically serve special student populations, emphasize faculty teaching over research, include

diverse geographical and socio-economic regions, and have significant budgetary constraints. The assumption is that faculty resist formal assessment processes and only participate if mandatory.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2007) describes the qualitative researcher's role as critical, as they are the primary data collector and analyst. My role as the researcher is as a participant-observer. I will collect the data through direct and follow-up questions, record the data in notes and audio formats, and then code the data to analyze emerging patterns and themes. Potential bias could occur through my work with the faculty participants of this study. However, mutual understanding of contexts and the institutional culture could also be a benefit to this study.

Researcher Assumptions

In a qualitative study with faculty participants, several assumptions are understood. Faculty will use self-knowledge but answer honestly and in their context. Regardless of their program's Accreditation status, faculty will have had similar institutional emphasis and requirements on student learning assessment processes and procedures. Faculty participants will not be incentivized to participate in this study.

Scope and Limitations

This study's scope includes faculty in a regional public university in various academic program areas, holding various degrees and ranks. It looks to measure their engagement in student learning assessment in these settings. The most significant limitation will be voluntary participation at the request of a focus group. The data will be reliant upon the participating faculty member, their demographics, and their answers. The possibility of selection bias exists based on who participates and their moderating variables. However, the selection will be based

on sampling across colleges, programs, accreditation status, and degree that the faculty member holds.

Definitions of Key Terminology Used in this Study

For the purpose of this study, the terms and definitions below will be used:

1. *Student Learning Assessment (Assessment)*: “Assessment is the ongoing process of: 1.) Establishing clear, measurable expected outcomes of student learning, 2.) Ensuring that students have sufficient opportunities to achieve those outcomes, 3.) Systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches our expectations, and 4.) Using the resulting information to understand and improve student learning.” (p. 4, Suskie, 2018)
2. *Accreditation*: “Accreditation will ensure: (i) quality control (minimum standards) in higher education; (ii) accountability and transparency; (iii) quality enhancement; and (iv) the facilitation of student mobility.” (p. 6, Sanyal and Martin, 2007)
 - a. *Regional or Institutional Accreditation*: An example of a regional accreditor’s, The Western Association of Schools and Colleges’ (WASC) purpose: “A process by which institutions are evaluated to determine the degree to which they have established a mission in accordance with the recognized purposes of such institutions, and are fulfilling their avowed mission according to standards of good practices established by the Commission.” (p. 5, Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1998)
 - b. *Specialized or Program-level Accreditation*: For example the purpose purported by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing is: “The purpose of the ACEN is to provide specialized accreditation for all levels of nursing

education and transition-to-practice programs located in the United States, U.S. Territories, and internationally.” (Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, Mission: Purpose: Goals. 2022)

3. *Regional Public Institution*: Delaney (2021) summarizes the category of institution as: “This institutional type caters primarily to undergraduate students that live in residential areas. These institutions are generally medium-sized in terms of student enrollment population (approximately 11,000), offer on-campus living, participate in various levels of the NCAA and tend to offer graduate or continuing education program.” (p. 28)
4. *Higher Learning Commission*: “The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is an independent corporation that was founded in 1895 as one of six regional institutional accreditors in the United States. HLC accredits degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions in the United States.” (2022)
5. *Faculty Engagement*: During a redesign of WASC’s accreditation processes was with the aim of: “[s]ystematic engagement of the faculty with issues of assessing and improving teaching and learning processes within the institution, and with aligning support systems for faculty more effectively toward this end.” (p. xiv, Driscoll et al., 2011)

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One is an introduction to the research covered in this study. Included in the Background and Context are detailed descriptions of Accreditation and Assessment in Higher Education. Problem statement, purpose and research questions sections are followed by the research’s design and conceptual framework. The chapter concludes with the role of the researcher, their assumptions and definitions relevant to the study.

Chapter Two, the literature review, contains an introduction, annotated bibliography and conceptual framework's relevance to the research. Topics covered include higher education accreditation and its history; student learning assessment; their best practices, place in regional public institutions and faculty engagement in their processes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the cited research in the study.

Chapter Three begins with an overview of the research design, case study method and data collection and analysis methods. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations, trustworthiness and limitations.

Summary

Faculty in higher education are ultimately the ones conducting student learning assessment in individual courses. Courses make up academic programs; academic programs are given through departments housed in colleges and universities. Some academic programs are accredited under external bodies that are content experts referred to as Specialized Accreditation. Some programs are not, depending upon the discipline and its needs. This study looks to distinguish if there are significant differences in the level of engagement by faculty members teaching in programs with specialized accreditation versus those within programs that are not specially accredited. Understanding the context in which a faculty member is constrained, such as accreditation status, is the beginning of understanding the motivating factors of a faculty member's engagement level. A commonly seen theme throughout literature is that faculty are resistant to the practice of assessment. This study will seek to identify if this assertion correlates to moderators, such as the accreditation status of the program a faculty member teaches. The study will statistically analyze a series of questions relating to faculty members' personally held

feelings, ideas, and beliefs on assessment and accreditation. This study's results will be viewed through the lens of provided historical and empirical research in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

This study explores how program accreditation influences faculty engagement in student learning assessment and continuous program improvement in higher education. To understand faculty involvement in this process, it must be known that assessment and accreditation exist in a highly complex structure of regulations and procedures that varies significantly in context. Assessment and accreditation are inextricably linked with quality assurance systems in post-secondary education. They are tools to ensure student learning and programmatic goals align in rapidly changing fields of study. This chapter provides a scholarly review of literature related to faculty engagement in assessment and accreditation at a regional, public institution.

Accreditation in Higher Education

Regional accreditation has influenced student learning assessment efforts on many, if not all, public campuses (p. 656, Peterson & Einarson, 2001). In the 1990s, with the *Higher Education Act*, regional accreditors began to require a commitment by institutions to assess student learning at the program level (p. 82, Howard, 2018). In this way, regional accreditation acts as a link between higher education learning and the federal government. This review of accreditation in higher education will outline the accountability required by all institutional stakeholders involved.

Author Finkin (1994) offers a robust historical perspective of higher education accreditation in America. The modern form of the American higher education system was shaped during the end of the 19th century, continuing into the 20th century. This "reformation" period was marked by societal shifts in economics, politics, and cultural norms. At the point in time of the Morrill Land Grant of 1862, the American higher education system most closely resembled

the German model, where often gender, religion, or ethnic group was the main distinguishing factor of an institution (Finkin, 1994). The United States lacked a formal department of education, and therefore the prevailing idea was that the state was responsible for their institutions of higher education (Finkin, 1994).

