

Running Head: ACBSP INFLUENCE ON SCHOOLS' VALUE PROPOSITION

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF ACBSP ACCREDITATION ON THE  
VALUE PROPOSITION OF NC BUSINESS SCHOOLS

by

Jamie H. Conrad

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

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Liberty University, School of Business

December 2018

### **Abstract**

National accreditation agencies, such as the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, offer accreditation opportunities to provide external validation of continuous improvement processes implemented within the business schools' programs of study. The requirements for obtaining and maintaining the most popular national business program accreditations are resource consuming and do not yet have a documented level of influence on the business schools' value propositions associated with the accreditation process or accreditation status. The current study is necessary to explore the influence accreditation has on the value proposition presented to the marketplace, which is an essential component of the marketing strategy formation for both the business schools and the accrediting organizations. This research study explored the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for a business school's programs of study.

*Key words: Accreditation, ACBSP, value proposition, higher education, NC business schools*

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### **Dedication**

Dedicated to the memory of my loving grandmother, Eula Mae James, who was the inspiration for me to pursue this dream and to complete it. I know you are smiling down from above and I pray you will always be proud of the way each one of us carries on your incredible legacy with all that we do. Thank you for teaching me how to live, laugh, and love, but most of all how to pursue my dreams and never give up no matter what type of challenges I face along the way. You are so loved and so very missed always, but especially so as I complete this dream of ours. Thank you for your love and the wonderful memories.

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Thank you to my wonderful parents. You have supported each of my dreams and have helped make me who I am today. Thank you for being there during each of the challenges I have faced along the way and for supporting me by pushing me to continue pursuing this dream in the midst of those difficult days. It is because of you and your support that I have made it through each of those challenges and am here today to celebrate the achievement of this goal. Thank you for being who you are and for loving us all the way you do!

To my Chair, Dr. Ahmed – thank you! You have encouraged me, guided me, prayed for me, and supported me as I worked through so many challenges. God could not have provided a more perfect match for me during this educational journey. I am thankful for you and for all that you have done to assist me in completing this dream in my life.

Thank you most of all to the One who made this all possible. I thank God for the many, many miracles He continues to bring into my life each day. Even when I thought there was absolutely no way possible, God provided just what I needed to complete this dream. I know that Jeremiah 29:11 will forever ring true in my life – for God is the only one who knows what the future holds and His plans are always better than my own. I am forever thankful for His unwavering love and the many blessings He bestows on my family.

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## **Section 1: Foundation of the Study**

A business school's overall success is dependent on the school's ability to market the business programs' adherence to quality standards that directly align with the goals of its stakeholders. National accreditation agencies, such as the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), offer accreditation opportunities to provide external validation of the adherence to quality standards and the implementation of continuous improvement processes within the business schools' programs of study. The requirements for obtaining and maintaining the most popular national business program accreditations are resource consuming and do not yet have a documented level of influence on the business schools' value propositions associated with the accreditation process or accreditation status. The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for a business school's programs of study.

### **Background of the Problem**

Any endeavor pursued within an institution of higher education should have the same focus as those pursued within other businesses and industries – to utilize resources in an effective and efficient manner to create a positive impact and assist in achieving the overall mission of the organization (Burton, 2012). As quality assurance and continuous improvement processes are of utmost importance to most organizations within all industries, the same is true within the field of higher education (Foss, Stubbs, & Jones, 2011). In order to increase the marketability of the business schools' programs of study, many schools are relying on accreditation processes to increase the quality of their offerings and provide quality assurance to key stakeholders (Eaton, 2012). However, the accreditation process seems to be utilized as a checklist of goals related to quality and marketability of the programs of study, rather than focusing on accreditation as a

strategy, defining the set of coherent actions that help meet the challenge of ensuring the programs meet the actual expectations and needs of key stakeholders (Foss, Stubbs, & Jones, 2011). It is important for one to develop an understanding of the influence that the accreditation status and the continuous improvement processes that are utilized and implemented as a result of the accreditation pursuit have on the overall value proposition presented to the marketplace.

Many of the higher education institutions within the state of North Carolina have earned regional and/or national accreditation (US Department of Education, n.d.). Regional accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) (EDsmart, 2017) is most common in schools within the state of North Carolina. Some of the North Carolina colleges and/or universities have also obtained additional accreditations specifically based on the adherence to quality standards and continuous improvement processes implemented within the institutions' individual schools and programs (Guttenplan, 2011). The most common national accrediting bodies for schools of business within the state of North Carolina are the Accreditation Council of Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Both accrediting institutions claim to increase the stakeholders' perceived value placed upon business schools and programs in response to the school's documentation of the adherence to quality standards and continuous improvement processes that are required to gain accreditation (Viehland, 2012). Although these accreditations are highly sought after and held in high regard within many institutions, the experience of key decision makers within higher education institutions as they consider and pursue accreditation, as well as their perceptions of the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition presented to the marketplace upon receiving accreditation status has not yet been fully explored.

## **Problem Statement**

The general problem to be explored is the lack of understanding of the influence that accreditation has on the value proposition that business schools present to the marketplace. Colleges and universities often utilize accreditation as a component of their marketing strategies to emphasize the educational quality and the continuous improvement processes present within their programs of study (Brown, 2001). Accreditation has served as a regulatory approach to quality assurance and consumer protection in higher education for over fifty years, but now many are questioning whether accreditation remains connected to the priorities and needs of today's consumers and higher education institutions (Eaton & Neal, 2015).

The cost and intrusiveness of the current higher education accreditation system often raise complaints and leave individuals debating about whether the accreditation process positively influences the overall value of the schools' programs as perceived by its key stakeholders (Eaton & Neal, 2015). The current study is necessary to explore the influence accreditation has on the value proposition presented to the marketplace, which is an essential component of the marketing strategy formation for both the business schools and the accrediting organizations. The specific problem to be explored is the lack of understanding of the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that private business schools offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina presents to the marketplace.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that business schools within private universities

offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina present to the marketplace. The key decision-makers associated with educational programs in NC business schools within private universities, namely business school administrators and faculty, will be the subjects of this multiple case study. The perceived benefits associated with the accreditation process will be explored, in an effort to develop an overall understanding of the influence the ACBSP accreditation status and accreditation process have on the value proposition the business school presents to the marketplace. The study results are intended to provide the ACBSP organization, as well as business schools across the world, with data that will assist key decision makers in developing an understanding of the influence ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that the business schools present to the marketplace.

### **Nature of the Study**

The research questions associated with this study demand the use of a qualitative case study approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that the most suitable situation for utilizing the case study design is when the research focus is on the development of an in-depth understanding of cases or the comparison of several cases, all of which are clearly identifiable with boundaries. When the desire exists to understand complex social phenomena, the case study design allows the researchers to focus on a specific case or cases and retain a holistic and real-world perspective (Yin, 2014). The research questions associated with the current study include primarily "how" and "why" questions, with little or no control over behavioral events from the researcher's standpoint, and a focus on a contemporary phenomenon, which Yin (2014) indicates is the most appropriate type of situation for the use of the case study design.

## **Discussion of Method**

The research questions associated with this study demand the use of a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative research methods allow for an interpretive process, allowing the researcher to key on the meaning of human affairs from multiple viewpoints (Stake, 2010). To explore the influence of accreditation on the value propositions of business schools, one must be able to discover the various viewpoints of the accreditation process and status from all key stakeholders' perspectives. Qualitative research is also experimental, situational, and personalistic (Stake, 2010). The qualitative research method will allow for a field-oriented research process with a descriptive view of the key stakeholders' individualized perceptions of the influence of accreditation on the value propositions for each business program.

Quantitative research methods were also considered, as they have the ability to provide data regarding the cause and effect relationships associated with the accreditation process (Creswell, 2008). Although the quantitative research methods would be useful in determining the relationships that exist between the accreditation process and the perceived value of accreditation in the market, this study seeks to focus on the human experience of pursuing national, program-specific accreditation and the influence the overall accreditation experience has on the value proposition presented to the marketplace. The data gathering process for this study is narrative in nature, as it is intended to be a basis for understanding the experience associated with the consideration, pursuit, and receipt of ACBSP accreditation and the perceived influence it has on the business school's value proposition. Quantitative studies rely heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis to test objective theories by examining the relationship among variables (Creswell, 2010). As this study is focused on the perceived



experience individuals have with the ACBSP accreditation process and its influence on the value proposition marketed by business schools, it demands the use of a qualitative research method rather than a quantitative method of study (Stake, 2010).

The mixed method research approach is often used to improve the quality of the evidence in a research study (Hansen, O'Brien, Meckler, Chang, & Guise, 2016). Qualitative researchers often rely on triangulation with a mixed methods approach if they are looking for a method to increase the level of confidence in their research discoveries by including a numerical scale that delivers statistical confidence (Yin, 2014). Although some researchers rely on mixed methods to collect data, to analyze data, and to increase the level of confidence in the research results, other methods for triangulation are also available to researchers conducting qualitative research, such as member checking and the use of review panels. For this study, the researcher will use multiple sources of evidence in triangulation of data sources, with the intended result of corroborating the same findings in all sources. Multiple queries of the research participants, with an understanding that multiple realities may be presented from various sources, as well as the utilization of information from various key stakeholders within the same institutions, will assist the researcher with the triangulation process, eliminating the need for a mixed methods approach.

### **Discussion of Design**

The qualitative research method that is best suited for the proposed research topic is the case study, as it allows for a holistic look at the topic with the inclusion of multiple data points, such as a look at the accreditation structure and process, interviews, and business school practices. The case study design is most appropriate as the research focus is on the development

of an in-depth understanding of cases or the comparison of several cases, all of which are clearly identifiable with boundaries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is a desire to understand complex social phenomena related to the manner in which the value proposition is influenced by the accreditation process, so the qualitative research methods, using a multiple case study design, will allow the researcher to focus on a specific case or cases and retain a holistic and real-world perspective (Yin, 2014).

Through the multiple case study design, the researcher seeks to discover the meaning of each individual's experience and develop an understanding of the perspective of each research participant (Stake, 2010). This design choice will help express how each key stakeholder acquired and describes their experiences with ACBSP accreditation and the influence it has on the value proposition for the business schools' programs of study. The qualitative case study research approach will allow for the exploration of the ACBSP accreditation experiences of multiple business schools within private universities in the state of North Carolina through a multiple bounded system approach.

There are other qualitative research designs that are useful in some types of research, such as the narrative, phenomenology, grounded study, and ethnography research methodologies. However, upon examination of the purpose and research questions associated with the current study, none proved more useful or appropriate for the purpose of this study than the case study qualitative research design. Although each of the other qualitative research designs presents alternative opportunities for research gathering methodologies and potential research outcomes, the case study proves to be most useful in the development of an understanding of the complex social phenomena related to the manner in which the value proposition is influenced by the accreditation process (Yin, 2014).

Narrative design is a narrative description of a phenomenon or specific series of events in chronological order, with an emphasis on the story, including what and how it is communicated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The narrative design provides a collection of stories that communicate experiences and highlight identities. The stories include details about the specific organization where the story occurs, which provides valuable contextual information (Clandinin, Cave, & Berendonk, 2017). The narrative design often includes data gained from interviews, observations, experiences, documents, and pictures, from a single or a small number of individuals (Keefer, 2015). The most suitable situation for utilizing narrative design is when the research focus is on exploring the life of an individual, and the research problem focuses on telling stories of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With a lack of focus on the complex social phenomena related to the research focus, the narrative design would lack the necessary attributes to deliver the outcomes associated with the current study.

Phenomenology design is a study that describes common experiences that all participants in a situation have in common regarding a specific concept or phenomenon, such as the universally experienced feeling of grief (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenology design focuses on a description of the universal essence of what individuals experience and how they experience it in relation to the phenomenon (Skuzza, 2007). Phenomenology allows one to study and learn about phenomena that are difficult to observe or measure by collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and analyzing that data to generate themes (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). The focus of the current study is on the overall phenomena created by the accreditation process and its influence on the value proposition for the business school, which affects different study participants in a variety of ways. The study is not focused

on the experience itself, but instead on the outcome of the accreditation process; therefore, the phenomenology design would not allow for the outcomes of the research study to be discovered.

Grounded theory is defined as a qualitative research design that moves beyond a simple description of common experiences and instead seeks to generate or discover a theory for a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The most suitable situation for utilizing the grounded theory design is when a theory does not currently exist that provides an explanation for or understanding of the process that the researcher is studying (Glaser, 2016). Grounded theory provides the opportunity to develop theory based upon the samples and populations of interest to the qualitative researcher, which may not be available in the current models extant in recent literature or research publications (Johnson, 2015). If the theories are present, they may not completely address the variables or categories the researcher is most interested in and may warrant a new study based on the grounded theory design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The current research study focus is not on theory or the explanation or understanding of a process; therefore, the grounded theory design would not be the most appropriate research design to be utilized in the study.

Ethnography is defined as a research method that focuses on the description and interpretation of the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of an entire culture-sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sim and Shepperd (1999) referenced ethnography as an inductive, qualitative technique that is suitable for investigating complex human phenomena in an open-ended manner. Ethnographic studies incorporate an immersion of the researcher into the day-to-day lives of the people within the culture-sharing group to obtain information through participant observations and participant interviews (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). The current research study focus is on the influence of accreditation

on the value proposition, rather than on a specific cultural group. The most suitable situation for utilizing the ethnography design is when the research focus is on the development of a description of a specific cultural group, with a focus on the exploration of the beliefs, language, behaviors and issues facing the group (Cope, 2015). Therefore, the ethnography design would not be an appropriate design to deliver the desired outcomes for the current research study.

### **Summary of the nature of the study.**

The researcher chose a qualitative multiple case study approach to explore the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the business schools' value propositions through the review of the experiences and perceptions of key stakeholders in higher education institutions. The case study approach is exploratory in nature and will be advantageous in helping the researcher review phenomena that has not yet been recognized using an intuitive research approach. The research process is intended to reveal various aspects related to the experience of key stakeholders with the accreditation process in order to create a better understanding of the value associated with ACBSP accreditation. Yin (2009) emphasizes the importance of utilizing the case study approach to develop an understanding of the phenomena that is explored, with a thoughtful approach that includes the reason for exploring it. Stake offers the view that qualitative research should not seek to explain, but instead it should seek to understand. With the desire to understand the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the overall value propositions offered by business schools, the qualitative case study approach is the most appropriate research method for this exploratory study.

### **Research Questions**

- Why does a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution choose to consider national, program-specific accreditation?

- Why does a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution choose to pursue ACBSP accreditation?
- How is the value proposition the business school presents to the marketplace influenced by the school becoming ACBSP accredited?
- Do employers look for candidates that have specifically graduated from a school with ACBSP accreditation?

### **Conceptual Framework**

To be effective, an organization's value proposition must deliver unique and differentiated benefits to key stakeholders (Zolezzi, 2015). The value proposition is only effective if it is aligned with the expectations of the organization's key stakeholders and delivers the consumer benefits they desire in a format that is differentiated in some manner from those of their competitors. Establishing processes to receive continuous feedback from key stakeholders with a focus on quality and continuous improvement helps an organization create an effective method for meeting the unique needs of its target market (Anderson, Narus, & Van Rossum, 2006). Successful organizations push their value proposition to the next level by focusing on the highest level of achievable quality for their product or service offerings and on the implementation of a continuous improvement process that allows for a focus on benefits that exceed the expectations of key stakeholders and provide differentiation from competitors (Zolezzi, 2015).

### **Discussion of Kaizen Theory.**

The Kaizen Theory--or theory of continuous improvement--emphasizes the positive effects of a continuous set of pervasive organizational improvement activities extra to specific, contracted responsibilities and involve undertakings each individual believes are contributory to

the organization's ability to meet quality standards (Kaizen, 2004). The Kaizen Theory forms the foundation for continuous improvement, as it focuses on instilling in each individual within the company the desire to strive for improvements in all areas (Stelson, Hille, Eseonu, & Doolen, 2017). A Kaizen approach will create company-wide efforts to improve upon and intelligently streamline business practices and production methods, while simultaneously respecting the product, craft, or the people involved with the production process (Osamu, 2013).

Change that occurs based upon a Kaizen approach takes the form of deliberate, constant improvements in all areas with a continuous focus on ensuring that all changes are outcome-based. Kaizen targets three specific areas within all aspects of an organization: unreasonableness, inconsistency, and waste (Osamu, 2013). Many organizations have long relied on the application of Kaizen to eliminate unreasonable, inconsistent, or wasteful practices in order to maintain the high standards of organization, production, and other essential processes within the company. Although the focus of Kaizen is on the elimination of practices or processes that are unreasonable, inconsistent, or wasteful, the overall effect of Kaizen is the creation of a continual improvement process and mindset that extends far beyond these three areas of concern (Stelson, Hille, Eseonu, & Doolen, 2017). Some have argued that Kaizen is more of a mental philosophy, rather than a methodology, in that it requires all those involved with an organization to adopt the mindset of continual change and the desire to improve the way outcomes are achieved within the organization. With a focus on striving for success through continuous improvement, Kaizen encourages individuals to embrace change and implement methods for continuous improvement at all levels of the organization (Osamu, 2013).

**Discussion of Continuous Improvement.**

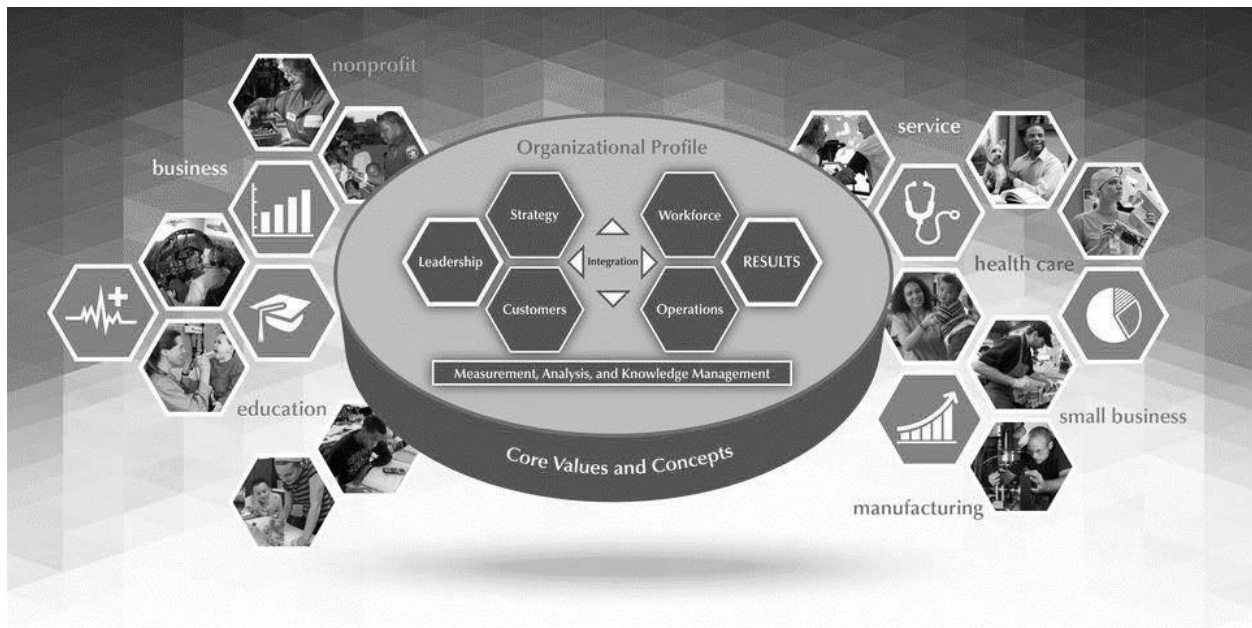
Creating a culture of quality and ongoing continuous improvement is a goal for many organizations throughout all areas of business and education (Foss, Stubbs, & Jones, 2011). Four fundamental elements of a continuous improvement culture have been identified – education, lean, project management, and quality. Creating processes that are more efficient is often a key focus for continuous improvement in many organizations. In identifying a method to improve efficiency, a lean approach is often utilized. Education is then commonly used as the key for training others on the new method that has been identified. Project management tools are often utilized to assist managers in changing behaviors to accommodate the new processes. Quality is the measurement tool that is most utilized in determining the overall effectiveness of the change. The four elements utilized in a synergistic fashion create a culture of ongoing improvement that ultimately leads to an increase in the value proposition for most products and services (Foss, Stubbs, & Jones, 2011).

The creation and utilization of a continuous improvement process is closely followed by a focus on maintaining the approach, along with a continual focus on the maintenance of quality standards. Organizations often use approaches such as Kaizen, Total Quality Management (TQM), Six Sigma, and other quality assurance approaches to ensure continuous improvement is maintained within the organization on an ongoing basis (Burton, 2012). The utilization of these quality improvement methodologies allows organizations to maintain improvement in a variety of areas of the organization, with other tools woven in as well (Evans & Lindsay, 2012). Many of the tools utilized by institutions of higher education for continuous process improvement are similar to or derived from the same tools utilized in other businesses or industries (Peng & Prybutok, 2015), just as ACBSP's accreditation process and standards integrate the Kaizen



methodology of continuous improvement and closely align with the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award guidelines (Viehland, 2012).

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) was established in 1987 by the United States Congress to enhance the competitiveness of United States businesses through a focus on quality and the identification and recognition of role-model organizations (National Institute of Standards and Technology, n.d.). The MBNQA includes criteria that allows for the evaluation of improvement efforts and an avenue for the dissemination of information regarding best practices (Peng & Prybutok, 2015). There are seven separate, weighted categories included within the MBNQA model: (1) leadership; (2) strategic planning; (3) customer focus; (4) measurement, analysis and knowledge management (MAKM); (5) workforce focus; (6) operations focus; and (7) results.



*Figure 1.* Baldrige Excellence Framework. This figure depicts the systems perspective of the 2013-2014 MBNQA criteria for performance excellence framework (National Institute of Standards and Technology , n.d.).

Practitioners must maximize the outcome of their efforts toward quality management practices by allocating efforts in each Baldrige category in direct proportion to the significance of the impact the categories have within their particular industries (Peng & Prybutok, 2015). Within higher education, the design of accreditation standards is often in close alignment with the Baldrige categories. However, the results of this study may reveal that the efforts toward quality management and the allocated weight of each Baldrige-related accreditation standard are evenly weighted without consideration for the areas that have the most impact within higher education environments.

### **Discussion of Quality Assurance in Higher Education.**

Quality assurance within higher education is often accomplished through the accreditation process (Eaton, 2012). The accreditation process includes standards and policies, developed to judge institutions and programs on both threshold quality and quality improvement (Viehland, 2012). Periodic reviews are conducted on a regular basis, consisting of a self-review against accreditation standards by each institution or program, followed by a peer review and then a decision made by the accrediting organization regarding whether the accreditation standards were met and a decision regarding whether the accredited status was to be awarded (Eaton, 2012).

The accreditation programs for colleges and universities are intended to be an effective way for improving the quality of higher education (Yong-An, Ao, Zhiwei, & Ping, 2009). Accrediting organizations have created quality assurance processes that verify the continuous improvement of business schools and programs. The accreditation is earned through the submission and verification of documentation related to the continual improvement processes, quality assurance, and procedures that promote overall effectiveness of the program offerings.

The accreditation process includes all factors related to student and institution success. The rigorous and demanding nature of the accreditation process, along with the application-oriented procedures, focuses on both the teaching process and teaching results of the institution of higher education (Yong-An, Ao, Zhiwei, & Ping, 2009).

The accreditation process follows the same methodologies associated with the Kaizen Theory and business-related quality management and continuous process improvement programs. The accreditation process for ACBSP closely mirrors the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, a process used by a variety of organizations to improve their performance and competitiveness (Viehland, 2012). Accreditation is designed to assist business school administrators in assessing what they do, how they do it, and how they can do it better. The process of obtaining and reaffirmation of accreditation requires a systematic reporting practice of the continuous improvement methodologies utilized and the results associated with such each academic year. Accreditation is an ongoing continuous improvement process with global recognition upon the award of accredited status (Viehland, 2012).

### **Discussion of relationships between concepts.**

To ensure the highest level of quality and offer quality assurance to key stakeholders, many business schools elect to implement activities aligned with the Kaizen Theory by pursuing national program-specific accreditation such as ACBSP accreditation (Eaton & Neal, 2015) that is based upon a quality assessment structure modeled after the Malcolm Baldrige National Award. The Kaizen process includes processes and procedures for creating continuous improvement within an organization. The Kaizen method is often implemented through a step-by-step analysis of each process and procedure that exists, ensuring that quality is at the forefront of all decisions and remains so via the instilled focus on continuous improvement (Osamu,

2013). The requirements associated with obtaining and reaffirming an ACBSP accreditation consists of measures to ensure quality as well as the implementation of a continuous improvement process (Viehlend, 2012). The accreditation standards includes criteria similar to that of the MBNQA, that allows for the evaluation of improvement efforts, as well as providing an avenue for the dissemination of information regarding best practices (Peng & Prybutok, 2015).

### **Summary of the conceptual framework.**

A business school's value proposition is effective only if it is aligned with the expectations of the school's key stakeholders and is consistent with the delivery of the consumer benefits they desire in a format differentiated from those of its competitors. Establishing processes to receive continuous feedback from key stakeholders with a focus on quality and continuous improvement helps an organization establish an effective method for meeting the unique needs of its target market (Anderson, Narus, & Van Rossum, 2006). With a focus on striving for success through continuous improvement, Kaizen encourages individuals to embrace change and implement methods for continuous improvement at all levels of the organization (Osamu, 2013). Accreditation is often the process status schools utilize to ensure the highest level of quality and offer quality assurance to key stakeholders, as the accreditation standards are aligned with the Kaizen Theory and offer a tool for continuous improvement (Eaton & Neal, 2015). Exploring the influence of accreditation on the business school's value proposition requires the researcher to understand the concept of the Kaizen Theory and the role that continuous improvement processes play on the overall market value from the perspective of the school's key stakeholders.

## **Definition of Terms**

**AACSB.** The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business is a global business education network and association that provides quality assurance, business education intelligence, and professional development services with required evidence of continuous improvement through engagement, innovation, and impact (Valle, Rich, & Cox, 2017).

**ACBSP.** The Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) has provided accreditation for business education programs at the associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctorate degree levels worldwide since 1988. ACBSP focuses on the recognition of teaching excellence, the determination of student learning outcomes, and the establishment of a continuous improvement model to assist higher education business schools in establishing quality assurance (Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, n.d.).

**Accreditation.** Accreditation is a peer-reviewed and voluntary validation process common to academia in the assessment and evaluation of the quality of degree programs (Abbadeni, Ghoneim, & Alghamdi, 2013).

**Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).** Continuous quality improvement refers to a process of ongoing improvement based on the creation of well-defined program outcomes, program educational objectives, and the development of assessment processes to ensure graduates' achievement of program-specific outcomes (Sikander, Aziz, Wasim, Hussain, & Jahanzaib, 2017).

**Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).** The Council for Higher Education Accreditation is the largest institutional higher education membership organization in the United States created for the purpose of addressing national accreditation issues for higher education institutions (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, n.d.).

**IACBE.** The International Accreditation Council for Business Education is a national institution focused on accrediting business programs that lead to degrees at the associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels in institutions of higher education worldwide that grant bachelor's and/or graduate degrees (International Accreditation Council for Business Education, n.d.)

**Institutional Accreditation.** Institutional accreditation refers to the accreditation of an organization as a whole (Utz, 2014).

**Kaizen.** Kaizen refers to an integrating strategy that envisages the gradual, continuous improvement of products and services quality, as well as productivity and competitiveness, with the participation of all those within the organization (Madar & Neacsu, 2014).

**Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA).** The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award is the highest level of national recognition a U.S. organization can receive for performance excellence. The award requires the recipient to have a system that ensures continuous improvement in overall performance in delivering products and/or services and provide an approach for satisfying and responding to customers and stakeholders (National Institute of Standards and Technology, n.d.).

**Program-Level Goals.** Program-level goals are specific goals that are established within academic programs of study.

**Programmatic Accreditation.** The accreditation of specific programs of study within a higher education institution is referred to as programmatic accreditation (Utz, 2014).

**National Accreditors.** National accreditors are accrediting organizations that offer the opportunity for program-specific accreditation to demonstrate business programs' legitimacy as a part of institutions of higher learning. The top three business school accreditation agencies are

the AACSB, the ACBSP, and the IACBE -- each with its own unique perspective and standards (Bryan, 2013).

**Regional Accreditors.** There are seven commissions, referred to as regional accreditors, that operate in six geographic regions across the United States to provide a self-regulatory, peer review accreditation process for colleges and universities based on rigorous standards with a focus on outcomes (New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.)

**Student Learning Outcomes.** Student learning outcomes are statements that specify what students will know or be able to demonstrate once they have successfully completed or participated in a program, activity, or course (Chance & Peck, 2015).

**Value Proposition.** The value proposition is a statement that informs consumers of the benefits of your products or services and of the advantages offered that differ from those offered by the competition (Baldassarre, Calabretta, Bocken, & Jaskiewicz, 2017).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

Assumptions must be made with any qualitative or quantitative research study, as they often form the basis for the arguments one develops, the language used throughout the research process, and the data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2008). The assumptions for the current study are centered around the research participants' ability to interpret and understand the influence of accreditation on the value proposition for the school. The research study poses the possibility of limitations that exist during the course of the study, including the multiple case study approach, the role of the researcher, and the interpretation of the study's findings, which should be also accounted for and considered during the interpretation of the overall findings. The researcher's decisions on the scope of the study, the research participants selected, the

identified research problem, and the theoretical perspective selected for basis of the identified study emphasis all form the delimitations of the study.

### **Assumptions**

An assumption that will be made in this study is that the selected participants will provide an accurate and thorough account of the accreditation process and its influence on the value proposition for the schools' business programs. Without an account that is accurate and precise with a true understanding of the influence the accreditation status and process has on the value proposition for each school, the results of the study will be skewed and inaccurate. The researcher will strive to select participants who have the background knowledge and involvement with the business school and the accreditation process well enough to be able to provide an accurate and descriptive account of the influence seen through their involvement with the school and its programs of study.

An additional assumption is that the research participants will be in a position to understand the ACBSP accreditation process and its overall effects on the organization and its key stakeholders. If the participants do not have a thorough understanding of the accreditation process, they will lack the knowledge that is required to correlate the details of the process with any influence on the value proposition. The participants must understand the process itself to fully grasp the amount of influence the individual requirements within the accreditation process can have on the outcomes associated with the accreditation status. The researcher will ensure that the participants have had full involvement with the accreditation process, as well as the business school's programs of study, by selecting the individual school's ACBSP Champion or Co-Champion for requested involvement in the research study.



The researcher must assume that the information provided by the accrediting organization, ACBSP, regarding its member schools is accurate and provides a true depiction of the accreditation status of the schools within North Carolina. The database compiled by the ACBSP organization is dynamic and accreditation statuses change throughout the academic year as new schools receive accreditation status and others opt out of renewing their accreditation. The database that is available to the members is not always up-to-date and on occasion contains errors for significant periods of time. Rather than relying on the status indicated by the ACBSP database, the researcher will contact the school directly to ensure the accreditation status is accurate before requesting the participants' involvement in the research study.