The United States Department of Education (U.S. DOE, 2018) writes: "Accreditation is the recognition that an institution maintains standards requisite for its graduates to gain admission to other reputable institutions of higher learning or to achieve credentials for professional practice. The DOE states, "(t)he goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality." (section 1)

The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS, 2022) defines accreditation as: "...a voluntary activity initiated by the institution that requires a rigorous self-evaluation and an independent, objective appraisal of the overall educational quality by peers. Accreditation emphasizes quality assurance and a commitment to continuous quality enhancement. To achieve accreditation by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), an institution must:

- “Comply with rigorous standards
- Develop and implement a Campus Effectiveness Plan
- Undergo an annual review of its financial stability and its retention and placement rates
- host announced and unannounced site visits” (section 1)

Accreditation primarily uses predetermined standards or outcomes to assess programs, units, and campuses. Groups determine the standards for accreditation with specific knowledge of a field of study or an area of general knowledge (for instance, higher education) in which their accreditation serves. Dueben (2015) summarizes the makeup of accrediting bodies by clarifying

that while program accrediting bodies are made up of content-specific experts, regional accrediting bodies are often higher education professionals (p. 10). The regional accreditor, The Higher Learning Commission, of focus in this research has an executive council of higher education and business professionals, a board of trustees who are all practicing in institutions of higher education while serving, and a staff who serve the commission's daily administrative needs (HLC, 2022). In contrast, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) is responsible for the accreditation of Teacher Education preparation programs employs former k-12 and higher education professionals from the current President who was a former superintendent to the reviewers who visit campuses who are former teachers and higher education practitioners (CAEPnet, 2022).

Blanco Ramirez (2015) describes other countries seeking to use the United States' higher education accrediting system as a template, finding that the U.S.'s current system is "mature" and "well established. Four steps generalize the accreditation process, whether at the regional or programmatic level: 1. A written self-study report is submitted by campus constituents to the reviewing accreditor; 2. A team is created by the accreditor of similar peers (from like-institutions or programs); 3. The peer review team evaluates the submitted report and all other relevant evidence and visits campus to meet with all stakeholders; and; 4. A recommendation for accreditation is made by the team to the accreditor's administration board (p. 11, Dueben, 2015). Lenn (1990) details the evolving beginnings of accreditation bodies in the United States compared to other like nations. While described as unrelated to government and self-involved, accreditation is characteristic of a varied and extensive scope of the American higher education system. Many nations, particularly Asian countries, answer to governmental agencies for accrediting purposes. Lenn (1990) further describes accreditation in a historical context in the

U.S. as either institutional or specialized. Institutional is to accredit the entire college or university, specializing in a particular program preparing students in a narrow programmatic field.

Student learning assessment is part of the larger accreditation process throughout the multiple iterations at an institution. The primary focus of student learning assessment in accreditation is to prove opportunities for student learning are occurring and measured. Student learning can be measured at the course level, program level, and the institution level (p. 14, Howard, 2018). Generally, there are people at each level (i.e., course, program, and institution) responsible for collecting, analyzing, and documenting these efforts for the larger quality assurance as a whole.

Assessment and Accreditation in Regional Public Universities

Regional Public universities (RPU) are viewed as the middle-ground between community colleges and state flagship universities in the higher education landscape of the United States. Orphan (2020) writes that RPUs are the most diverse grouping of colleges and universities; today, citing several indicators including Carnegie classification status, their varied stated missions, and student populations served. Warshaw et al. offer that historically, RPUs enroll large numbers of ethnically and racially diverse students, those of low socio-economic backgrounds, and first-generation students lending to their unique needs. (p. 25) These factors, among others, lend to a unique accreditation and student learning assessment landscape at such institutions. Campbell (2020) summarizes that often RPUs are left out of quality analysis reports by national rankings of U.S. institutions due to their focus on measures outside the scope of their vision and mission, such as scholarship and service of faculty, instead of heavily focusing on teaching and learning. However, ultimately teaching, and the level of its quality is in the "fabric"

of RPUs (p. 90, Campbell, 2020). With an emphasis on teaching and learning, student learning assessment becomes even more critical for the quality and continuous improvement of institutions that reach students of all knowledge and skill level.

Oty (2022) describes Cameron University as an RPU where student learning assessment efforts began in AY 1992-1993 and is still a focus of the mainly associate's and bachelor's degrees granting institution. Oty (2022) writes: "the primary purpose of assessment is to use data to determine if student learning, engagement, and satisfaction is at the desired level and, if not, to develop action items to address shortfalls." (p. 8) The author and professor describe three significant areas of consideration when sustaining excellence in assessment, with the last area regarding Faculty Involvement. Oty clarifies that while faculty may be involved in this process due to emphasizing teaching, documenting this work is challenging. Ultimately regardless of the type, classification, or geographical setting of the institution, faculty engagement in the assessment process must occur for stakeholders, such as accreditors, to ensure that it is occurring.

Emerging Trends and Best Practices in Accreditation

Peebles (2016) review of Suskie's work identifies three general areas of concern regarding assessment for higher education accreditation. "economic development, return on investment and the changing college student." (p. 474) Banta et al. (2009) explain:

Drawing on interviews with two dozen faculty and staff from various institutions who were responsible for administering NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement] on their respective campuses, Ahren, Ryan, and Massa-McKinley (2008) provide five principles to guide best practice in assessment: These best practices include:(1) collaborating on the analysis and communication of results, (2) triangulating data, (3)

using data to learn more about students, (4) using data to demonstrate goal achievement, and (5) enhancing the first-year experience. (p. 32)

Ideally, assessment is initiated and led by faculty of the program, unit, or department responsible for learning. However, in practice, often, campus administrators on both the institution and department level are ultimately driving this work. Peterson and Einarson (2001) acknowledge that the exact structure and process of student learning assessment efforts, including administrative guidance, vary widely between institutions. (p. 630) Data-driven decisions were much easier to make when actions were based on these five assessment actions. Goals such as programmatic improvement were more easily reached with collaborative faculty and stakeholder input (Banta et al., 2009).

Chief Accreditation Office at the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), Business programs specialized accreditor, explains accreditation and faculty this way: "Our job is to help schools get better, and the accreditation process does that. It is not an audit—it is a peer review that's designed to point out things schools should work on if they want to get better. Accreditation matters, but quality improvement matters more. And as a global organization, I think we should be focused on helping schools get better" (para. 21, Shin, 2018). AACSB focuses heavily on faculty credentialing in their programs for the perceived rigor having a more educated faculty equating to a more prepared student. However, with a shift to focus on student learning outcomes, the accreditor hopes to better all their programs' aspects (i.e., teaching, learning, rigor) (para. 17, Shin, 2018).

Faculty Role in Accreditation

Faculty have a variety of roles in accreditation at both the program and institution level. Historically, faculty had leaned on "a culture of compliance" when accreditation became

mandated for many at the program level, where assurance of student learning was not the driving force for faculty to participate in accreditation work but the demand of the accreditor instead. (p. 153, Bennett, et al., 2017) Kurt (2021) describes the faculty's role in accreditation tasks in the following statement: “[t]hese can be listed as determining the standards, creating a self-evaluation (internal evaluation) report, creating an external evaluation/inspection report, monitoring the process and making the final decision by accreditation organizations/agencies.” (p. 35)