The participants are assumed to have no reason to believe they will benefit in any way from participating in the research or have any ulterior motive for being part of the research study. With any reason for participating in the study other than for the intended outcome – to explore the influence accreditation has on the value proposition for the school's programs of study, the results of the study will be skewed and provide inaccurate results. It will be important for the researcher to select participants who are able to provide unbiased feedback and participate without any ulterior motives by thoroughly discussing the intentions of the study and the participant's level of involvement along with the potential benefits associated with the research.

### **Limitations**

The study poses the possibility of limitations due to the multiple case study approach, the role of the researcher, and the interpretation of the study's findings. The limitations that exist during the course of the research study should be considered during the interpretation of the overall findings.

The case study approach presents challenges related to the identification of the case(s), as the researcher must decide which bounded system or systems to study, while also ensuring that the rigor and quality of the research remains at an acceptable level throughout the case study research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The identification of the case(s) includes a selection of the number of cases to be studied, as well as the scope of the case. The number of cases studied influences the overall collection process and the number of resources required to complete the research process (Haunschild & Eikhof, 2009). The researcher must consider the type of case(s) that will best meet the needs of the intended research and consider the amount of information necessary to expand and provide a generalization of theories associated with the research purpose (Yin, 2014).

The rigor and quality of case study research has been the subject of concern regarding research methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study research often involves processes that can result in unreliable data if a systematic process is not followed or if the researcher allows equivocal evidence to affect the overall outcomes of the study (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Challenges exist with case study research when a formal process is not followed that allows for the selection of appropriate case evidence. The researcher can best address these challenges by completing a thorough literature review, followed by the careful and thoughtful creation of research questions or objectives that are specific to the scope of the study and the purpose of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial phases of the case study research development should be followed by the utilization of formal and explicit procedures to conduct the case study research, thus ensuring that the research is based upon fair and accurate evidence (Yin, 2014).

The multiple associations the researcher has with ACBSP influence the role of the researcher. As a student within the doctoral program of an ACBSP accredited institution, a faculty member of an ACBSP accredited institution, an ACBSP Institutional Co-Champion, and the ACBSP Region 3 immediate past-Chair, the researcher brings a unique set of biases and perceptions to the research study. The biases that will affect the researcher's study of ACBSP specific accreditation may also influence the researcher's interpretation of the research data. Attempts to reduce this limitation must be made during the research study through the exposition of any underlying feelings, assumptions, and biases that are present to allow the researcher to be more open to creatively thinking about the various explanations or interpretations that are present in each case. Establishing a reflective practice throughout the research process will help expose the biases that might be present (Stake, 2000). The researcher will consult with each research participant to ensure there is agreement on the interpretation of the research data for each case. The biases that exist will also be limited through the process of triangulation of the data, as the researcher will view the data from a variety of sources through a variety of methods and analyses of the data collection.

The inclusion of participants from a variety of accredited institutions and from different areas of North Carolina, will provide an opportunity to explore the common themes among the schools' accreditation experiences and its influence on the value proposition as well as the particular differences that exist. The elimination of some of the limitations associated with the generalizability effect of selecting only a specific type of higher education institution within a single state will occur with the multiple case study approach. However, the reader will be left to determine how the findings that account for the commonalities and differences among the schools best apply to their particular situations. The multiple case study approach is intended to

assist with the extrapolation of information that provides both the commonalities and the differences between the various research participants' experiences, providing the reader with the information necessary to interpret the results.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations that exist within this study include the scope of the study, the research participants selected, the identified research problem, and the theoretical perspective selected for basis of the identified study emphasis.

The scope of the study is limited in that it focuses on a small segment of higher education and only one of the regional business school accrediting organizations that exists within the United States. The study's unique focus on the business schools within private universities offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina will deliver results specific to these types of higher education institutions that may not be applicable to other institutions of higher education or other accrediting organizations. The focus on only ACBSP accredited institutions excludes the effects that might exist from one of the other two top accrediting institutions within the United States. The results will also be specific to a timeframe within the study period, which may affect the overall emphasis on the value proposition for the institution, depending on the other environmental factors that are affecting the business schools' programs of study at that time. The focus on these particular institutions limits the study to the perceptions of the value propositions specific to the size and nature of a particular type of institution of higher education rather than the inclusion of a variety of institutions, which may affect the overall success of the schools' value propositions in ways that are unrelated to the study.

The research study participants selected include the ACBSP Champion, Co-Champion, and other key decision makers or administrators of the business school. Although the research

study participants will have an association with the accreditation decision, this does not guarantee a high level of knowledge of the effects of the accreditation status on the various aspects of the business programs. The research participant may also hold views of ACBSP accreditation, its overall influence on the value proposition for the school, or the accreditation process that differ from other stakeholders associated with the business school. As a key decision maker for the business school, the research participant may be inclined to offer a view of the influence of accreditation on the value proposition that is altered from reality to avoid detrimental outcomes associated with the internal support for accreditation.

The identified research problem focuses on the influence of accreditation on the value proposition associated with the business schools' programs of study. A narrow focus without consideration of the other views of accreditation that have greater importance to key decision makers within the higher education setting may alter the participant's willingness to comply with the research efforts. The research problem can be addressed only if the institution has first identified the value proposition of its programs of study, and has an awareness of the perception of such before and after the accreditation status was awarded.

The theoretical perspective for this research study may prove to limit the overall results of the study, as a focus on the organization's value proposition and the effectiveness it offers for institutions in marketing their programs of study may limit the researcher's ability to determine the comprehensive influence of accreditation. The accuracy of the findings of the research study is dependent on the success of the Kaizen Theory, or theory of continuous improvement, to be effectively implemented in the accreditation process. The findings will be dependent on an accurate account of accreditation's ability to offer quality assurance through the implementation

of a continuous improvement process and the overall influence this process has on the value proposition for a business school.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study may provide guidance as to the accuracy of value propositions, especially when related to the level of quality assurance a product or service provides. Quality assurance and overall quality management have become a focus for most every industry, but especially so within higher education and within higher education politics across the world (Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann & Krücken, 2017). Many industries rely on quality management models and quality assurance programs to ensure that the value of the goods or services produced is in alignment with the overall quality expected. A value proposition offers the consumer guidance in selecting one product or service over another, as it summarizes the value that the consumer can expect from the product or service, as well as the ways in which that particular product is exceptional in relation to its competitors (Price, John, Christenson, Scharnhorst, Oellerich, Jones, & Morris, 2016). Findings that ratify the accuracy or inaccuracy associated with value propositions based upon quality assurance programs have the ability to affect a variety of industries in addition to higher education.

### **Reduction of Gaps**

The findings from this study may provide ACBSP and college and/or university administrators with information regarding the influence of national accreditation of business schools and programs on the business schools' value propositions. The pursuit of accreditation is resource consuming for many colleges and universities (Eaton, 2012). The results of the study are intended to help explore the influence that the accreditation process has on the business school's value proposition from a key stakeholder's perspective. An exploration of the value

associated with the accreditation status, derived from a case study approach, will provide college and/or university administrators with the stakeholders' perceptions of both the expected and unexpected benefits and costs associated with the accreditation process. Research results regarding the benefits and costs related to the accreditation process will validate whether the accreditation outcomes and perceived influence on the business school's value proposition actually correspond with the expectations of the key constituents and become a source of data for marketing purposes for both the accredited institutions and the ACBSP organization.

### **Implications for Biblical Integration**

The value proposition for a product or service offers the consumer guidance in selecting one product or service over another, as it summarizes the value that the consumer can expect from the product or service as well as the ways in which that particular product is exceptional in relation to its competitors (Price, John, Christenson, Scharnhorst, Oellerich, Jones, & Morris, 2016). One of the most important marketing tasks is to create and communicate the value that drives the level of satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability the organization desires from its customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). A value proposition serves as a promise of the perceived customer value the company intends to offer to the customer. Consumers rely on the promise as an indication of the value to be expected through the delivery of the product or service. Proverbs 20:25 offers a reminder of the importance of following through with promises made and ensuring they are made with integrity. It is important for the value proposition to be truthful and to deliver the promise of value that is useful to the consumer.

The accreditation status -- as a sign of continuous improvement, productivity towards intended outcomes, and the resulting achievement of high-quality standards -- is often a key component of a value proposition that is utilized to market the business programs in higher

education institutions. Quality management and productivity within the higher education environment play a significant role in advancing God's purposes for business on earth. The purpose of work as defined by God's word directly relates to each of the goals included in both quality management and the accreditation standards, in that individuals are encouraged to set an example by doing what is good (Titus 2:7), by working diligently (Proverbs 12:24 & 14:23), and by working for the glorification of God through service to others (Colossians 3:23).

Although the meaning of quality is defined in different terms in various industries, the term often conveys an adherence to standards, a fitness for purpose, an overall effectiveness in achieving institutional goals, the ability to meet the customers' stated needs, or a stated level of excellence (Elassy, 2015). The task of quality management includes both a focus on finding solutions to evident problems and the identification of future problems, while also identifying ways to create higher levels of performance. Titus 3:14 emphasizes the importance of focusing on good works and intended outcomes as it states, "Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives." The core task associated with both quality management and accreditation processes is to assure the fitness of an organization within a competitive environment by providing products of high quality, which meets all of the expectations of the various definitions of the term (Weckenmann, Akkasoglu, & Werner, 2015).

The continuous improvement plans and high-quality standards set forth in the ACBSP accreditation process are intended to provide business schools with a direction and set of intended outcomes that assist the school in developing efficient methods for achieving the overall goals of their individual institutions of higher education. God's loving care comes to individuals largely through the work of others (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012); therefore, being



productive in all that is done is not only important to the organization, but it also produces a continuation of God's love to those who benefit from its work, including the key stakeholders of higher education institutions. The exploration of the influence the accreditation process has on the business schools' value proposition will also reveal methods in which ACBSP accreditation furthers God's plans through the offering of quality educational programs of study.

### **Relationship to Field of Study**

Value propositions are a critical part of both marketing theory and practice. Products or services with strong value propositions are more likely to receive selective attention from consumers, be included in their consideration sets, be evaluated positively, and be chosen at the point of purchase (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). The perceived value associated with ACBSP accreditation is strategically important to most institutions, as the accreditation status is utilized to help educational programs remain relevant and competitive in the educational marketplace. An increase in the perceived value has a positive influence on brand equity, which is associated with an increase in an organization's ability to win brand-loyal customers (Datta, Ailawadi, & van Heerde, 2017). In the educational realm, the student who prefers one accreditation to the other in selecting a business program represents a brand-loyal customer. An employer who prefers to hire graduates from educational programs accredited by a specific accreditation agency is also a representation of a brand-loyal customer in an educational institution. Exploring the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for business schools and programs will help determine the perceptions key stakeholders exhibit regarding the benefits of ACBSP accreditation in comparison to the resources required to obtain the accreditation status.

**Summary of the significance of the study.**

This study is intended to provide the ACBSP organization and higher education administrators with information regarding the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for business schools and programs. The pursuit of accreditation is resource consuming for many colleges and universities. The study is intended to help explore the value of the accreditation process from a key stakeholder's perspective. An exploration of the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the business schools' value proposition, derived from a case study approach, will provide college and/or university administrators with the stakeholders' perceptions of both the expected and unexpected benefits and costs associated with the accreditation process. Research results regarding the benefits and costs related to the accreditation process will validate whether the accreditation outcomes and perceived value actually correspond with the expectations of the key constituents and become a source of data for marketing purposes for both the accredited institutions and the ACBSP organization.

**A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Many business schools and programs within the state of North Carolina have achieved the status of accreditation from a regional or national accrediting organization, and in some situations they have been granted both the regional and national accreditation status ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)). Achieving accreditation at either the regional or the national level is a time-consuming, arduous process that encompasses a high level of documentation noting the quality assurance and continuous improvement processes in place within the higher education institution. Many schools have chosen to pursue accreditation with the desire to utilize the accreditation status to create a positive impact on their business school's value proposition. Although data has shown the positive effect that sound quality assurance and continuous

improvement processes have on the business environment (Kohlbacher, 2013) and on the outcomes of most business schools (Bryant, 2013), data is not available regarding the influence of accreditation on the value proposition for a business school or the higher education institutions' programs of study.

The primary objective of the literature review is to present a critical analysis and synthesis of research pertinent to this research study. Included in the literature review will be an overview of accreditation and the accrediting organizations within the United States, including those that are specific to business schools and programs. The literature review will also include information on each aspect of the accreditation process and its intended outcomes, including specific information on quality assurance, continuous quality improvement, and benchmarking in higher education institutions. The literature review will present data on the use of value propositions within business schools and programs, the value of accreditation, strategic allocation of resources, and the balance scorecard approach for accountability. The results of the literature review will provide information from prior research addressing the main ideas of the field of marketing in higher education with regard to accreditation and the influence of the accreditation process on the value proposition for business schools and programs.

### **Accreditation**

According to the ACICS website (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, n.d.), accreditation is defined as “a status granted to an institution that meets or exceeds the stated criteria of educational quality.” The purpose of the accreditation process is to provide quality assurance for academic institutions, control access to state and federal funds, foster employers' confidence in the educational quality of their job applicants, and enable the transfer of credits between schools (Lindgrensavage, 2016). A variety of accreditations exist for

institutions of higher education, both on the regional and national levels, many of which are tailored to meet the specific quality assurance and improvement needs of business schools and programs.

The process associated with gaining accreditation involves several steps, including the achievement of standards for peer review and a continual process of reporting accreditation data on a regular basis. The accreditation process is both qualitative and fact-specific, relying on subjective judgments from peer evaluators rather than steadfast rules (Salto, 2017). The institutions are required to provide documentation to prove that they meet standards in areas such as academic quality, administrative capability, financial compliance, governance issues, strategic planning, and overall academic achievement (Lindgrensavage, 2016). This is a time-consuming, complicated process for most institutions, requiring regular documentation, control processes, and a system for continuous improvements in all areas. Although there are clearly defined benefits associated with the accreditation process (Flood & Roberts, 2017), the exploration of the influence of the accreditation process or accreditation status on the overall value proposition for the business school has not yet occurred.

### **History of Accreditation**

Accreditation processes began with regional accrediting agencies in the 1800s. Accreditation was first developed within the United States as a method for protecting the health and safety of the public while also serving the public interest (Eaton, 2015). As communities rapidly expanded, organizations increasingly desired standards to help meet the public's demand for quality in areas such as healthcare and education. The process of accreditation "gradually evolved along three parallel paths, commonly referred to as the Triad, forged by the development of peer-evaluation amongst institutions and accrediting agencies, and the development of

regulation, legislation and oversight by state governments, and the federal government” (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, n.d.).

Higher education began to develop in the United States during the 1800s, which then created the need for a method to determine the quality of education at each institution, as well as a way to distinguish the schools from each other. The accreditation processes for colleges and universities were developed to assist students and school officials in defining the campuses that met the conventional standards of quality education (Brittingham, 2017). The accreditation status also helped create national standards to allow for the transfer of credits between foreign educational institutions and the schools within the United States.

The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), was one of the first national accrediting organizations in the United States. It first began as the National Association of Accredited Commercial Schools, formed in 1912 by twenty-three private career schools, to offer national standards for institutions of higher education. It remains one of the highly respected accrediting institutions and is currently the largest national accrediting organization of degree-granting institutions, accrediting more than 800 U.S. and international institutions. ACICS is currently one of only two national accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education (CHEA) (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, n.d.).

### **Accreditation Process**

The accreditation process began to evolve shortly after the regional agencies were formed, as the growth of peer review processes were further created between institutions and accrediting agencies. The specific focus of early accreditation efforts was on educational standards and admissions procedures. The first step of the accreditation process began with the

development of regional standards in quality, followed by national accreditation organizations' implementation of minimum standards of quality set up throughout the country.

The effectiveness of the accreditation process was improved with the establishment of the American Council on Education (ACE) in 1918, which strove to include a wider variety of schools and academic programs (American Council on Education, n.d.). ACE is a national association for higher education institutions with an interest in standardization, effectiveness and reduction of duplication in the processes associated with accreditation (Cassells, 2017). Still in existence today, the ACE is the only significant higher education association representing all types of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions (two-year, four-year, public and private). The organization includes member institutions that enroll approximately eighty percent of the current students in higher education (American Council on Education, n.d.).

The number of national and regional accrediting agencies has grown significantly since the first ones established in the 1800s (Keil & Brown, 2014). ACICS was formally recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education in 1956, shortly after Congress passed the Veteran's Readjustment Assistance Act, which mandated the publishing of a list of recognized accreditation associations and increased the recognition of the accreditation process. This was followed just a few years later by Congress's enactment of the Higher Education Act in 1965, which provided regulation for accreditation within the United States (Brittingham, 2017).

In 1975, two accreditation institutions merged to form the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA). The purpose of the merger was to improve the process of accreditation by providing a unified process of recognizing accrediting agencies through peer-review evaluations. COPA also sought to improve quality assurance within the group of U.S. institutions who are members. COPA was replaced with the Council for Higher Education

(CHEA) in 1996, due to some challenges that had arisen within higher education in the previous two decades. In 2012, CHEA formed the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) to take the accreditation standards to a global level, providing quality assurance and promoting high-quality higher education on an international spectrum. Both the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) now recognize reputable accrediting agencies for higher education institutions. They also provide the guidelines and resources, as well as relevant data, regarding the recognized accreditors (De Paor, 2016).

### **Accrediting Organizations**

Ten organizations recognized by the U.S. Department of Education grant national accreditation to institutions of higher learning located within the United States and abroad. There are also six regional accrediting organizations that offer accreditation opportunities to institutions of higher education based on their geographic region in the United States. Most of the non-profit higher education institutions within the United States are regionally accredited, while the for-profit colleges and universities are usually accredited by national agencies (The Database, 2016).

Accrediting organizations are designed to review entire higher education institutions or specific programs of study, along with their intended outcomes in relation to the mission of the overall institution. There are four types of accrediting organizations within the United States: regional accreditors, national faith-related accreditors, national career-related accreditors, and programmatic accreditors. Accreditors for higher education institutions are viewed as being legitimate accrediting organizations only upon recognition by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). CHEA recognition of the accreditor confirms that the processes and

required standards are consistent with the CHEA established guidelines for academic quality, continuous improvement, and accountability.

Most institutions pursue accreditation on a voluntary basis. As a self-review and peer review process, accrediting organizations provide institutions with a clear description of what they regard as academic quality. They also provide clear expectations that the institutions or programs they accredit have processes to determine whether quality standards are being met (Abbadeni, Ghoneim, & Alghamdi, 2013). Some fields of study require graduation from an accredited program of study to obtain licensure to practice within the field. In those cases, accreditation becomes a mandatory requirement for the success of the program of study (Dill, 2014). In most other cases, institutions voluntarily decide to pursue the accreditation status to enhance the quality of their programs of study or to provide verification of the quality of the education that is offered by the institution.

### **Regional Accreditation**

Regional accreditors accredit public and private, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting, two- and four-year institutions. Six CHEA recognized regional accrediting organizations offer accreditation for colleges and universities within the United States ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)). Each of the regional accrediting organizations grants accreditation to institutions based on its geographic region within the United States and has a CHEA recognized scope of accreditation. The regional accrediting organizations within the United States recognized by CHEA include each of the following ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)):

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS)



- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

The colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina are able to pursue the regional accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

**Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).**

The mission of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges is to “assure the educational quality and improve the effectiveness of its member institutions” ([www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)). As the second largest of the regional accrediting agencies within the United States, the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) accredits over 800 institutions of higher education within the United States (Brown, 2015). SACSCOC covers the southeast region, offering accreditation status to higher education institutions within eleven states including schools in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia ([www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)).

SACSCOC’s mission is to enhance the quality of the education offered and improve the overall effectiveness of higher education institutions throughout the region. The pursuit of SACSCOC accreditation requires institutions to demonstrate that they meet standards established by the higher education community and designed to ensure that the educational offerings are meeting the needs of students and society (<http://sacscoc.org/pdf/2018PrinciplesOfAccreditation.pdf>). By requiring the institutions to meet specific quality-related standards, SACSCOC serves as the common denominator of shared

values and practices among the diverse institutions within the region in which it serves (Brown, 2015).

The purpose of accreditation is to enhance the quality of programs and services through each member institution's engagement in ongoing improvement within the context of the institution's resources and capacity. Each accredited institution is expected to maintain an educational environment that allows teaching and learning, research, and public service to occur in line with the institution's overall mission (Capps, Touchstone, Eldridge, Smith, & Borchers, 2018). SACSCOC is dedicated to assisting with the enhancement of quality within education by offering guidelines and accreditation standards that assist the institution with the creation and maintenance of quality programs of study that make up an up-to-date, sound educational experience while optimizing student achievement outcomes. For example, in response to the need for more current guidelines for its member colleges and universities with online programs, SACSCOC produced an enhanced "Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement" jointly with its "Guidelines in the Application of the Principles of Accreditation to Distance and Correspondence Education" to create shared practices regarding online education offerings (Commission on Colleges, 2014).

Although participation in the accreditation process is voluntary and intended to be a form of self regulation, higher education institutions typically decide to pursue accreditation for reasons that differ from just the primary purpose of offering quality assurance to key stakeholders. Institutions pursue accreditation to also ensure students are eligible for federal financial aid, have the opportunity to transfer academic credits to another school, and are able to obtain appropriate professional licensure in their chosen field of study. There are currently 112 colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina that have chosen to pursue and have

earned the status of being SACSCOC accredited. Forty-two of the SACSCOC accredited North Carolina colleges and universities offer a baccalaureate degree or higher (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2018).

### **National Accreditation**

Most regional accreditation bodies are focused on accreditation of the college or university as a whole. National accreditation programs, also often known as program-specific accreditation programs, have been established to allow for the accreditation of specific schools or programs of study within the college or university. The national accreditors are split into three different categories: faith-related accreditors, career-related accreditors, and programmatic accreditors. As of 2018, there are four CHEA recognized faith-related accreditors, two CHEA recognized career-related accreditors, and forty-nine CHEA recognized programmatic accreditors within the United States ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)). There are three national accrediting organizations recognized by CHEA as program-specific accreditors for business schools and programs. All three programmatic accreditors for business schools and programs offer similar accreditation procedures and standards, but each one maintains a primary focus on a specific type or level of educational institution.

#### **Accrediting Organizations Specific to Business Schools and Programs**

The top CHEA recognized national accrediting bodies for schools of business are the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), and the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE) (Hahn & Fairchild, 2015). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) and the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) are national accrediting institutions focused on assuring students that the

accredited institutions of higher learning adhere to high-quality standards based on the latest research and professional practice. The International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE) shares many aspects of its purpose and procedures with ACBSP and AACSB in that the programmatic accreditation by IACBE is mission-driven and outcomes-based, and involves an independent, external evaluation of the business programs offered by an institution's academic business unit (Capps, Touchstone, Eldridge, Smith, & Borchers, 2018). The focus of the IACBE accreditation process is also on the effectiveness of the business unit, as evaluated through a review of the teaching and learning processes within the institution and an assessment of the outcomes of the teaching-learning process (<http://iacbe.org/accreditation/>).

Within the state of North Carolina, there are twenty-one schools with the earned status of being AACSB accredited ([www.aacsb.org](http://www.aacsb.org)), twenty-six schools who have received ACBSP accreditation ([www.acbsp.org](http://www.acbsp.org)), and no schools who have earned IACBE accreditation status (<http://iacbe.org/accreditation/member-status-information/>). The regional accreditation council for schools within the state of North Carolina is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Of the 112 North Carolina schools that are SACSCOC accredited, almost all have business schools and programs. However, only approximately forty-two percent of all NC SACSCOC accredited business schools and programs have also earned the status of being AACSB, ACBSP, or IACBE accredited as well.

### **Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)**

AACSB is unique with differing attributes from those of the other organizations that offer accreditation to for Business schools and programs. As stated on the [allbusinessschools.com](http://allbusinessschools.com) website: "AACSB International accreditation is widely regarded as the highest level of accreditation for business schools, as only 25 percent of U.S. business schools achieve AACSB

International accreditation—the hallmark of excellence in management education”

(<http://www.allbusinessschools.com/business-administration/common-questions/business-school-accreditation/>). AACSB focuses on research institutions and currently accredits 817 business schools in 53 countries and territories (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, n.d.). AACSB provides specialized accreditation for business and accounting programs at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level (Barnes, Smith, & Vaughan, 2015).

### **Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP)**

ACBSP is focused on smaller, private and public schools that concentrate on teaching rather than research. The national accreditation standards associated with ACBSP accreditation have a greater emphasis on the achievement of teaching excellence through the assessment of outcomes. The standards are based on quality and a process of continuous improvement. ACBSP provides accreditation for business and accounting programs at the associate, baccalaureate, master, and doctoral programs with a focus on the quality of the teaching methodology within the school rather than research practices (Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, n.d.). ACBSP currently accredits nearly 3,000 programs at over 430 campuses across the world.

ACBSP also offers separate accreditation for the accounting units at schools that have an accredited business program. The decision to offer separate accreditation for accounting units was in response to recommendations by the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy to the state boards of accountancy. They urged the state boards to adopt rules that allow students graduating from programs that have attained separate accreditation in accounting to receive less scrutiny of transcripts, and instead to put greater emphasis on students having met the recommended requirements to sit for the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) exam

(Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, n.d.). ACBSP is also one of the first accrediting organizations to offer specialized business accreditation to all degree levels, including programs that offer degrees at the associate, baccalaureate, master and doctoral degree levels worldwide (Viehland, 2012).

### **International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE)**

IACBE focuses on the mission of the institution and on an outcomes-based approach in its accreditation processes. The target market for IACBE is the smaller, private liberal arts colleges as well as the mid-size private and public higher education institutions with business degree programs of study (Ekman, 2014). IACBE's philosophy indicates that the measurement of academic quality and excellence in higher education institutions with business programs should be based on the educational outcomes of the academic business unit relative to its mission. Although the focus of the other two top accrediting organizations for business schools and programs is on prescriptive standards related to academic resources with outcomes-based assessment as a portion of the required standards, IACBE emphasizes the need for mission-related outcomes to be the fundamental basis of the quality assurance and accreditation process (International Accreditation Council for Business Education, n.d.). The IACBE offers accreditation to institutions of higher education worldwide that grant bachelor's and/or graduate degrees at the associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. The IACBE does not accredit business programs of institutions of higher education that offer only associate degrees in business. There are no programs of study or higher education institutions within the state of North Carolina that have earned the IACBE accreditation status (International Accreditation Council for Business Education, n.d.).

### **Quality Assurance within Higher Education**

Institutions within higher education from across the world are concerned with the level of quality that exists with each program of study (Papadimitriou & Blanco Ramírez, 2015). Many nations have developed mechanisms for quality assurance that include quality comparison metrics such as rankings and comparative tables. Although many nations use the implementation of similar relative quality assurance mechanisms in various higher education institutions, it seems that accurate comparison of quality between the institutions is often based on metrics that cannot accurately provide a comparative model (Kinser, 2014). Many institutions of higher education have chosen to implement an accreditation process to provide a quality assurance model that is representative of high quality standards based on the latest research and professional practice. Higher education institutions often utilize accreditation to provide a comparative model of quality assurance that assures key stakeholders of continuous development and growth, as well as the maintenance of accreditation standards throughout the institution or its programs of study (Kalinina, 2013).

#### **Accreditation Standards**

Each of the accrediting organizations has a unique set of methods and standards associated with the accreditation process. Accrediting standards vary depending upon the focus of the accrediting organization. AACSB standards are focused on continuous quality improvement in management education through engagement, innovation, and impact (Bitter, 2014). They are designed to verify that processes are in place in each accredited institution that demonstrate competencies and procedures in each of fifteen different areas. The AACSB standards are divided into four areas: strategic management and innovation, participants (students, faculty, and professional staff), learning and teaching, and academic and professional

engagement. The standards, as presented on in the Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation document (2016, p.15-42), are as follows:

Standard 1: Mission, Impact, Innovation

Standard 2: Intellectual Contributions, Impact, and Alignment with Mission

Standard 3: Financial Strategies and Allocation of Resources

Standard 4: Student Admissions, Progression, and Career Development

Standard 5: Faculty Sufficiency and Deployment

Standard 6: Faculty Management and Support

Standard 7: Professional Staff Sufficiency and Deployment

Standard 8: Curricula Management and Assurance of Learning

Standard 9: Curriculum Content

Standard 10: Student-Faculty Interactions

Standard 11: Degree Program Educational Level, Structure, and Equivalence

Standard 12: Teaching Effectiveness

Standard 13: Student Academic and Professional Engagement

Standard 14: Executive Education

Standard 15: Faculty Qualifications and Engagement

The ACBSP standards focus on teaching excellence, student learning outcomes, and the process of continuous improvement. There are a total of six standards included within the ACBSP accreditation process, with separate accreditation standards for associate degree programs and baccalaureate/graduate programs. Each standard focuses on a specific area of the business program, as ACBSP does not accredit business schools, but instead accredits only programs of study. The six ACBSP standards, as listed in the Standards and Criteria for



Demonstrating Excellence in Associate Degree Programs documentation (2016, p.8-29) are as follows:

Standard 1: Leadership

Standard 2: Strategic Planning

Standard 3: Student, Stakeholder, and Market Focus

Standard 4: Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management

Standard 5: Faculty and Staff Focus

Standard 6: Process Management

The standards differ slightly for the baccalaureate/graduate degree programs, focusing on the types of organizational needs that are present at that level. The six ACBSP standards, as listed in the ACBSP Standards and Criteria for Demonstrating Excellence in Baccalaureate/Graduate Degree Schools and Programs documentation (2016, p.19-58) are as follows:

Standard 1: Leadership

Standard 2: Strategic Planning

Standard 3: Student and Stakeholder Focus

Standard 4: Measurement and Analysis of Student Learning and Performance

Standard 5: Faculty and Staff Focus

Standard 6: Educational and Business Process Management

These standards are a reflection of the goals and expectations of each of the accrediting bodies. As stated in the Standards and Criteria for Demonstrating Excellence in Associate Degree Programs documentation (2016, p.2),

The purpose of these accreditation standards and criteria is to assist member institutions of the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) in achieving performance excellence in business education. Through the process of self-study, on-site visitation, and assessment, business units will have the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to serving students, other institutions, and industry as defined in the “Bylaws” of ACBSP. Accreditation will signify that the business unit is committed to excellence.

### **Accreditation Process**

Accrediting organizations rely on a peer review process to measure institutional and program-specific criteria for accreditation status (Dill, 2014). Accreditation commissions and member institutions coordinate the accreditation process. The regional accreditation process ensures an acceptable level of quality at the institutional level. The national accrediting agencies, with a focus on the accreditation of specific programs of study, assure program quality.