Faculty Engagement in Accreditation.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) defines continuous improvement in accreditation and assessment as: “Continuous improvement requires setting goals, assessing progress toward goals, and informed reflection on assessment outcomes in a way that reinforces current success, and redirects efforts as needed to ensure future success.” (para. 2) Burbano et al.'s (2018) conference presentation discusses three strategies to engage faculty in the accreditation process. The faculty concluded that for continuous improvement, they were more empowered to improve if using a tool for evaluating their program or unit that they created, developed, and implemented instead of one that lacked their input. Faculty are more inclined to engage in improvement efforts if these efforts focus on meaningful advances at the program level rather than external accreditation alone. (p. 71, Haviland et al., 2011) Tools used by faculty to improve their programs include guides on assessment and accreditation processes and policies from accreditors, rubrics for evaluating their work, and peer review processes where feedback is given to improve not only the method but also its documentation of student learning assessment plans. Bardo (2009) describes five trends in the United States Higher Education accreditation landscape that influence change in the structure and function of U.S. institutions. Bardo (2009)

describes the following: "Of particular importance are the concepts of (1) the changing accreditation climate (2) the need to focus on assessment across all areas of the institution (3) organizational approaches to continuing accreditation, and (4) developing a culture of accreditation across the campus that traditionally was found only in professional colleges and schools" (p. 47). Carter et al. (2013) add that it is very common among health and human service fields that are often a part of professional schools to be heavily accredited to assure the public and profession that practitioners are competent. (p. 157) With the aim of continuous improvement, accreditation is of perpetual focus on higher education campuses. Kurt sums up the reasoning for this by suggesting that due to the continual change at institutions, the dynamic structure and function of the complex campuses are continually monitored through accreditation. Not only does this describe why the landscape of the changes occurring in Higher Education in the U.S., but it also suggests where resistance from faculty may occur.

Flood and Roberts (2017) examined faculty concerns regarding the accreditation process, the bodies that govern them, and the power that they yield. These concerns include cost, not only financially but in time and resources. Institutional or academic freedom at the course, program, and institution level remain a concern, and opinions vary widely if accreditation is valuable at all (Flood & Roberts, 2017). Ultimately, as Flood and Roberts (2017) find, accreditation continues to help garner a sense of transfer of knowledge and skill from institution to the student. However, Tully and Walker (1991) found that accreditation bodies struggled with the nature of what criteria must be met to offer these assurances. Barber and McNair (2017) suggest a need for accountability of the accrediting agencies. "Ultimately, these issues center on the question of who guards the guardians? If higher education institutions are responsible for the learning

experiences of their students, and accrediting agencies ensure the institutions do their job, then who ensures that the accrediting agencies do their job?" (p. 228)

Accreditation in higher education is now well established in the United States and beyond. While accreditation remains a divisive issue for faculty, historical findings show mostly agreeable attitudes from faculty, namely that accreditation provides a level of status and prestige to their university, while also citing faculty's critical issues such as rigor, collaboration, and monetary, time and resource costs that remain a concern (p. 25-26, Hail, et al., 2019)

Assessment in Higher Education

Driscoll and Cordero (2011) suggest that the birth of assessment can be traced to the first National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education in 1985. The movement that followed furthered higher education's commitment to assessment and demonstrated the practices and processes needed to create "authentic and meaningful" (p. 4) assessment opportunities and the roles that faculty must play (Driscoll and Cordero, 2011). One example of an authentic and meaningful assessment practice driven by faculty engagement is at Concordia University in Wisconsin. Evans (2017) describes this process, adopted from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Framework, that faculty move through annually to self-scrutinize, evaluate, collaborate and moderate the assessment process for improvements in student learning. (p.1-2) Banta (2006) argues that assessment must fit the context of an institution, and therefore, prescriptions must be flexible. Context of the institution, such as administrators' commitment to assessment, academic focus, mission, and vision Fuller, et al. (2016) offer all play a role in the assessment culture and context of a campus. (p. 398) Just as the historical roots of the higher education system in America were primarily based on demographically segregated campuses, either by religion, race, or gender, these contexts still

have implications today in assessment practices and should be considered for optimal results. In Kodama's (2021) study at the University of Illinois, Chicago of Asian American population, the author found even among one ethnic group a great deal of variation and that almost all variables in the study affected student success. (p. 9) Factors that ultimately affected student learning and its assessment including what immigrant generation students were in, their use of the English language, parental education levels, and academic readiness. (p. 10, Kodama, 2021) Student learning assessment processes and policies, while widely required for institutional and program accreditation, cannot easily be replicated without context.

Challenges of Assessment.

Current Assessment practices, no matter the framework used, all include six basic steps as Evans (2017) describes in a practical example of Concordia University's assessment cycle: 1.) developing learning outcomes; 2.) measuring those outcomes with learning instruments (i.e., exams, papers, presentations, etc.); 3.) analyzing the learning data produced from those tools; 4.) drawing conclusions from the analysis of learning; 5.) make changes based on assessment results; 6.) measure the impact of those changes. (p. 16) Describing the limitations of current assessment processes, Mathers et al. (2018) suggest that student learning assessment is: "often simply assess[ing] student competency, or their knowledge and skills at the time of assessment." (p. 1212) They suggest the flaws of longitudinal assessment process "often attempt to infer student learning, or change in knowledge and skills within individuals, from data collected using cross-sectional designs." (p. 1212) In this example, cross-sectional designs refer to comparing data from first year students to an independent group of upperclassmen to attempt to see learning growth. (p. 1212, Mathers et al, 2018) Underlying characteristics such as academic motivation, demographics of students and other variables make this system problematic, Mathers et al (2018)

suggest. (p. 1212) In addition to inaccurate methodology, Barrette and Paesani (2018) found "(s)tudent learning outcomes (SLO) assessment is often perceived as a burdensome, top-down process driven by institutional requirement," (p. 331) but it is necessary for program evaluation and is mandated by accrediting bodies, therefore faculty buy-in is difficult to achieve.

Emerging Trends and Best Practices in Assessment

Skidmore (2018) suggests that most American post-secondary institutions embrace one of three general assessment cultures. These "archetypical" cultures are: " a culture of fear, compliance, or improvement of student learning" (p. 1241, Skidmore, 2018). A culture of fear in assessment is where leadership demonstrates control and demands over the process and policies regarding assessment and often leads to punitive measures instead of accolades for faculty. (p. 1242, Skidmore, 2018) A culture of compliance is most common, and Skidmore (2018) describes it as most often connected to accreditation and accountability. (p. 1241) Lastly, a culture of student learning in assessment is the aim. Skidmore (2018) asserts that promoting a culture of student learning leads to a transformation of culture on campus, where teaching and learning are at the forefront. (p. 1242)

Emil and Cress (2014) write that higher education's focus on accountability increased the growth of assessment initiatives. Different institutions, however, have had varying degrees of success and strategies for implementation (Emil and Cress, 2014). The authors state that this variation in success has been mainly due to the level of faculty engagement present. Emil and Cress's (2014, p. 1) found that "faculty knowledge, beliefs and attitudes toward assessment, and their perception of leadership, resources and work environment, interact with their decision to engage." Hutchings (2011) likewise found that faculty members with larger and more in-depth participation and experience with assessment have a different attitude toward the practice than

their peers who lack the same. (p. 37) Hutchings (2011) found that hands-on or practical experience with assessment is more valuable than having only theoretical knowledge of the subject. (p. 37)