The process for accreditation is tailored to the specific requirements of the business schools and programs of study. It is based upon program-specific standards and criteria within each to clarify further the quality and continuous improvement processes that are required. The standards are focused on both tangible and intangible aspects of the business schools' programs of study (Miles, McClure, Franklin, Heriot, Hadley, & Hazeldine, 2014). Accreditation standards are designed to assure stakeholders that the quality and continuous improvement processes required to ensure success are evaluated in relation to the school's mission, expected outcomes, and supporting strategies (Dill, 2014). The standards for each accrediting organization are designed through a strategic process and are reviewed and revised on a continuous basis. Accredited schools and programs are required to meet each standard initially,

gaining accreditation, but are also required to report ongoing adherence to the standards on a regular reporting cycle, usually every two-five years.

To be accredited by one of the accrediting organizations for business schools and programs, an institution of higher education must begin by applying for candidacy. The accreditation process for ACBSP begins with determining whether the institution meets the eligibility requirements, budgeting for anticipated costs on the timetable established to complete the process, and filing an Application for Candidacy. Once those steps are complete, a mentor is assigned to the institution to guide the group through the accreditation process. The accreditation coordinator and the institution's accreditation team begin to work on the preliminary questionnaire in the online reporting portal (Eligibility Procedures, 2016).

Upon completion and approval of the initial reporting process, the team begins work on the self-study documentation. The self-study report contains the institution's responses and documentation supporting their status on each of the accreditation standards. Once the self-study report is submitted and verified by the accreditation agency, a site-visit team is assigned to the institution. The site-visit team visits the campus(es) of the institution to clarify and verify the information submitted within the self-study report. The site-visit team evaluates the data and submits a report of its findings to the accreditation agency. The accreditation staff first reviews the report contents before the report is then forwarded to the business program accreditation coordinator for further review. The accrediting agency's Board of Commissioners reviews the self-study, the organization's response, and the evaluators' notes before making a final decision regarding the accreditation status. Once it is confirmed, accreditation status is immediately effective and can be advertised to the public.

### **Continuous Quality Improvement**

Achieving the status of accreditation often requires a complete change of mindset within the organization. Friedman and Kass (2016) emphasize the importance of understanding the significant organizational and culture change that must occur to successfully complete the accreditation process and achieve the accreditation status. There are two distinct processes that deans and other leaders of the cultural change must implement including bureaucratic changes related to curriculum alignment, course offerings and sequences, and prerequisite structures. Quite often, the changes that occur within the program during the accreditation process will create the need for new courses to be added to the required curriculum while other courses will need to be removed from the curriculum. This often creates tension within the institution, as faculty members are often hesitant to discontinue courses that have been part of the curriculum for many academic periods. Course changes require additional work from the faculty, which creates a situation where faculty members approach the necessary modifications with hesitancy and a strong resistance to change. Therefore, an additional area of change that must occur is in relation to the behavior of the faculty.

Deans and other administrators within the business schools have the high demand for creating a culture that supports and encourages the meeting of accreditation standards. Business school administrators can shape the culture in a business school. The deans and other leaders of the institution must find a way to overcome the resistance to change and create an environment that supports the accreditation process. Unfortunately, the change leader's response is often to try to overcome the resistance to change with extrinsic rewards and punishments, which rarely seem to motivate the behavior that is desired (Friedman & Kass, 2016). Leaders of higher education institutions often face institutional constraints that influence the level of collegiality in

a higher education institution such as faculty and/or professional staff unions, institutional repositioning strategies or even the economic context in which the college or university operates (Miles, McClure Franklin, Heriot, Hadley, & Hazeldine, 2014). As the leaders of the business school within the higher education institution, the dean and other administrators have the responsibility of overcoming the challenges and creating an environment that meets the requirements of the accreditation standards.

### **Process of Continuous Quality Improvement**

In both the field of education and within the business environment, it is essential to develop a system for assuring quality through continuous improvement. The continuous improvement processes allow an organization to strive to improve its business processes and outcomes through monitoring and analyzing data. As a company's capacity to handle data has improved drastically due to the technological innovations, organizations can make changes to their operating procedures that have the potential for drastically improving performance (Heavey, Ledwith, & Murphy, 2014). However, careful management of this process is required for a company to reap the intended benefits associated with the process.

To ensure proper integration of data and to report into the organization's day-to-day operations, a company must have both the right plans and the correct tools to implement the process. The continuous improvement process requires distinct steps for implementation (Heavey, Ledwith, & Murphy, 2014). The first step is planning – ensuring the processes associated with the continuous improvement plan are aligned with the organization's mission statement and strategic goals. The purpose of organizational and executive coaching aligns with this same planning goal – assuring the leadership is in tune with and continually pursuing the

mission of the organization (Underhill, McAnally, & Koriath, 2007). When designing a continuous improvement process, the same focus must be at the forefront of the project.

The next step is the data collection phase, where an organization is focused on collecting information that relates to the current processes in place, their effectiveness, and areas where improvements need to be made. This process must begin with the establishment of expectations that are in line with the overall mission and strategic goals of the company as well. Just as in organizational and executive coaching, if one is unaware of the purpose of the business or the educational institution, it will be difficult to commit to that goal. The coaching process is similar to the process of continuous improvement in that the coach helps the leader articulate the purpose that provides the opportunity for making a difference in the results of the business. The coach uses that commitment to anchor the leader's work (Underhill, McAnally, & Koriath, 2007) just as the accreditation standards create an anchor for an organization's commitment to success.

The third phase of the continuous improvement process is the data analysis portion, with a focus on the analysis of the information that was collected about the overall goals of the organization, the status of that attainment, and the processes necessary to get to the desired results. The core components or forces of continuous improvement are customer value focused co-leadership, customer value-focused strategic objectives, improvement specialists with people performance knowledge and improvement methodology (Heavey, Ledwith, & Murphy, 2014). By analyzing the current situation and determining where the organization is and where it is going, a process for reaching those goals can be established. Just as a manager is expected to measure the results of the other organizational processes (Underhill, McAnally, Koriath, 2007), all continuous improvement processes must be measured as well.

The final stages of the continuous improvement process are the implementation and process analysis phases. The continuous improvement processes must not only be implemented in a fashion that ensures success but must also be analyzed to determine areas for improvement throughout the organization. It is crucial for an organization to take the steps necessary to improve its processes or services, while also continually monitoring for further improvements to pursue as well. By adopting this framework, all of the individuals within the organization can have a role to play in process improvement leading to increased returns on investment (Heavey, Ledwith, & Murphy, 2014).

### **Value of Continuous Quality Improvement**

The value associated with a continuous quality improvement system is best determined based on the benefits derived from the process and the overall results. Conti (2013) contends that "customer value perception is, in fact, a complex construct of the specific satisfactions and dissatisfactions, related to the different 'qualities' exhibited by the product, each of them associated with different levels of importance and value expectation" (p. 224). The overall definition of value can be different for different individuals.

One dimension of quality involves the comparison between what a customer expects and the actual performance rendered. The difference between the customer's expectations and the customer's perceptions is critical to defining customer value improvement for organizations. This is where the value of a continuous improvement process is defined by its ability to identify the gap and place strategic improvements processes in place to close the gap (Heavey, Ledwith, & Murphy, 2014). Although the overall value of this process is not yet clearly defined in quantitative terms, the value is realized through the customer satisfaction levels that exist as a result of the continuous improvement processes and quality assurance measures.

Just as the accreditation agencies have established continuous improvement and quality assurance processes for institutions of higher education, there are certifying organizations that have established the same processes for businesses. A variety of certifications are available for businesses to pursue that provide evidence of the quality standards and continuous improvement processes that are present within their companies. Certifications such as ISO 9000 allow companies to gain the same status of quality assurance and continuous improvement through the adherence to standards, just as with the accreditation processes (Yeung, 2017).

ISO 9000 is a set of international standards on quality management and quality assurance that were developed to assist companies in effectively documenting the quality system elements that are required to maintain an efficient quality system (Kundu & Bairi, 2016). ISO 9000 is a management system standard that provides the minimum requirements that organizations need to follow to have verifiable quality management systems and, hence, help ensure that the company provides a consistent quality product or service (Halczman, 2017). The value associated with the ISO 9000 standards is debatable, just as it is with the accreditation status and processes. Although some have perceived the value of ISO 9000 certification as highly successful, others have indicated they feel it simply increased the workload and business costs associated with the manufacturing process. The European Commission's Directorate General for Industry cast additional doubt on the value of ISO 9000 certification with questions regarding the effectiveness of certification and consideration of the reduction of their promotion of and emphasis on the certification programs (Yeung, 2017).

### **Benchmarking in Higher Education**

The accreditation process includes standards that ensure that higher education institutions are continuously improving their programs of study through quality management and through



processes that provide quality assurance to the organization's key stakeholders. In order to best understand the level and aspects of quality in demand from consumers within higher education, it is necessary to establish an ongoing, systematic process for measuring and comparing the work processes of different organizations by bringing an external focus to internal activities and functions. Although there are several appropriate analytical tools that can be utilized by organizations in the process of measuring and managing their overall performance, benchmarking is an analytical tool that is frequently used in measuring an institution of higher education's overall performance in comparison to other institutions.

Benchmarking has been applied in many ways in higher education institutions as an application for continuous improvement and a measure of the organization's growth. Each step of the benchmarking process often offers multiple opportunities for profitable growth through a decrease in unnecessary expenses throughout the entire organization (Strang, 2013). In preparing for the budgeting of revenues and expenses, the colleges and universities commonly compare their performance in recent and current academic periods to that of their counterparts, not only across the nation and within the state, but also within the academic programs of the institution, using the process of benchmarking.

Institutions of higher education, along with many other types of organizations, have been using benchmarking as a tool to improve administrative processes and instructional models since the late 1980s (Agasisti, & Bonomi, 2014). Benchmarking can assist administrators in determining areas of successful performance and areas for improvement by comparing them with other institutions with similar profiles. Also, the instrument helps to acknowledge specific areas of progress and prepare targeted strategies for enhancement of performance in these areas. The analytical tool has been often used to compare success levels for two of the most sought out

areas in higher education institutions: quality assurance and accountability. This process is necessary to meet the high demand for transparency and the demonstration of quality institutional stakeholders' place on the college and university programs (Richardson & Coates, 2014). The accreditation process includes each stage of the benchmarking process as a component of the accreditation standards.

### **Benchmarking Stage One**

The first stage of the benchmarking process includes an internal study and initial competitive analysis of the organization. In this stage, the institutions of higher education must begin by deciding which key areas they will utilize for the study as benchmarking factors for consideration. Most often, the key areas that are used in benchmarking in institutions of higher education include enrollment, persistence, completion, course and program outcomes, attainment goals, affordability and employment outcomes (Juhnke, 2006). Financial measurements are also considered based on the full-time equivalent (FTE) and institutional class report (ICR) data generated by each program area, department and division within the institution (About FTEs and ICRs, n.d.).

Societal standards have set the expectation that universities are to perform successfully under whatever "market conditions" exist and be innovative in their approach (Narimantas & Labanauskis, 2015). By examining each area of the institution, faculty members and administrators will analyze many processes and policies to determine areas that need to be improved upon to meet this quality-related performance goal. Programs of study, along with their outcomes and other measurement tools, are often benchmarked to determine if any modifications would help increase enrollment and retention, as well as produce a higher result in employment outcomes. Faculty and other teaching staff members are compared to determine best

teaching practices and goals for continuous improvement in the instruction of the curriculum. Learning resources and student support systems have associated benchmarks to determine the relationship between those components and the overall quality of the academic programs. FTEs and ICRs are compared between colleges and universities across the state and the nation to determine additional methods for increasing the overall revenue for the institution (Amin, & Amin, 2003).

Accountability is a key area of concern for most higher education institutions. Governments demand assurance that the funding allocated to colleges and universities is well directed. Societal stakeholders expect to see higher education institutions producing informed citizens. Employers need to be able to employ graduates that are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to meet local demands, but the ability to respond to global contexts as well. Students and parents want to see educational results that indicate that the institutions are offering an education that is truly reflective of the significant investment of time and money (Narimantas & Labanauskis, 2015). Higher education institutions are able to utilize the stages of benchmarking to ensure that each one of these areas of accountability is met in all areas of the college/university setting.

### **Benchmarking Stage Two**

In the second stage of the benchmarking process, the college or university ensures that support is obtained from the institution's administrators as well as the board of trustees, governing committees and all those involved with the administration of the institution's policies and procedures. A benchmarking team is developed that includes individuals from across the institution along with a coordinator who is knowledgeable of the organization but also is capable of implementing the benchmarking process. This usually includes not only institution

administrators, but faculty, staff, and often student representatives as well. Objectives are also set during this stage to guide the benchmarking goals and detailed processes.

### **Benchmarking Stage Three**

After completing the first two stages, the newly formed benchmarking team must identify benchmarking partners who are aware of the process and have the ability to provide information on the areas to be benchmarked. Within the college and university setting, this usually includes partners from peer communities, the state, and the nation. It also includes the formation of partnerships within the institution—between programs and divisions. A large number of partnerships are needed in order to determine an applicable level of knowledge for the study in this type of organization. There are many benchmarks to be considered; therefore, it is best to increase the benefits of the study by increasing the number of partners due to the high level of competition between institutions of higher education (Mitchell, 2015).

### **Benchmarking Stage Four**

In a college or university setting, information gathering and sharing is a constant process. At this stage in the benchmarking process, the team must focus on gathering information that is most applicable to the determined benchmarks. The information collected must be divided into the three classes of applicability to the study: product information, functional benchmarking, and strategic benchmarking (Tasopoulou & Tsiotras, 2017). All three types of information are used in the decision making processes at institutions of higher education. It is important to classify the information so the benchmarking team can focus on the specific benchmarks associated with the applicable study.

Higher education institutions use benchmarking to study the product information by focusing the process on the courses and programs of study that are offered (Strang, 2013).

Benchmarks are often based on the development and implementation of learning outcomes for the measurement of the courses and programs of study. This allows the organization to practice continuous improvement processes by developing performance indicators that help determine how an institution is doing in terms of its product offerings and its long-term direction in comparison to other leading institutes of higher education. The learning outcomes are based on the expectations of the future employers, who are one of the institution's key constituents and determinants of the successful outcome of the institutions' practices. By completing the benchmarking process to determine the learning outcomes that are considered to be best practices across the field, institutions of higher education are discovering the indicators of value added by the instructional process, and modifying it as necessary to ensure that the activities are geared toward learning competencies desired by the main constituents of the institution as well (Amin and Amin, 2003).

Functional benchmarking is used to study the processes associated with the college or university offerings. This includes many areas of the institutions, such as readiness, enrollment, persistence, completion, and post-college outcomes (Ronco, 2012). Each area is benchmarked to determine the effectiveness of processes that contribute to the overall student success for that factor. The required standards within each accreditation process include functional benchmarking guidelines and reviews of each area of the institution in relation to the required student success factors. The functional benchmarking that occurs within the accreditation process provides data for the institution that allows for a thorough review of all policies and procedures related to each functional area of higher education (Eaton, 2012).

In analyzing the readiness factor, an institution of higher education will benchmark statistics on students' college-preparatory course-taking rates, the student-counselor ratio, high

school/GED completion rates, financial aid application completion, and the placement rates for developmental courses. Some of the benchmarks analyzed in this area include enrollment rates, retention rates, FAFSA completion rates, and development course placement statistics.

Looking at the enrollment factor, the benchmark team would use benchmarks such as college application/acceptance rates, direct college enrollment rates, out-of-school/work population enrollment rates, enrollment by level and sector, and full-time enrollment rates. The persistence factor would be analyzed using benchmarks of retention rates, gateway-course completion rates, credit accumulation, declaration of major(s), and the level of unmet financial need. In determining the areas for improvement in the completion factor, the team would use benchmarks such as transfer rates, graduation rates, degree completion time, awarded degrees, and licensure/certification rates. Institutions of higher education must also look beyond the organization to determine the true effectiveness of the services they offer (Strang, 2013). Therefore, the post-college outcomes must also be included as benchmarks for most areas. These include graduate employment rates, earnings data, loan debt and default rates, learning outcomes assessment, and any related regional industry employability gaps (Ronco, 2012).