The Role of Faculty in Assessment and Accreditation

The role of faculty in accreditation began as being "conspicuous," as Crosson (1986) notes, as it can seem periodic to faculty not actively involved at the program level. (p. 19) The author goes on to explain that as accreditation processes have become more widely spread at the program level, faculty are more concerned with their own program's courses and requirements. (p. 20) Generally, faculty create, teach, and assess the curriculum. This automatically lends oversight and involvement in the foundation of the accreditation process. (p. 22, Crosson, 1986) The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the regional accrediting body for the West Coast of the United States, implores faculty to be involved not only in the documented activities of the self-study document that is provided to the accreditor, but in the entire accreditation process (p. 6, Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1996) The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (1996) gives four charges on how faculty can actively participate in strengthening accreditation at their institution: 1.) act as a site reviewer for the accrediting body, where you can see the inter-workings at other institutions and learn from their successes and challenges; 2.) participate in writing a part of the accreditation self-study report; 3.) make themselves available to the accreditation team visiting campus to share their insights on the campus' efforts; and 4.) lastly be a part of reviewing and acting on any recommendations from the accrediting visit team. (p. 8-9)

Perhaps the faculty's most hands-on involvement with accreditation efforts is collecting, documenting, analyzing, and implementing changes from student learning assessment data

required by accreditors. Smith (2005) suggests faculty engagement, particularly in assessment, is a means to evaluate the program's effectiveness and contributions in teaching critically. It demands faculty to ask engaging questions regarding what their students should know to graduate. In addition, what will they be able to offer a future employer uniquely, what is "noteworthy" about their program and what can it lend to its field or university, and what strategies using what measures are best suited to their discipline? (Smith, 2005) One example of where reflections on student learning assessment data can occur is during a peer review process as described by Evans (p. 2, 15, 2017) Evans (2017) describes that peer cross-disciplinary faculty gather to discuss student learning. Through collaboration and communication, the process highlights what is working in student learning assessment and what is not. (p. 2)

Glass et al.'s (2011) found that faculty engagement goes far beyond the classroom. In Academia, faculty engagement often includes school and community relations and teaching and scholarly activities (Glass et al., 2011). Some faculty participate in service outside of the classroom, including testifying as an expert witness, receiving patents or copyrights on research, and advisory boards for accreditors or other discipline-specific groups. (p. 16, Glass et al., 2011) The study also found that "personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) and professional characteristics (e.g., rank, appointment, and college)" influenced the levels of faculty engagement (p. 9, Glass et al., 2011).

Faculty Engagement in Assessment.

Faculty engagement in assessment is encouraged in diverse ways at various institutions. For example, Evans (2017) writes that a culture of assessment includes initiatives specifically for "fostering engagement." By clarifying the process and the university's vision for student learning outcomes assessment, the university builds a culture of engaging faculty and students in

assessment through a six-step in-house assessment plan (Evans, 2017). The six steps in Concordia's Cycle of Assessment of Student Learning process include: 1. Outcomes, can be called Learning Outcomes, Standards, or Components and are statements explicating learning expectations; 2. Tools, are often exams, rubrics, or surveys that measure a students' learning; 3. Results, often given in summary and numerical form derived from statistical measures of the tool; 4. Conclusions, what information for change is gathered from the analysis of the results; 5. Changes, summarized change proposal from the conclusion, and 6. Impact, the impression of changes on student learning, the program or course. These steps mirror the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment Transparency Framework underpinning this case study.

Allen et al. (2018) espouse that hiring faculty who are predetermined to be engaged is the best predictor of having faculty engaged while employed at one's institution. "By using statistically significant statements as the basis for interview questions, eventually all faculty hired would be engaged. There would be no more disengaged faculty or detractors. Hopefully, the ultimate result would be an increase in student success." (p. 56) These statements could include "I am proud of the work that I do" or "I am immersed in my work." (p. 56, Allen et al., 2018) Allen et al. (2018) observed that faculty who rated themselves through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale as engaged "were significantly more productive, they were less likely to show signs of burnout, they were more loyal, and they were less likely to be looking for jobs elsewhere." (p. 56) In their 2015 study, Harrill et al. found that to increase student learning, faculty engagement is crucial and that the policies, practices, and culture of universities must begin with the leadership shaping an engaged faculty-lead assessment initiative. Ultimately as Hutchings (2011) describes, faculty becoming engaged in assessment looks like a collaborative, faculty-lead, open communication process.

Assessment Culture

Skidmore et al. (2018) summarize that leadership on campuses greatly influences the type of culture of assessment at an institution. (p. 1243) Continuing, the authors add: “interest in assessment throughout the organisation, communication, the capacity to take risks, a sense of academic focus or community, and the honesty and integrity of administrative leaders also influence cultures of assessment to favour improved student learning.” (p. 1243-1244, Skidmore et al., 2018) Institutional requirements for assessment are unlikely to lessen in the future and are important to understanding the “efficacy and effectiveness of programs” offered, Martins asserts that building a culture that can sustain ongoing assessment efforts is critical. (p. 2010) A lack of institutional commitment to assessment can lead faculty to resist assessment efforts citing a lack of time, effort, or motivation for the practice. (p. 3, Martins, 2010)

Irrespective of the instruction's modality, the type of assessment, or whether accreditors require the assessment or not, faculty engagement in assessment processes is crucial. As a result of their "Quality Enhancement Plan" for accreditation, the University of South Carolina identified methods to assess student work while engaging faculty and promoting a change in culture regarding assessment processes (Fallucca, 2017). Fallucca suggests aligning student-learning outcomes with the institution's mission encouraged faculty to work on integrative learning opportunities for their students "beyond-the-classroom" and transfer them to classroom experiences. Fuller et al. (2016) describe that a culture of assessment must include "faculty ownership." Faculty reflect the institutional values, and their engagement within depends on what practices, policies, and procedures the campus has adopted (Fuller et al., 2016). Regarding campus culture and how assessment is affected in this culture, Maki (2010) wrote:

An inclusive commitment to assessment of student learning is established when it is (1) meaningfully anchored in the educational values of an institution—articulated in principles of commitment statement; (2) intentionally designed to foster interrelated positions of inquiry about the efficacy of education practices among educators, students, and the institution itself as a learning organization; and (3) woven into roles and responsibilities across an institution from the chief executive officer through senior administrators, faculty leaders, faculty, staff, and students.” (p. 9)

Eckel et al. (1999) describe campus culture in this way:

“Culture is the 'invisible glue that holds institutions together by providing a common foundation and a shared interpretation and understanding of events and actions.

Institution-wide patterns of perceiving, thinking, and feeling; shared understandings; collective assumptions; and common interpretive frameworks are the ingredients of institutional culture.” (p. 26)

Assessment culture is a microcosm of institutional culture by this definition has its shared understandings and assumptions among faculty and leadership. Schein (1992) suggests that institutional culture has three elements. Visible artifacts communicate campus culture. Schein (1992) describes these artifacts as tangible flyers and posters around campus, to stories from all constituents (i.e., faculty, staff, students, community members) that lend to campus perception. "Espoused values" described by Schein (1992) are the next layer of campus culture and manifest in the institution's mission and vision. Lastly, Schein (1992) posits that all institutions have "underlying assumptions" that impact campus or institutional culture and are the least likely to be altered or changed completely. Rajala et al. expounds on Schein's research and defines underlying assumptions as: "as a concept that has become so taken for granted that one finds

little variation for other solutions within a group.” (p. 543) Angelo and Cross (1988) specifically name five basic assumptions of student learning assessment:

1. “The quality of student learning is directly although not exclusively related to the quality of classroom teaching. Therefore, the first and most promising way to improve learning is to improve teaching.
 2. Teachers need to make their goals and objectives explicit to improve their teaching. They also need to receive specific, comprehensible feedback on the extent to which they are achieving those goals and objectives.
 3. Teachers conduct the research most likely to improve teaching and learning on questions they have formulated in response to problems or issues in their teaching.
 4. Inquiry and intellectual challenge are powerful sources of motivation, growth, and renewal for college teachers, and Classroom Research can provide such challenge.
 5. There is nothing so esoteric, mysterious, or fragile about Classroom Research that it cannot be entrusted to and done by anyone capable of and dedicated to college teaching.”
- (p. 10-12)

These assumptions can lead to challenging change, and student learning assessment is often focused on change through the continuous improvement process.