Through the process of strategic benchmarking, the overall mission and strategies of the college or university are analyzed to determine how they compare to other institutions of higher education. The information obtained from the benchmarking process assists the college and university administrators in determining current and potential problems within the system, while creating an overall strategy for institution success. The benchmarking process allows administrators to make policy- and process-related decisions utilizing data that reveals areas for improvement and opportunities for success. The overall strategic plan for the organization can

be modified to focus on institutional priorities, measure the overall progress within each area, and build commitment across the institution for attainment of strategic goals.

### **Benchmarking Stage Five**

At the end of the benchmarking process, it is time to apply the data to make any necessary changes within the institution based on the benchmark results. The higher education institutions often make changes by utilizing the information obtained from the first four steps of the benchmarking process to implement new policies and procedures, make changes in curriculum and course offerings, and modify current strategic plans. The resulting improvements from the benchmarking process allow institutions of higher education to save time and money by developing an understanding of best practices in course creation, implementation, and processes in other institutions of higher education (Sae-Khow, 2014).

Benchmarking is a useful tool for comparing the quality standards and assuring accountability is met throughout all business environments through comparisons of product offerings, programs, policies, and procedures. Within the higher education institutions, benchmarking results are used to increase revenue and lower expenses through the efficient use of resources, focusing on the achievement of value, increased productivity through the use of systematic planning, organization and control, and the measurement of areas of achievement using the comparisons formed by the benchmarking process (Asif, 2015). The higher education institutions are able to utilize the comparisons of practices and outcomes between departments and divisions within their own institutions, as well as those from other institutions' practices within their peer communities, the state, and the nation to reveal best practices that decrease expenses by lowering the costs associated with ineffective practices and increasing revenues through the use of value-added activities (Thị Hồng, 2015).

## **Value Propositions for Business Schools and Programs**

### **Defining Value**

The consumer's perception of the value of a product or service offering is a crucial element in the buying process. Customer-perceived value is defined as the difference between a consumer's evaluation of the benefits and costs of the offering and the perceived alternatives. Today's consumers are better educated and better informed than ever and therefore have a tendency to be value maximizers in that they select the product or service offering they believe will deliver the highest value. The combination of quality, service, and price that creates the customer value triad influences the consumer's perception of the value associated with the product or service and plays into the current and future decision making process regarding the selection of offerings. One of the most important marketing tasks is to create and communicate the value that drives the level of satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability the organization desires from its customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016).

The customer will most often consider the total customer benefit, represented by the perceived monetary value of the economic, functional, and psychological benefits they expect from the offering. The total cost to the customer is also a factor in determining the overall value as a customer considers not only the purchase cost, but also the costs they expect to incur in evaluating, using, and disposing of the market offering. Consumers consider financial aspects when forming a perception of the value of a product, while also incorporating the time, energy, and psychological costs associated with the offering. Consumers will base future decisions on whether the product or service offerings purchased in the past live up to the expectations and create an acceptable level of satisfaction.



The backbone of a successful marketing program is the ability to identify, create, communicate, deliver, and monitor customer value.

**Identifying customer value.** The process of identifying customer value begins with an overall analysis of the consumers' needs and their willingness to pay, along with the development of an understanding of the perceived benefits a good or service provides to the customer (Rothaermel, 2017). Although the task of determining the value of a good in the customer's perspective is not a simple task, it can be accomplished by observing consumers' purchasing habits to discover their revealed preferences, which indicate how much they are willing to pay for a product or service.

**Creating value.** To create value, managers often conduct a customer value analysis to determine the company's strengths and weaknesses relative to those of various competitors, allowing the company to focus on maximizing total customer value within its market offerings. The value analysis includes the identification of the major attributes and benefits that customers value, with an assessment of the quantitative importance of each, as well as an examination of the company's and its competitors' performance regarding those aspects consumers value most (Rao, 2015). The analysis includes the monitoring of customer values over time to allow for a continual update of the value identification and ratings while also monitoring competitors' standings as changes occur with the economy, technology, and product features.

**Communicating value.** Marketing includes identifying customer value, creating it, and then communicating value to the consumers within the target market. Once the organization has identified what value means to each stakeholder and defined the benefits and features of the product or service offerings that meet that create value for the customer, the organization must develop an understanding of how the key stakeholders consume and process information

(Grewal, Roggeveen, Compeau, & Levy, 2012). The efforts to communicate value will be most effective when the organization understands how information reaches the stakeholders. Several different types of marketing channels are available for communicating information, so it is important to develop a good understanding of which channel influences which stakeholder and to what extent (Bellin, 2016). Once an understanding of what the stakeholders value has been established and the benefits of the product or service offerings are clearly articulated, along with an understanding of how the stakeholders consume and process information, the development of communications materials that clearly align the identified benefits to the stakeholders' needs should occur. It is important to develop messages that resonate with the target market and encourage them to act upon the offering.

**Delivering value.** The process of delivering value to the consumer includes three of the most salient value drivers: namely, product features, customer service, and complements, that managers can utilize to either increase the perceived value or decrease the costs associated with their product or service (Taylor, 2013). In relation to the organization's expertise in and organization of the different internal value chain activities, the value drivers provide managers with a method for increasing the value added to the consumer's buying process (Rao, 2015). The organization can increase the perceived value of the product or service offering by adding unique product attributes, by implementing strong research and development capabilities to create superior product features, or by differentiating the features of the product and highlighting the differentiation (Grewal, Roggeveen, Compeau, & Levy, 2012). The perceived value of product and service offerings can also be increased by increasing the focus on customer service (Leroi-Werelds, Streukens, Van Vaerenbergh, & Grönroos, 2017). Increasing the availability of

complements also has the potential to add value to a product or service when they are consumed in tandem (Rao, 2015).

**Monitoring value.** Once the delivery of the product or service occurs, the company must alter its focus to include monitoring the customer's perceived value of the deliverable. Predetermined metrics that measure value perception should be utilized to monitor reaction and measure results of the product or service offering's ability to meet the consumers' expectations (Taylor, 2013). Developing behavior, performance, and perception metrics enables the organization to measure internal efforts to promote the institution's offerings, determine the way the offerings are viewed by consumers, and create financial and outcome criteria that allow the institution to modify the programs and policies as necessary to ensure the programs' offerings are aligned with the organization's overall objectives (Fabricant, 2014). Predetermined metrics also assist the organization's leaders with heading off emerging liabilities, allowing them to take advantage of momentum or sudden changes in positive perceptions of the institution's offerings (Taylor, 2013). Higher education institutions have a great challenge in monitoring value, as the value for business programs' offerings is often intertwined with the outcomes associated with the education, student engagement in the classroom and academic-related experiences, as well as with other areas of extracurricular institutional engagement (Celuch & Robinson, 2016). The challenges associated with higher education increase the need for accurate value measurements and the ability to predetermine metrics that provide an effective measurement of consumer value perception (Fabricant, 2014).

The primary method for monitoring the value perceived by customers in higher education is through consumer feedback in the form of classroom feedback or other methods of increased static student satisfaction surveys, which do not provide the level of control necessary to

incorporate monitoring of all aspects of customer perceived value within the higher education environment (Celuch & Robinson, 2016). Institutions of higher education are receiving less public funding, which is creating a response for the need for additional funding in the form of controlling tuition costs, reducing internal costs, and producing more graduates (Fabricant, 2014). The measures to increase funding internally within higher education create an even greater need for an extensive view of customer perceived value and the quality of educational offerings provided to the consumer. Accreditation processes assist in creating a more complete form of value monitoring through the incorporation of other measurement tools in addition to student or consumer feedback, encouraging higher education institutions to take a more encompassing approach to monitoring overall consumer perceived value and the methods in which the educational offerings are provided and funding is obtained (Piña & Bohn, 2015).

### **Value Propositions**

The value proposition often creates a set of expectations for the consumers. Consumers' needs are defined, and the company responds to the needs by putting forth a value proposition that includes a set of benefits that satisfies the identified needs (Bellin, 2016). The intangible value proposition is then represented in the form of an offering, which can be a combination of products, services, information, and experiences. The customer's satisfaction with the offering is reflective of their judgment of the product or service's perceived performance in relation to the expectations they have from the value proposition associated with the offering (Leroi-Werelds, Streukens, Van Vaerenbergh, & Grönroos, 2017). A product or service offering that falls short of expectations created by a value proposition will leave the customer feeling disappointed. If the performance of the offering is in line with the expectations of the consumer, they are

satisfied. It is only when the product or service exceeds the consumer's expectations that the result will be a delighted customer.

### **Value of Accreditation**

There is a level of increasing pressure that is currently present in higher education in regard to the demand for higher quality degrees at a reasonable cost to students (Fincher & Katsinas, 2016). Educational institutions are meeting this demand by utilizing strategies for increasing quality within the institutions and its programs of study. Institutions are making changes for a variety of reasons, including the need for a renewed focus on retention efforts (Wolff & Tinney, 2006), the desire to meet the expectations of quality concerning student engagement (Stipek & Chiatovich, 2017) and to match educators' accountability standards (Nunes, Reis, & Seabra, 2015), and the accountability standards of legislators, parents, and donors (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). For the business schools' programs of study to remain marketable, many of these changes are a required part of the educational process.

The accreditation process follows some of the same guidelines and procedures as the processes associated with ISO, TQM, and other quality assurance and continuous improvement processes. The value associated with these types of processes has been somewhat determined through a variety of studies and defined by the benefits associated with each. The value of the accreditation processes and accreditation status has also been determined for the accreditation status and processes associated with both AACSB and ACBSP accreditations, but the influence the accreditation status has on the overall value propositions for business schools and programs has not yet been clearly defined.

The value of the AACSB accreditation has been somewhat defined in a variety of studies focused on how the accreditation affects the business schools' ability to compete. A study by

Durand and McGuire (2005, p.3) found that “accreditation provides legitimization for the business school and offers students, as well as other stakeholders, external validation that the business school is managerially relevant and conforming to a sound and globally accepted business curriculum.” This leaves one to wonder if that is enough to justify the costly resources required to achieve the accreditation. The influence on the value proposition associated with the accreditation status or process has not yet been determined. Making such a determination would be beneficial to organizations desiring a correct estimate of their overall return on investment from the accreditation process and accreditation status associated with their business schools and programs.

A program must demonstrate relevancy and currency of faculty, programs, and courses to be marketable. It must also have a high level of focus on quality performance to sustain the marketability (Johnson & Stage, 2018). The ability of the business program to be marketable is also dependent on the business school's ability to assure stakeholders that students are learning material that is relevant to their field of study and that they will be adequately prepared to take on leadership roles upon graduation. National accreditation standards from program-specific accrediting agencies are intended to assure that these program requirements are met and that a continuous improvement process is in place (BestBizSchools.com., n.d.). The large amount of resources required to achieve accreditation status and the limited data correlating the brand equity and marketability of national accreditation for business schools and programs to the accreditation process pose a hindrance to some institutions in justifying the cost associated with accreditation (Trifts, 2012).

The administrators at colleges and universities have expressed concern regarding the level of understanding the public has of the accreditation process and its overall value (Council

for Higher Education Accreditation, 2016). The lack of understanding that exists with the key stakeholders to whom the accreditation is supposed to assure quality, along with their lack of understanding of the overall accreditation process, has many college and university constituents contemplating the actual influence the accreditation status and process have on the overall value proposition for the programs of study. Without a clear understanding of the influence of accreditation on the value proposition, schools are left without a defined level of value that is actually associated with the marketability of the business programs (Bitter, 2014).

### **Strategic Allocation of Resources**

Many business schools and programs within the state of North Carolina have achieved the status of accreditation and are continuing to fulfill the requirements associated with the annual reporting processes without a clear understanding of whether the investment is met with the desired rate of return (Maxwell & Pearson, 2016). Debates continue to occur regarding the costs and benefits associated with the accreditation process. Some higher education institutions question whether the cost and value of specialized accreditation is worth the benefits gained from the accreditation status (Trifts, 2012). As the development of a comprehensive strategy for the allocation of financial resources within an organization is critical for the overall success of the organization (Uspuriene, Sakalauskas, & Dumskis, 2017), it is important for the organization to have some level of understanding of the costs and benefits associated with accreditation.

A clear strategy that contains measurement of both financial and nonfinancial measures is in determining the company's success in evaluating and managing the company's overall competitive position. In most organizations, the focus on products and services present in previous years has now shifted to a focus on the importance of relationships with consumers, while productivity on the basis of intangible assets has become more central in relation to

tangible performance (Grgic & Simundza, 2012). Business leaders must have the ability to concisely measure the overall value of the intangible assets as translated into tangible objectives and measures for the organization.

### **Cost of Accreditation**

The overall cost associated with the accreditation process has been debated, as it includes both direct and indirect costs as well as non-financial costs to the institution, many of which are difficult to accurately measure (Trifts, 2012). The cost of accreditation includes membership and accreditation fees (Appendix A), fees associated with the ongoing review process—including the reaffirmation process, as well as the cost of the substantial amount of resources that are required to bring the school into compliance with the accreditation standards. An additional resource that must be accounted for in the overall cost summary for accreditation is the time involved with pursuing the accreditation status (Nigsch & Schenker-Wicki, 2013). For many higher education institutions, years of preparation and lengthy tasks are required to meet the accreditation standards. Once accreditation is achieved, additional hours that must be spent to maintain the requirements in preparation for the reaffirmation of the accreditation status (Salto, 2017).

An indirect cost that is often overlooked in preparation for pursuing accreditation is the impact of the accreditation process on the culture of the school. The accreditation process often results in significant quality improvements, especially in the areas of strategic planning, faculty qualifications, and student learning (Eaton, 2017). However, if not carefully managed, the accreditation process has the potential of creating a negative impact on the culture of the school, especially when faculty members are deemed to be unqualified for certain program areas (Salto, 2017). The accreditation process often requires a significant amount of resources, which can also create a negative impact on the culture of the school as faculty and staff often express



dismay with the amount of energy and other resources needed to successfully achieve the accreditation status (Nigsch & Schenker-Wicki, 2013).

### **Christian Perspective of Resource Allocation**

Properly allocating the various resources obtained by an organization is significant in advancing God's purpose for business on earth. As Keller & Alsdorf (2012) emphasize, God provides talents and resources for each individual so that each one will have the ability to do for others what God intends to do for us and through us. As the leader of any type of organization, one must recognize the God-given talents and abilities that have allowed such a position to be obtained. One must consider the duties and responsibilities as opportunities to fulfill God's work on earth and consider the biblical principles that offer guidance in each of these areas.

God provides each individual with the resources necessary to fulfill his commands. As it states in Romans 12:7 (King James Version), God has given each individual different gifts with the expectation that they will be used in proportion to the individual's level of faith. Each individual is given many types of gifts from God, such as natural talents, abilities and resources. These gifts of grace often vary in degree and intensity of quality, but what is of most importance is how they are used faithfully for God's glory. As a Christian leader, one must consciously view each given responsibility or assignment as God's calling and offer all that is done to glorify Him (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012).

As resources are received, it is important to ensure they are used wisely. Financial leaders can best accomplish this task through the process of budgeting and the utilization of strategic resource allocation methods. The budgeting process allows for a detailed determination of exactly how given funds are to be allocated within the company (Green, 2007). The distribution of resources must be accomplished with the consideration of the demands of the

organization, both now and in the future. A Christian leader will complete these tasks with the mission of the organization in mind, while also considering the importance of these tasks as stated in the Bible. The book of Proverbs (King James Version) clearly states the importance of planning, acting on knowledge rather than expectations, and the importance of utilizing all resources in a God-centered manner for sustained success.

Matthew 6:19-21 provides direction to individuals on the importance of focusing on investing in things that have eternal value, rather than on worldly possessions: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The focus for the achievement of eternal investments must be on God and people. This focus is only accomplished through the continual practice of being good stewards of all resources. Material resources should be used in ways to glorify God. The glorification of God is best accomplished within an educational institution or other type of business environment by remaining focused on God's purpose for the organization and the influential contributions towards such from each member of the workforce (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012). As financial resources are allocated, one must always consider the purpose God has set for those resources within His view of the organization's overall mission on earth.

Financial leaders are often placed in positions where the decisions to be made closely resemble the decisions made by Esther, King Xerxes' chosen queen. They must decide between following the rules of man in order to stay in command or following the mission from God to serve in a way that is best for the overall organization and/or society. Business leaders are given the task of determining the most effective use of resources while considering the mission of the

organization, as well as the guidance given by the principles in the Bible. Esther's relative Mordecai, a Jewish leader, reminds Esther to consider why God has placed her in the royal position for "such a time as this" as she faces the difficult decision ahead (Esther 4:14 King James Version). There are often competing demands that must be considered when allocating financial resources. Today's leaders must take into account, just as Esther did, why God has placed them in that position and what their God-given role is within this world.

The resources provided to an institution of higher education are a large part of this overall plan. All of the resources are provided by God. They are to be accounted for as such and utilized in a way that brings glory to His name. As a business professional, one is often tempted to consider the bottom line, financially-speaking alone. With a gospel worldview, one learns that it is crucial to consider more than just the financial status of the institution. Profit is only one of the many important bottom lines that are crucial to the overall success of a gospel-centered organization (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012). Many other factors are considered, such as the importance of developing and sustaining relationships with a strong emphasis on excellence and product quality.

### **Balance Scorecard Approach for Accountability**

Accreditation is intended to provide a type of Balanced Scorecard approach for managers to utilize to gain access to multiple internal and external performance metrics that allow them to effectively balance financial and strategic goals. Leaders within the educational institutions must consider many factors in order to develop and maintain the strategic allocation of resources that is both profitable for the organization and in line with the biblical guidelines. The creation of standards that require the assessment of past performance, the identification of areas for improvement, and the process of positioning the company for future growth should guide the

current allocation of resources. As a broad diagnostic tool, the Balanced Scorecard offers guidelines for complementing the financial metrics with operational measures of customer satisfaction, with internal processes, and with innovation and improvement activities. The accreditation process includes many of the attributes of the Balanced Scorecard approach, which allows educational leaders to develop a more balanced perspective of organizational performance, as it includes a broader perspective than a financial analysis alone.

The Balanced Scorecard framework assists leaders within educational institutions in developing an understanding of the customers' perspective concerning the company's products and services; in developing strategic objectives that ensure future competitiveness, innovation, and organizational learning; and in identifying the core competencies needed to achieve the objectives and shareholders' view of the value creation (Rothaermel, 2017). The accreditation process incorporates the attributes of the Balanced Scorecard framework into accreditation standards to allow educational leaders to create a shared strategic vision among all responsible parties by translating the organization's vision into measurable operational goals that are included within the design and planning of business processes. The accreditation standards also include the Balanced Scorecard advantage of requiring the implementation of feedback and organizational learning into the modification and adaptation of strategic goals when indicated.

Educational institutions will gain many of the same benefits from the accreditation process that are often gained from other strategic measurement systems such as the Balanced Scorecard, if the organization utilizes the process to create measurement tools for each component of the organization's comprehensive approach to resource allocation. With a bible-centered approach, an organization allocates resources based on the mission of meeting customer-focused standards that are based on a high level of ethics, even when it might entail a

loss of margin (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012). The Balanced Scorecard type of approach within the accreditation process assists the organizational leaders as they measure each of the organization's objectives, including those that are intangible such as customer, process, and learning and growth perspectives that are inherently important to gospel-centered businesses.

With the required amount of resources needed to fulfill both the initial accreditation requirements, as well as those required for the regular reporting and reaffirmation process being so tremendous and requiring high levels of commitment within most organizations, this level of commitment becomes difficult to justify and sustain without a clear understanding of the benefits derived from the accreditation status (Bitter, 2014). Organizations are in great need of a precise understanding of the influence of the accreditation process and status on the value proposition for the business school and the associated programs of study.

#### **Summary of the literature review.**

The literature review clearly indicates the importance of defining a value proposition that is both accurate and clear in its depiction of the quality and value consumers can expect from the offered product or service. Quality assurance is necessary for key stakeholders and consumers to trust the value they are receiving from the educational programs offered through business schools' programs of study. Consumers and key stakeholders alike also demand a level of continuous improvement within the programs of study to ensure that the information being disseminated is current and useful for the current job market. The accreditation process ensures that a level of quality exists within all programs of study being evaluated for accreditation status, while also creating the expected level of continuous improvement with milestones to ensure the process continues after the accreditation status is earned. ACBSP accreditation is intended to offer a high level of quality assurance and the implementation of a stringent continuous

improvement process modeled after the Malcolm Baldrige Award process, providing consumers and key stakeholders with the status symbol indicating that the level of quality expected has been achieved by the business school.

### **Transition and Summary of Section 1**

The purpose of the research study is to explore the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that business schools within private universities offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina present to the marketplace. Research indicates that a continuous improvement process and a level of quality assurance are both necessary to meet the demands of today's market within the educational environment. Key stakeholders have a high level of expectations regarding the promises made from a value proposition, and it is important to ensure that accreditation, if included as a form of quality assurance for the business schools' programs of study, meets those expectations through the influence it has on the overall value offered by the business school. The results of this study are intended to explore the influence of accreditation in hopes that the outcome of the study will assist both those within the business schools who are considering the pursuit or continuation of accreditation, as well as the accrediting organization.

The primary strategic objective of Section One was to present the purpose, significance, and conceptual framework associated with this research study. Prior to establishing the framework from which the research study would be conducted, the researcher reviewed the literature to determine the current status of accreditation in higher education in regard to the influence of the accreditation process on the value proposition for business schools and programs. A summary of each aspect of this review of literature is also included in Section One. Information on the research methodology and design, on the population chosen for the study and

sample description, on data collection and analysis, and on the reliability and validity associated with the research study will follow in Section Two.

## **Section 2: The Project**

The research project is intended to provide the opportunity to explore the influence ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition for business schools within the state of North Carolina. Many schools invest a great amount of time and financial resources to pursue ACBSP accreditation with the intention of utilizing the process and the accreditation status to further enhance the school's continuous improvement processes and increase the quality of the programs of study. The desired quality enhancement is often reflected in the value proposition with dependency on the accreditation status to provide key stakeholders with an assurance of the level of quality that exists within the schools' programs of study. This section of the dissertation includes information regarding the research study on the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition, including the purpose statement, role of the researcher, information on the participants, research method and design, population and sampling, data collection and analysis, and reliability and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that business schools within private universities offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina present to the marketplace. The key decision-makers associated with educational programs in NC business schools within private universities, namely business school administrators and faculty, will be the subjects of this multiple case study. The perceived benefits associated with the accreditation process will be explored in an effort to develop an overall understanding of the influence the ACBSP accreditation status and accreditation process have on the value proposition the business school presents to the marketplace. The study results are intended to provide the ACBSP organization,



as well as business schools across the world, with data that will assist key decision makers in developing an understanding of the influence ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that the business schools present to the marketplace.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is to explore the influence of accreditation on the value proposition within business schools, specifically focusing on the ACBSP accreditation status and process within business schools in the state of North Carolina. The researcher is responsible for selecting the participants for the study, conducting the research study, and analyzing the results with recognition and limitation of any personal bias on the results of the study. The researcher is responsible for conducting rigorous and ethical research, abiding by policies and procedures for research on human subjects. The researcher is also responsible for ensuring all participants are able to fully participate in the study as necessary and for the recognition and mitigation of the limitations that exist within the research study.

The researcher is part of the phenomenon, as an insider in the role of a Co-Champion of ACBSP at an accredited higher education institution within the state of North Carolina and the immediate past-Chair of Region 3 of ACBSP. As such, the researcher must separate the personal bias and individual perspective of the researcher with the outcomes of the study, as the researcher's affiliation with ACBSP has the potential to skew the results of the study. The researcher will ensure separation of personal bias and the individual perspective of the researcher by utilizing a reflective practice throughout the research process to help expose the biases that might be present (Stake, 2000). The biases that exist will also be limited through the process of triangulation of the data, as the researcher will view the data from a variety of sources through a variety of methods and analysis of the data collection.

## **Participants**

The potential participants have been identified as the key decision maker, namely the dean, associate dean, or chief administrator, of each business school selected to participate in the research study. There are up to five potential participant institutions across the state that will be contacted directly or via liaisons the researcher has established with others within the business school at each identified institution. There are also alternative schools that are included in the researcher's list of potential participants in the event that less than three of the initially contacted participants will be unable or unwilling to participate in the research study.

The researcher is responsible for ensuring the study is conducted in an ethical manner by abiding by policies and procedures for research on human subjects. The researcher has completed CITI training on conducting human subjects research and will obtain a signed informed consent letter from each participant before conducting research. Participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process if they choose to do so, as ensuring voluntary participation of the research participants is of great importance. The researcher will ensure informed consent by fully informing each participant of the details of the study, providing sufficient information and assurances regarding the individuals' participation, to allow each individual to reach a considered and freely given decision regarding participation without the exercise of any pressure or coercion. The privacy and anonymity of the research participants will be of paramount importance.

## **Research Method and Design**

The nature of the research study demands the use of a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach to research allows for the exploration of a complex social phenomena (Khaldi, 2017), which in this study will be related to the manner in which the value proposition

is influenced by the accreditation process. The effectiveness of a value proposition is based on the influence it has on the perception of the individuals who are receiving the information on the value of the product or service offering (Leroi-Werelds, Streukens, Van Vaerenbergh, & Grönroos, 2017). To explore the manner in which accreditation has an influence on the value proposition for business schools and programs, the researcher must develop an understanding of the social phenomenon that exists surrounding the perception of value for key stakeholders within the business school environment (Murshed & Zhang, 2016). The qualitative research approach allows for the exploration of how the key stakeholders experience the accreditation process and the influence it has on their perceptions of value for the business schools' programs of study (Khaldi, 2017).

The qualitative research design that is best suited for the proposed research topic is the case study, as it allows for a holistic look at the topic with the inclusion of multiple data points, such as a look at the accreditation structure and process, interviews, and business school practices. The case study design is most appropriate, as the research focus is on the development of an in-depth understanding of cases or the comparison of several cases, all of which are clearly identifiable with boundaries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is a desire to understand complex social phenomena related to the manner in which the value proposition is influenced by the accreditation process; therefore, the case study design allows the researcher to focus on a specific case or cases and retain a holistic and real-world perspective (Yin, 2014). The qualitative case study research approach will allow for the exploration of the ACBSP accreditation experiences of multiple business schools within private universities in the state of North Carolina through a multiple bounded system approach.

**Discussion of method.**

The research questions associated with this study demand the use of a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods allow for an interpretive process, allowing the researcher to key on the meaning of human affairs from multiple viewpoints, generating a depth of understanding when little is known about a phenomenon (Murshed & Zhang, 2016). The goal of the research study is to understand the mental processes underlying how the business schools' consumers interpret and give meaning to their own behaviors, specifically their derived perceptions of value related to the business schools' programs of study, and the social phenomena related to the influential role the accreditation process has on their perception of value for the business schools' offerings. By utilizing a qualitative approach for this study, the researcher will be able to explore the dynamic reality of the accreditation process and its influence on the value propositions of business schools and programs through immersion in context and direct interaction with key stakeholders within the business schools (Almalki, 2016).

To explore the influence of accreditation on the value propositions of business schools, the researcher must be able to discover the various viewpoints of the accreditation process and status from all key stakeholders' perspectives. The qualitative research process allows the researcher to gain a unique perspective of issues from investigating them in their own specific context (Almalki, 2016). Qualitative research methods also allow the researcher to develop an understanding of the meaning that individuals bring to the current issues by conducting research in through an experimental, situational, and personalistic approach (Murshed & Zhang, 2016). Utilizing the qualitative research method will allow the researcher to explore the topic with a field-oriented research process and gain a descriptive view of the key stakeholders'

individualized perceptions of the influence of accreditation on the value propositions for each business program (Khaldi, 2017).

Quantitative research methods were also considered, as they have the ability to provide data regarding the cause and effect relationships associated with the accreditation process (Tominc, Krajnc, Vivod, Lynn, & Frešer, 2018). Although the quantitative research methods would be useful in determining the relationships that exist between the accreditation process and the perceived value of accreditation in the market, this study seeks to focus on the human experience of pursuing national, program-specific accreditation and the influence the overall accreditation experience has on the value proposition presented to the marketplace. The data-gathering process for this study is narrative in nature, as it is intended to be a basis for understanding the experience associated with the consideration, pursuit, and receipt of ACBSP accreditation and the perceived influence it has on the business school's value proposition. Quantitative studies rely heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis to test objective theories by examining the relationship among variables (Datta & Vaid, 2018). As this study is focused on the perceived experience individuals have with the ACBSP accreditation process and its influence on the value proposition marketed by business schools, it demands the use of a qualitative research method rather than a quantitative method of study (Almalki, 2016).

The mixed method research approach is often used to improve the quality of the evidence in a research study (Hansen, O'Brien, Meckler, Chang, & Guise, 2016). Qualitative researchers often rely on triangulation with a mixed methods approach if they are looking for a method to increase the level of confidence in their research discoveries by including a numerical scale that delivers statistical confidence (Yin, 2014). Although some researchers rely on mixed methods

for data collection and analysis as a way to increase the level of confidence in the research results, other methods for triangulation are also available to researchers conducting qualitative research, such as member checking and the use of review panels (Johnson, Hara, Hirst, Weyman, Turner, Mason, Quinn, Shewan, Siriwardena, Niroshan, & O'Hara, 2017). For this study, the researcher will be using multiple sources of evidence in triangulation of data sources and with the intended result of corroborating the same findings in all sources. Multiple queries of the research participants, with an understanding that multiple realities may be presented from various sources, as well as the utilization of information from various key stakeholders within the same institutions, will assist the researcher with the triangulation process (Vanner & Kimani, 2017), eliminating the need for a mixed methods approach.

#### **Discussion of design.**

Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate that the most suitable situation for utilizing the case study design is when the research focus is on the development of an in-depth understanding of cases or the comparison of several cases, all of which are clearly identifiable with boundaries. When the desire exists to understand complex social phenomena, the case study design allows the researchers to focus on a specific case or cases and retain a holistic and real-world perspective (Lam, 2017). The research questions associated with the current study include primarily “how” and “why” questions, with little or no control over behavioral events from the researcher’s standpoint, and a focus on a contemporary phenomenon, which Omair (2015) indicates is the most appropriate type of situation for the use of the case study design. The qualitative research method that is best suited for the proposed research topic is the case study, as it allows for a holistic look at the topic with the inclusion of multiple data points, such as a look at the accreditation structure and process, interviews, and business school practices.

Through the case study design, the researcher seeks to discover the meaning of each individual's experience and develop an understanding of the perspective of each research participant (Stake, 2010). Tetnowski (2015) recommends the use of a qualitative case study design when the intent of the research is insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing. This design choice will help express how each key stakeholder acquired and describes their experiences with ACBSP accreditation and the influence it has on the value proposition for the business schools' programs of study. The qualitative case study research approach allows for the exploration of the ACBSP accreditation experiences of multiple business schools within colleges and universities in the state of North Carolina through a multiple bounded system approach.