Motivators for Faculty Engagement in Assessment.

Faculty engagement or buy-in for student learning assessment has notably been an arduous task across many campuses and times. Sujitparapitaya (2014) notes that student learning assessment takes place in many venues, individual courses, programs, general education courses, and student life activities, but much of the focus is at the program level where faculty stake is high. (p. 3) The author notes faculty buy-in is particularly of note on the program level as student

retention, learning, and ultimately matriculation is at stake. (p. 3, Sujitparapitaya, 2014)

Sujitparapitaya (2014) looks at the tasks of student learning outcomes assessment (SLOA) through goal commitment and notes that there are several components of this structure integral to faculty engaging in assessment. (p. 6) One question that this study address is: “Is SLOA important enough?” (p. 6, Sujitparapitaya, 2014) This question addresses the crux of faculty motivation in carrying out assessment practices, what will the course, program, institution gain with gathering student learning assessment data? In support of the integral goal of faculty engagement in student learning assessment, Sujitparapitaya (2014) offers the following as some motivators to create faculty buy-in by administration: 1.) Help Faculty Members Develop Self-confidence in their SLOA Skills and Knowledge; 2.) Remove Unnecessary Policies, Procedures, and Existing Barriers; 3.) Develop Incentive Programs. (p. 9)

In a similar study that addresses faculty motivation in assessment, more specifically General Education courses, McDonald et al. (2014) offer motivators for faculty buy-in. Increasing faculty knowledge in the skills of carrying out assessment is integral to faculty motivation to undertake assessment practices. (p. 80, McDonald et al., 2014) The authors offer that having supportive, knowledgeable professionals to conduct such training instead of administrators demanding the process is important for positive results. (p. 80, McDonald et al., 2014) McDonald et al. (2014) also address the intrinsic value that some faculty feel regarding assessment and suggest that involving faculty from the beginning of the process and incrementally, positive results can arise. (p. 81-82) Ultimately, preparing reports from the faculty's assessment efforts that are easily "digestible" produce positive feelings from faculty regarding assessment value. (p. 81, McDonald et al., 2014)

Faculty rewards for assessment efforts can also create faculty motivation and buy-in in student learning assessment. Smith and Gordon (2019) assert that faculty who take part in assessment practice tend to value it more than those who do not. (p. 66) There is, however, some disconnect in faculty work being used toward service and promotion and tenure status, but could work for many faculty members seeking compensation for their efforts (p. 67, Smith and Gordon, 2019) Smith and Gordon (2019) conclude that “(f)aculty participants recognized that monetary compensation was not always possible; however, providing food, publicly recognizing assessment efforts, and valuing assessment contributions in the P/T process were emphasized.” (p. 75) Faculty may not be fully aware of the value of assessment work and are less motivated when not seeing tangible recognition and rewards. They often view it as taking their time and effort away from teaching, research, and service. (p. 66-67, Smith and Gordon, 2019)

Demotivators for Faculty Engagement in Assessment.

While faculty engagement is critical to its success, the primary goal of assessment is to document student learning. In her 2017 study, Crista found that students generally positively perceive assessment and understand its role. Faculty buy-in of student learning assessment, however, still has challenges. Some assessment professionals, faculty, and staff value assessment beyond accreditation. They understand that ongoing assessment is useful for continuous program improvement, while others believe it infringes on academic freedom and student success. The empirical research on faculty embedding student learning assessment in teaching and learning, such as in Hutchings's (2011) case, is still relatively limited and must be more present in literature to draw more generalized conclusions on its worth.

The research does note three major challenges for faculty motivation to engage in assessment activities. (p. 66, Smith and Gordon, 2019) Smith and Gordon (2019) attribute poor

faculty buy-in to a lack of time, resources, and expertise in student learning assessment. (p. 66)

Truehart (2011) expands on the common obstacles of engaging faculty in student learning assessment. Heavy workloads, initiative overloads, connection between goals and assessment duties, resistance to administrative mandates, and focus on external accreditation demands can lead to faculty challenges integrating assessment practices on campus. (p. 6, Truehart, 2011)

Sujitparapitaya (2014) concluded that accreditation accountability has led to a trend of decreased faculty autonomy and increased faculty workload. (p. 8) And while some faculty remain obstinate considering these demotivators to participate in student learning assessment, as many have taken up its cause.

Emerging Trends and Best Practices associated with Faculty Engagement

Garrison and Rexeisen (2014) conclude that ultimately all faculty becoming involved and engaged with assessment and accreditation remains a reach, but perhaps a strong nucleus of faculty could be as effective. Sundararajan (2014) found that accreditation experience points to continuous improvement through student learning assessment. It is still necessary and illuminating for the individual student and the program's success to be examined, but it still asserts that while highlighting assessment processes and successes in accreditation, the largest hurdle remains faculty buy-in and engagement. Sundararajan (2014) found that faculty reported positive experiences of those faculty involved.

Faculty engagement and buy-in, particularly in assessment and accreditation efforts, often fall to an individual's beliefs and are often prescribed by an accredited body and the administration of an institution. Cunningham and deLeon (2000) acknowledge that student learning assessment is "here to stay." While much work has been done to build engagement as part of service requirements or in other incentivized measures, some resistance remains.

Conceptual Framework

Teacher, or Faculty, Autonomy is defined by Wilches (2007) “as a personal sense of freedom to execute the necessary actions and exert control over the school environment” (p. 256). Faculty Autonomy is examined at the individual level and how personal and environmental factors are experienced and create constraints in any professional situation. The ownership of the assessment of teaching and learning is a domain the author sees as integral in the faculty’s own sense of autonomy.

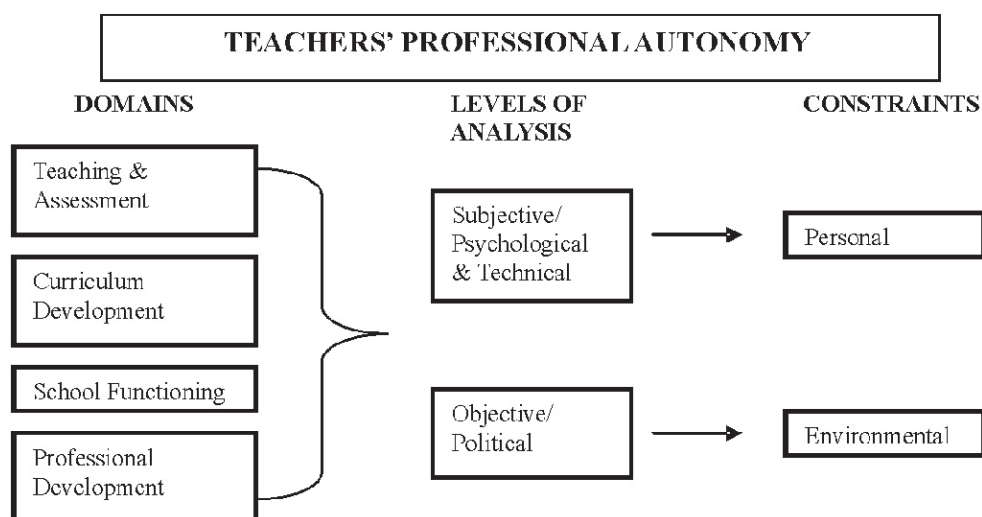


Figure 1. A model depicting the analysis of Teacher’s Professional Autonomy. Wilches, J.A. (2007). *Teacher Autonomy: A Critical Review of the Research and Concept beyond Applied Linguistics*.

Wilches (2007) goes on to describe autonomous faculty satisfaction is at its highest when faculty perceive that “decision making and risk taking” are sufficiently opportune. Hamilton (2007) emphasizes that ultimately the autonomy of faculty in higher education leads to the importance of academia’s contribution to the common good (p. 36).

The role of accountability in higher education is intertwined with student learning assessment and accreditation. Ultimately what students are learning and how that is measured is the goal of this accountability. Student learning accountability can be affected by constraints on

personal and environmental factors of faculty. Thus, these factors can be greatly affected by faculty autonomy or lack thereof. This research examines the relationship between faculty autonomy in the classroom, the role of student learning assessment, the demands of accreditation, or lack thereof, and how all of these factors work together.

Relationship Among Concepts and Research Problem

Empirical or Theoretical Research

Dueben (2015) concluded the major findings of her dissertation as aligning with the literature findings that there are two categories of attitudes towards assessment: 1.) those with skeptical ideas regarding higher education assessment demand that quality product is returned for the money input and 2.) the view that assessment does inform the teaching and learning process in higher education, improving programs and students alike (Dueben, 2015; Suskie, 2009). Dueben resolves that the summary of these two viewpoints was largely the result of her dissertation findings, that attitude of faculty reflects assessment participation.

Fuller et al. (2016) came to the following conclusion after analyzing their empirical survey that a "fundamental perspective" on assessment emerged. Fuller and colleagues (2016) surveyed a wide range of faculty in varied geographical and categorical colleges and universities. The author asserts that further evaluation is necessary to advance the survey's findings fully. Fuller's study provides the survey instrument for this study (Appendix A).

Conclusions

Faculty engagement is theoretically and historically a large part of higher education assessment and accreditation processes. Often, a faculty's attitude toward assessment and accreditation is seen to have the largest effect on their level of engagement and "outside" demands such as administrative requests, prescribed accreditor needs, and departmental duties.

There are additional forces that affect a faculty member's feelings to assessment and accreditation, such as seeing it as bureaucratic, financial, and legislatively tied and being a meaningless exercise that ultimately leads to little change in student learning in courses or programmatically. Assessment and accreditation are central to higher education and continue to be the subject of research. Research suggests that the approach and attitude toward institutional assessment can greatly benefit their outcome. Empirically, surveys of current teaching faculty who also practice assessment processes offer opportunities for scholarship and research that can positively influence their feelings on the subject. Lastly, faculty who are part of the planning and establishment processes and practices in assessment reports are more satisfied with assessment and have higher buy-in.

Summary

According to the published literature, both historical and empirical, accreditation, assessment, and the need for faculty engagement in these processes are here to stay on the higher education landscape. In summary, accreditation is internal or external assurance process that aims to guarantee student success at the post-secondary level no matter the program or institution in which the program is offered. It provides all constituents, students, parents, faculty, future employers, and other community members the opportunity to know that their desired degree or employee is endorsed with a proficient amount of learning. Accreditation-like assessment, which is often a large component of the accrediting bodies' interest, is still a much-debated issue in and outside the higher education community. Many still feel that student learning assessment is either extraneous, unnecessary or not under a faculty's purview. However, the literature claims repeatedly that the more engaged faculty are in the assessment process from the beginning, the more likely the program or institution seeking accreditation is successful.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

The purpose of this study is to compare faculty engagement in student learning assessment between programs that are specially accredited and programs that hold no specialized accreditation. This chapter discusses the research's methodology. This includes (a) the rationale for a case study design, (b) the description of the study's sample, (c) the overview of information needed to conduct the research study, (d) the research design, (e) how the data was collected, (f) how the data will be analyzed, (g) ethical issues, (h) trustworthiness of the study, and (i) any limitations and delimitations of the research. The chapter will end with a brief summary of the study's methodology.

Rational for Case Study Methodology

This qualitative research study was conducted with a case study design as Merriam (1998) asserts educational phenomenon can be best understood when presented this way. She goes on to describe:

A case study design is employed to gain an in depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (Merriam, 1998, p. 19)

This study seeks to answer: "Does program accreditation promote faculty engagement in student learning assessment?" This question grew out of my personal observations that faculty tend to be more engaged with assessment when the accreditation stake is high. There is an observation that a programs' lack of accreditation is directly linked to its viability. If that is the

case, then a faculty member's residence in a specially accredited program may mean job preservation. In contrast, faculty members that lack the structure of accreditation could in fact be more empowered to conduct assessment in a more meaningful and less prescribed way.

Institution structure, including the tenure and promotion process and context of the college or university could also prove to be a critical point in the demands of assessment and accreditation as these processes could vary widely in method and load between institution types. Assessment is often viewed as cataloguing or documenting work throughout the literature, which leads to a lack of faculty buy-in (Dueben, 2015). This research question fit well within a case study approach as it is intended to understand why some faculty are more engaged in student learning assessment than others.

Research Problem and Hypothesis

Despite decades of discussion and focus on student learning assessment and its place within accreditation efforts and higher education campuses, there are still issues with faculty engagement and buy-in. However, the literature supports that faculty engagement in assessment leads to increased student learning. Not all faculty are equally engaged in assessment and, therefore, student learning can suffer. Specially accredited programs devote considerable time to assessment and research shows that this does positively impact student learning. The hypothesis of this study is that faculty are more engaged in student learning assessment when the program that they teach within is specially accredited. Faculty both inside and outside of specially accredited programs will be interviewed for their level of engagement to analyze any significance differences that may appear in the data.

The Research Sample

A purposeful sample for this study was conducted at a Regional-Public Research II State University, geographically located in the Southern United States with approximately 14,000 students. This specific University was chosen for the lack of research in this higher education setting and familiarity of the researcher. More specific demographic information of this setting is described in Chapter 1. The criteria for selection of individual faculty members were as follows:

- Faculty who leads assessment in their academic program
- Faculty who are familiar with their program's accreditation status

A total of eight (8) assessment leaders who are faculty members across eight (8) colleges within the University participated in this pilot. Selection was based on availability, but careful consideration with having leaders within all colleges and some within accredited programs and some without those external reviewers.

Informal interviews were the primary research technique used in the pilot study. Additionally, review of faculty's programs websites, accreditation bodies' websites, literature review and interview notes were examined secondarily. From the interviews and secondary analysis, several key discussion points were present for further development of the interview questions.

Overview of Information Needed

This case study research focuses on eight (8) assessment leaders in both accredited and non-accredited programs at a Research II Public University in the Southeastern United States. This study asks the variance of engagement in faculty members in student learning assessment across disciplines and accreditation statuses in an interview setting. Contextual, perceptual, demographic and theoretical information was collected during interviews and website analysis. This information includes:

Table 3.1 Overview of Information Needed

<i>Type of Information</i>	<i>What the Researcher Requires</i>	<i>Method</i>
Contextual: researcher examined website and other pertinent documents for analysis of context and background of institution, programs and participants	Institutional background, history and structure; Accrediting body background, history and structure, Organizational-wide Student Learning Assessment culture and history	Documents Websites Observation
Perceptual: participants were asked their own perceptions of their work in student learning assessment through their academic teaching discipline	Participant's answers including beliefs, perceptions, and ideals regarding their own work in assessment and accreditation pertinent to the study	Interviews
Demographic: participants included several key demographic facts about themselves including length of time at the university, length of time in their discipline, tenure status, highest degree status, age, gender, ethnicity	Descriptive information and history of participants	Interviews
Theoretical: the literature review for this case study research is ongoing providing a theoretical basis of information	Examination	Peer Reviewed Journals Books Other Texts

Overview of Research Design

The list below is a summary of the steps in this study's research design. Following the listed steps, is a more detailed review of the qualitative research design of the research to be conducted.

1. A literature review was conducted prior to developing the research design of this study to understand and inform the organization of this work.

2. Potential research participants were identified by program accreditation status and leadership in their program assessment processes. These participants were contacted to be included in this work.
3. A pilot study of eight (8) participants of eight (8) academic colleges participated in interviews for this research.
4. Pilot interview responses and pertinent documents such as websites regarding the academic program and accrediting body represented were analyzed.
5. Further study with additional participants will be included in later research.

Qualitative research has grown out of centuries of human research where we try to understand the world and systems around us. Research and science at their core are a systemic way to obtain facts and solve problems. Ezer and Aksüt (2020) define qualitative research as a “long-term and versatile in-depth examination of certain facts and events within their natural environment.” (p.16) The authors go on to add that qualitative research’s purpose is examine a part of social life, and “to understand the perception and experiences of individuals or societies about a particular subject.” (Ezer and Aksüt, 2020, p. 16) Keegan (2009) writes that while qualitative research may be “less easy” to define than quantitative research, “it is primarily concerned with meaning rather than measuring.” (p. 11) Keegan (2009) further defines qualitative research this way: 1.) involves small groups of representative sample populations; 2.) person-centered; 3.) informal relationship between researcher and participant; 4.) purpose is to understand how the participant thinks and feels; 5.) output is the behaviors, thoughts and feelings of participants, not numerical data; and 6.) synthesis and analysis of data conducted on output by researcher. (pgs. 12-13) Qualitative research lends itself to the research problem and questions outlined in this chapter.

The contextual and complex nature of higher education assessment and accreditation lent to a need to narrow this study specifically to faculty engagement within these settings. This study will be a qualitative design to determine faculty involvement in program-level assessment initiatives at a Regional Public 4-year University in the Southeast United States. A semi-structured interview setting will be used one-on-one with full-time faculty who take part in assessment efforts within their own academic program. An interview setting was used to gauge faculty engagement by participants and motivations that can be shared for improvement by other faculty readers. I have observed in my own work with faculty as an assessment professional that often initial thoughts and reactions skew negative, but after further exchange, faculty members express more varied opinions on the processes and procedures of student learning assessment. I opted for a more informal, less structured interview set-up to give faculty an opportunity to naturally express their perspectives without leading questions.

In a related study, Dueben (2015) interviewed faculty one-on-one for a reflection of their attitude towards assessment. This research, conducted as a dissertation, was highly qualitative in nature. Dueben quotes Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stating that perspectives and stories told by faculty were the structure of her investigation. Fuller (2011) asserts that a “strong methodological foundation for assessment” has allowed the process to grow in practice. Many, if not all, institutions of higher education in the United States who are state or federally funded have to have processes in place that assure to all stakeholders that its students are meeting set learning outcomes or goals. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describes qualitative research as answering the “how” and “what” questions in a study. This study in particular seeks to answer how faculty are engaged in assessment efforts within the programs that they teach and if the accreditation status of these programs affects that engagement.

Positionality

The nature of my work in this study both as a practitioner and the researcher is important to the context of this research. In my role as the Assistant Assessment Directory at a Research II (R2) Carnegie classified Regional Public University, I act as a support to faculty and staff in developing, implementing, performing, documenting and analyzing assessment processes. Often each program has one Assessment Leader, and it is my role to assist in making accreditation and university-lead assessment work feasible.

Current research in faculty engagement in assessment is binary, faculty either participate or do not. Little has been written about what is a motivator or demotivator to faculty engagement in assessment. Often, I have experienced, the more a faculty member is engaged in assessment, the more that they understand and value it. Once useful and understandable assessment results are obtained, initial faculty hesitancy wains. From my role, I see one factor that affects engagement, and its level, and that is if the program accreditation requires the work in student learning assessment. This requirement often acts as a faculty's initial motivator to take up assessment work. My positionality as an assessment professional does shape this study's methodology, but I seek to understand faculty engagement and motivation toward student learning assessment from faculty's own perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

Because this study will focus heavily on an individual's thoughts and experiences in student learning assessment and the part that it can play in accreditation, a qualitative study was most relevant. Qualitative research is specifically used as a perspective for a more thorough investigation of the study's participants and their viewpoints. (Keegan, 2009, p. 11) The data collected in this study is informed by the literature review that proceeded it. Qualitative data for

this study was collected via one-on-one interviews. Open-ended questions, aligned to the research problem and questions, will be posed to participants to garner responses regarding their engagement in student learning assessment and attitudes and experiences in its processes. Watt (2007) describes the nature of qualitative research as complex, with no direct guidelines on how to conduct the study, but names the researcher as the primary instrument. (p. 82)

The Pilot Study

Location and Participation. The pilot phase of this study was conducted at a Regional-Public Research II State University, geographically located in the Southern United States with approximately 14,000 students. This specific University was chosen for the lack of research in this higher education setting and familiarity of the researcher. More specific demographic information of this setting is described in Chapter 1.

A total of 8 assessment leaders who are faculty members across 8 colleges within the University participated in this pilot. Selection was based on availability, but careful consideration with having leaders within all colleges and some within accredited programs and some without those external reviewers.

Objectives. The purpose of this pilot was the following:

- To gain an understanding of the scope and limitations of this study and its interview process;
- To gauge participants' willingness to speak on their experiences in student learning assessment for results;
- To identify key variables in common answers to further guide interview analysis

Based on answers received during this process, the hypothesis of this study was further refined, specifically regarding engagement of female faculty who are assessment leaders, in that all pilot participants were female.

Pilot Procedures. Informal interviews were the primary research technique used in the pilot study. Additionally, review of faculty's programs websites, accreditation bodies' websites, literature review and interview notes were examined secondarily. From the interviews and secondary analysis, several key discussion points were present for further development of the interview questions.

Setting. This research study is based at a university that resides in a large town of approximately 80,000 people in the Southeast United States. The university is home to approximately 14,000 students. The institution was included in this study as its exact context, Carnegie classified as a Research 2 (R2) university, its mission and vision identified Regional Public status and geographical location is highly underrepresented in the literature. The university has a complex history of assessment efforts through accreditation but has recently reached a level of steady leadership and achievement in regional accreditation.

The university has an Office of Accreditation and Assessment that oversees all like efforts on campus. The office's responsibility includes regional, specialized accreditation and all on-campus assessment practices. Assessment planning, data collection, "closing the loop" and future efforts for program-level student learning are all catalogued electronically through this unit.

Participants. All participants in this study will be faculty at a regionally accredited, R2, Regional Public University. Some faculty will be included whose programs do not participate in external program-level accreditation but are responsible for collecting assessment data as part of their

university's regional accreditation. Additionally, some will be faculty members in programs responsible for reporting to individual specialized accreditors as demanded by their discipline. Specialized accreditation is a peer-review based system, in that a program would seek external accreditation from others familiar with their discipline who are often highly prescriptive and have set benchmarks to reach for student learning and other administrative goals and outcomes. Including faculty from a number of specific disciplines both with and without specialized accreditation will give a more epistemological view. Ultimately given the differences with the participatory group, there will be a chance to observe the differences in engagement between faculty in specially accredited programs and those that have no such external review.

Study Data Collection

Interviews and Documents. The primary data resource for this study will be collected through interviews with faculty in varying programs with varying specialized accreditation statuses at a Regional Public University. The interviews will be only slightly structured with a more general question regarding assessment to begin but letting the participant guide most of the discussion. Any follow-up questions will also be open-ended to allow for the participants clear thoughts and attitudes to come through.

Interviews will be recorded both by voice recording, but I will also take notes for conciseness. Additionally, I will thoroughly research the program that the faculty resides within through their website, applicable accreditor website and historical context within the university through bulletins and course catalogues. A pilot study of this process will be undertaken to test the sample questions and prepare for the future study as a whole.

Study Implications

The pilot study indicated that irrespective of all motivators, demotivators, accreditation status or program in which faculty resided, engagement in student learning assessment was universal in all participants. The topic of faculty motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) is now of particular interest in the ongoing study.

Methods for Analysis and Synthesis

Data collected by interview and analyzed through both written and recorded notes will be connected with the following questions integral to this research:

1. Are each faculty member teaching in a program with an external specialized accrediting body?
2. What are the individually held perceptions and beliefs of each faculty regarding program-level student learning assessment?
3. What internal or external factors that shape these perceptions
 - a. Motivators?
 - b. Demotivators?
4. What kinds of support influence these factors (i.e. financial, service, recognition, other?)
5. How can the faculty member promote engagement by others in program-level assessment regardless of accreditation status?

The purpose of these questions is to view this research in the context of the research problem. Connection between faculty, their perceptions, motivators/demotivators, enticement and engagement are integral to carrying out student learning assessment whether guided by accreditation or not.

Coding Strategies

Qualitative research analysis often involves the “coding” of spoken or written answers. Williams and Moser (2019) describe coding in qualitative research as being: “...comprised of processes that enable collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for the construction of meaning.” (p. 45) Through the lens of the research questions and literature reviewed, this case study interview and document analysis will be examined through coding. Open coding, the first level, is to categorize data through participant answers in broad themed terms (Williams and Moser, 2019, p. 48). The authors describe the next level called axial coding, where themes are further refined and aligned to research questions (Moser and Williams, 2019, p. 50). Lastly, Williams and Moser (2019) describe the third level, selective coding, where selected themes can be further explored for more cohesive meaning to the research question. (p. 52) Qualitative research software, MAXQDA will be used to code the interview data in this study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration in qualitative research is as important as the questions being asked in the study itself. The design of this study will follow all ethical processes as established in qualitative research literature. The faculty participants of this study are academics and, therefore driven to protect their students, discipline and individual interests bound by privacy and academic integrity. This study was designed with these participatory factors in mind.

Consent. Consent of participants is integral to any research study. This study includes letters of participatory consent for all individuals at the time of interview request. Rapport with participants was also important for the accuracy of this study, and this began with their informed consent of participation. Because this study focuses on faculty engagement through their own beliefs and attitudes, establishing a rapport for ease and collegial interaction is crucial. In

remaining collegial, but neutral in response, this research should offer a transparent study of faculty experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

It is of the upmost importance in the validity and reliability of this study to establish trustworthiness with participants, the handling of the information collected and the data presented. “Qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study.” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 40) Participants will be given the data from interview and document analysis for checking before study results are published and given the opportunity to correct factual information throughout.

Limitations. This study, as with any research, limited to is specific context. This study will take place at a single institution. The nature of qualitative research makes this study not generalizable to any other type of institution, academic program, accredited or not. However, themes that emerge from this research could offer a place in the literature for further study.

Additionally, I came into this study with my own assumptions and perceptions after years of working in Student Learning Assessment and Higher Education Accreditation. My assumptions that faculty often resist assessment, that they are not well-versed in its processes and procedures, and that they do not view it as valuable to the learning of their students or their service to academia certainly informed this study. However, I looked to work through these assumptions through a thorough review of literature and faculty responses simply to contribute to the literature and research in this field.

Delimitations. Beyond this study being bound to a single Research II Public Institution situated in the Southern United States, the major delimitation of this study is that as of the pilot study, there were eight (8) faculty participants. Therefore, further generalization of specific

participants, their disciplines in one institution is likely. Transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) can be generated from this research were this study can be used as a bases of study in other higher education systems. By recording the details of this study, its methodology and findings, applicable transfer of knowledge can be used by others.

Summary

The basis of this study has grown from my personal interactions with faculty members involved in assessment activities both within and without specialized program accreditation. I want this study to explore the perceptions, efforts to meet the demands from outside accreditors as well as university-lead asks in student learning assessment and if the level of engagement by those faculty is dependent upon program accreditation. I have chosen a qualitative study, so that a more robust question and answer method can occur.

This study's intent is to measure the level of engagement in faculty members in a variety of programs within both specialized and non-specialized accredited programs. The study's scope is limited by institution type and context. There is little empirical evidence regarding faculty engagement depending on their program's accreditation status and its limitations, so it is important to view the analyzed data within this study's context. Ultimately this study should lead to findings that need to be more thoroughly explored. It is important to understand engagement levels and motivations of faculty regarding assessment to begin to understand how engagement can be improved or changed for the purpose of conducting student learning assessment to achieve accreditation.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

These interview questions are intended to be semi-structured to guide the participant interview process. The questions were developed after the literature review and pilot process.

Research Question: Does faculty engagement in student learning assessment differ between accredited programs and non-accredited programs?

Research Guided Questions	Possible Follow-up Questions
What does “student learning assessment” mean to you?	What has led you to this thinking?
When discussing “student learning assessment” between colleagues within your program, what is discussed?	Do you speak to colleagues outside of your program about “assessment?” How are these conversations similar and/or different then when discussing with your own program faculty?
Who leads “assessment” efforts for your program? How did that faculty member(s) acquire that leadership role?	
Does the faculty leader ensure that other faculty members in the program know what is happening regarding “assessment?”	
What do you feel is the value that you are involved in “assessment?”	
What is a motivating factor to participate in student learning assessment?	What would dissuade you from participating in “assessment?”
What are your final thoughts regarding faculty being engaged in assessment?	