There are other qualitative research designs that are useful in some types of research, such as the narrative, phenomenology, grounded study, and ethnography research methodologies (Jorrín Abellán, 2016). However, upon examination of the purpose and research questions associated with the current study, none proved more useful or appropriate for the purpose of this study than the case study qualitative research design. Although each of the other qualitative research designs presents alternative opportunities for research gathering methodologies and potential research outcomes, the case study proves to be most useful in the development of an understanding of the complex social phenomena related to the manner in which the value proposition is influenced by the accreditation process (Omair, 2015).

Narrative design is a narrative description of a phenomenon or specific series of events in chronological order, with an emphasis on the story, including what and how it is communicated. The narrative design provides a collection of stories that communicate experiences and highlight identities (Bruce, Beuthin, Sheilds, Molzahn, & Schick-Makaroff, 2016). The stories include

details about the specific organization where the story occurs, which provides valuable contextual information (Clandinin, Cave, & Berendonk, 2017). The narrative design often includes data gained from interviews, observations, experiences, documents, and pictures from a single individual or from a small number of individuals (Keefer, 2015). The most suitable situation for utilizing narrative design is when the research focus is on exploring the life of an individual and the research problem focuses on telling stories of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With a lack of focus on the complex social phenomena related to the research focus, the narrative design would lack the necessary attributes to deliver the outcomes associated with the current study.

Phenomenology design is a study that describes common experiences that all participants in a situation have in common regarding a specific concept or phenomenon, such as the universally experienced feeling of grief (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenology design focuses on a description of the universal essence of what individuals experience and how they experience it in relation to the phenomenon (Skuzza, 2007). Phenomenology allows one to study and learn about phenomena that are difficult to observe or measure by collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and analyzing that data to generate themes (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). The focus of the current study is on the overall phenomena created by the accreditation process and its influence on the value proposition for the business school, which affects different study participants in a variety of ways. The study is not focused on the experience itself, but instead on the outcome of the accreditation process, therefore the phenomenology design would not allow for the outcomes of the research study to be discovered.

Grounded theory is defined as a qualitative research design that moves beyond a simple description of common experiences and instead seeks to generate or discover a theory for a



process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of the research participants (Green, 2014).

The most suitable situation for utilizing the grounded theory design is when a theory does not currently exist that provides an explanation or understanding of the process that the researcher is studying (Glaser, 2016). Grounded theory provides the opportunity to develop theory based upon the samples and populations of interest to the qualitative researcher, which may not be available in the current models in recent literature or research publications (Johnson, 2015). If the theories are present, they may not completely address the variables or categories the researcher is most interested in and may warrant a new study based on the grounded theory design (Cooke, 2014). The current research study focus is not on theory or the explanation or understanding of a process; therefore, the grounded theory design would not be the most appropriate research design to be utilized in the study.

Ethnography is defined as a research method that focuses on the description and interpretation of the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of an entire culture-sharing group (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). Sim and Shepperd (1999) referenced ethnography as an inductive, qualitative technique that is suitable for investigating complex human phenomena in an open-ended manner. Ethnographic studies incorporate an immersion of the researcher into the day-to-day lives of the people within the culture-sharing group to obtain information through participant observations and participant interviews (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). The current research study focus is on the influence of accreditation on the value proposition, rather than on a specific cultural group. The most suitable situation for utilizing the ethnography design is when the research focus is on the development of a description of a specific cultural group, with a focus on the exploration of the beliefs, language, behaviors and issues facing the group (Cope, 2015). Therefore, the

ethnography design would not be an appropriate design to deliver the desired outcomes for the current research study.

### **Summary of research method and design.**

The research questions associated with this study demand the use of a qualitative case study approach, as the qualitative method will allow for an interpretive process allowing the researcher to explore the influence of accreditation on the value propositions of business schools through the discovery of the various viewpoints of the accreditation process and status from all key stakeholders' perspectives. The case study design is most appropriate, as the research focus is on the development of an in-depth understanding of cases or the comparison of several cases and there is a desire to understand complex social phenomena related to the manner in which the value proposition is influenced by the accreditation process. The case study design allows for a holistic look at the topic with the inclusion of multiple data points, including the accreditation structure and process, interviews, and business school practices. The qualitative research method, using a case study design, will allow the researcher to focus on a specific case or cases and retain a holistic and real-world perspective through the exploration of the ACBSP accreditation experiences of multiple business schools within private universities in the state of North Carolina through a multiple bounded system approach.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population for the research study will include six regionally accredited schools offering baccalaureate and graduate degree business programs in a private university setting within the state of North Carolina who have earned ACBSP accreditation for the programs of study. The researcher will use a purposeful sampling technique to select the participants from the research population for the research study, allowing a focus on certain participant criteria.

The research study criteria will focus on regionally accredited private universities, offering ACBSP accredited baccalaureate and graduate-level business degree programs within the state of North Carolina who are also members of the North Carolina Phi Beta Lambda student business organization.

### **Discussion of Population.**

In the state of North Carolina there are 112 regionally accredited higher education institutions, fifty-three of which offer baccalaureate and graduate-level degree programs (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2018). Twenty-eight of the regionally accredited higher education institutions are private universities offering baccalaureate and graduate-level degree programs, with sixteen offering business programs of study at the baccalaureate and graduate levels (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2018). Five of the regionally accredited higher education private institutions offering baccalaureate and graduate-level degree business programs have not earned any form of national or program-specific accreditation for their business programs; five have earned AACSB accreditation (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, n.d.); six have earned ACBSP accreditation (Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, n.d.).

ACBSP currently has 1,143 member campuses, 1,009 of which have earned accreditation status for their business programs of study ([https://www.acbsp.org/page/membership\\_list](https://www.acbsp.org/page/membership_list)). Of the 1,009 campuses earning accreditation status for business programs, 158 earned accreditation for associate degree programs; 740 schools earned accreditation for baccalaureate and graduate degree programs; and 111 schools earned accreditation for associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degree programs. There are twenty-eight business schools in the state of North Carolina who have earned ACBSP accreditation for their business programs, with twenty of those offering

degrees at the baccalaureate and graduate degree levels and only six of those meet the criteria for this research study. See Appendix B for a complete list of the ACBSP accredited, baccalaureate and graduate degree granting schools located in the state of North Carolina.

There are six regionally accredited higher education private institutions, primarily based within the state of North Carolina, offering baccalaureate and graduate-level degree business programs that have earned ACBSP accreditation for their business programs. One of those six business schools, Lenoir-Rhyne University, is the primary employer for the researcher and will be excluded from the study population. The remaining five institutions will comprise the population for this research study.

### **Discussion of Sampling.**

The researcher will use a purposeful sampling strategy to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest, limiting the universe of possible study participants to those that met specific research criteria (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). The sample size for qualitative case study research often cannot be predetermined, but instead only estimated. The conceptual orientation to the research data exhibits that the information to be discovered is not known until it is revealed within the study. Because the goal of the study is to reveal patterns in the research findings, the number of sample participants will depend on the number required to reveal the pattern (Flannery, 2016).

The purposeful strategy of criterion and convenience sampling will allow the researcher to select higher education institutions that are willing to allow access to individuals who are especially knowledgeable and have experience with the phenomenon; who are available and willing to participate in the study; and who have the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner, which according to Sousa (2014)

provides some measure of quality assurance. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will select regionally accredited private institutions of higher education, offering ACBSP accredited baccalaureate and graduate-level business degree programs primarily based within the state of North Carolina who are members of the North Carolina Phi Beta Lambda organization. Three of the five higher education institutions in the total population meet the criteria for this research study and also meet the criterion of being a member of NC PBL. Table 1 describes the rationale for the criteria that will be used for the selection of the cases.

Table 1 – Rationale for Research Case Selection Criteria

Criterion	Reasoning
SACSCOC Institutional Accreditation	Limiting cases to one regionally accredited program eliminated the variation that could result from the variety of accreditation standards that are present in various regions.
Primarily North Carolina Based Institution	Higher education institutions have standards and evaluation criteria that often differ from one state to another. Limiting the cases to one state limits the variability and provides additional validity in the research outcomes.
Private Institution	Bayraktar, Tatoglu, and Zaim (2013) asserted that the link between the fulfillment of the expectations of stakeholders and the quality management practices of the institution is much stronger for private higher education institutions than for public ones.
ACBSP Accredited or Non-Accredited Programs of Study	The focus of the study is on the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for business schools. Only those schools who have pursued ACBSP accreditation or chosen not to pursue accreditation are part of the research phenomenon being studied.
Authority to Grant Baccalaureate and Graduate Degrees	The majority of ACBSP member campuses are baccalaureate/graduate degree granting institutions.
NC PBL Member	The researcher is a member and active participant in the North Carolina Phi Beta Lambda association. Including NC PBL members as a criterion in the sampling process provides convenient accessibility to the subjects due to the researcher's established relationships with members of the institution.

**Summary of population and sampling.**

The population for the research study includes five regionally accredited schools offering baccalaureate and graduate degree business programs in a private university setting within the state of North Carolina who have earned ACBSP accreditation for the programs of study. The researcher will use a purposeful sampling strategy to identify and select the three information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest who also meet research criteria, namely regionally accredited private institutions of higher education offering ACBSP accredited baccalaureate and graduate-level business degree programs within the state of North Carolina who are members of the North Carolina Phi Beta Lambda organization.

**Data Collection**

A multipart data collection process will be utilized for the research study, including both a document review and structured interviews at each institution. Yin (2009) affirms that the case study research design provides the ability to utilize multiple strategies in the development of an understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon in a specific context. The data regarding the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for business schools and programs will be collected beginning with the review of institutional documentation. Following the review of documentation, the researcher will conduct structured, private, individual open ended interviews with key stakeholders from each institution from the population sample.

**Instruments.**

The researcher will be the primary instrument in the research by conducting interviews and reviewing documents. The instrument of choice for the interview portion of data collection for this research study is the Interview Questionnaire, included in Appendix C, as it will allow the researcher to collect dependable and accurate information using the case study research

design. The researcher developed the questionnaire to include open-ended questions, with a variety of inquiries into different areas associated with accreditation and the value propositions of the programs of study, to improve the reliability of the case study and to assist in the detection of emerging and reoccurring themes. The ordering of the questions was intentional to include groupings of specific information regarding aspects of the research study to insure the responses to the questionnaire provided data that was reliable and valid.

#### **Data collection techniques.**

The researcher will utilize qualitative research methods to help depict the essence or basic structure of the phenomenon, the accreditation process, associated with the research study. Qualitative research methods allow researchers to develop an understanding of how people interpret lived experiences and the meaning the experience brings to their lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher will request the opportunity to review institutional documentation related to the accreditation process and/or quality assurance and value creation methods within the business school. The researcher will submit a request to review the institution's assessment plans; program assessment plans; and if applicable, the most recent ACBSP Self-Study report produced by each institution. The institutional data, especially the program-specific accreditation self-study report, may provide additional insight into the influence of accreditation and the value propositions used by the institution to market its programs of study. A comprehensive review of the Self-Study report also has the potential to reveal information that will provide validation or conflicting views of the data obtained during the participant interviews regarding the ACBSP accreditation process and the stakeholders' perceptions on the accreditation status.

The researcher will follow the documentation review with structured, private, individual open-ended interviews. Recruitment e-mail messages (Appendix D), including an attached Consent Form (Appendix E), will be sent to the dean or primary administrator for each institution's business school. Interviews will be conducted with administrators from each institution, including but not limited to the president or provost of the higher education institution and the academic dean of the business school. The business school's assessment coordinator, program chairs, and Champion or Co-Champion for accredited business programs will also be included in the interview process. The interviews will be in-depth interviews based on a phenomenological type approach using primarily open-ended questions. The objective for this approach is to have the study participants share accounts of their feelings, observations, and experiences regarding the ACBSP accreditation process and accreditation status. The audio portion of the interviews will be recorded to allow subsequent inductive analysis of the responses to the interview questions. The audio recordings of the interviews will also serve as evidence of the confirmation of trustworthiness of the research data. Any informal conversations that occur between the researcher and the research participants during the interviews will also be documented in the fieldnotes for each institutional visit.

A complete set of data for each institution participating in the research study will include a collection of requested documentation and interview data from interviews with at least five of the following individuals from the institution: the president or provost, along with the business school's academic dean; assessment coordinator; program chairs; and Champion or Co-Champion for accredited business programs.



**Data organization techniques.**

The data from the documentation review will be collected via fieldnotes. The fieldnotes from the documentation review fieldnotes and the transcriptions from the recorded interviews will be entered into word-processing and spreadsheet programs to allow the researcher to effectively analyze the information. Organizing and coding the data will be completed by the researcher to determine if there are any major themes or categorical information that emerge from the information. Pseudonyms will be used when necessary to insure the confidentiality of the research participants' responses in the data organization. The research data collected will be kept in a protected place for three years, and then it will be destroyed. Electronic files will be deleted after the three-year mandatory retention period, and paper copies will be shredded.

**Summary of data collection.**

Using a qualitative inquiry method for the research study, the researcher will be able to explore and depict the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for business schools' programs of study. The qualitative inquiry methodology allows the researcher to gain an empirical foundation in the description of others' experiences, perceptions, and understandings. A review of institutional documentation regarding the research study and interviews with key stakeholders within each institution will allow the researcher to collect the data required to develop a better understanding of the program-specific accreditation process and its influence on the value propositions in the business unit of the institution.

**Data Analysis**

After the data collection process is completed, the researcher must analyze the data. Inductive analysis will be used to analyze the data, looking for patterns that emerge from the information collected. The data from each individual case will be analyzed, categorized, and

compiled into a summary to be reviewed by the participants for accuracy. Upon review, and following the identification and correction of any errors, omissions, or clarifications that might be needed, the researcher will perform the thematic multiple-case analysis using NVivo or another qualitative data analysis computer software package to develop themes within the data.

### **Coding Process**

Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, and Morales (2007) recommend six steps that will increase the effectiveness of the data analysis. The first step is for the researcher in both the individual and multiple-case analyses is to organize and prepare the data. The researcher will begin this process by entering the data into a secure, private database, using NVivo or another qualitative data analysis program, where the information will be held in confidentiality. The data will be organized by identifying any keywords or phrases that are repeated throughout the information. Any patterns in the data will be noted so that they can be analyzed for any themes that might exist. After the data is organized, the researcher must read through the collected data to determine the recurrent themes, categories, and any comparisons or contrasts that might exist between the cases in the study. The third step is to begin noting themes that emerge from the data collection. Using the emergent themes, the researcher will be able to complete the fourth step in the analysis process of generating a description and/or identity of the case and the attributes that have been discovered. The description and themes should then be represented in the narrative before the last step of interpreting or discovering the meaning of the information is completed. In this final interpretive phase, the researcher will report the lessons she learned from the research study, including the applied generalizations regarding the research topic discovered from the individual and multiple-case analyses.

### **Summary of Data Analysis**

The approach that will be used to analyze the data from the multiple case studies will follow the steps outlined by Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, and Morales (2007). An inductive analysis will be used to analyze the information collected from each case study, including the data from the interviews and the documentation provided by the institution. A focus on the analysis of each individual case before analyzing the multiple cases together will allow for the discovery of both general and particular patterns, commonalities, and divergences that exist between the multiple institutions included in the study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

To ensure the authenticity of research study results, the researcher must devote the necessary effort to ensure reliability and consistency within the study. Qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the research findings. To improve the reliability and validity of the research study, the researcher must account for any personal biases that have the ability to influence the data and implement an ongoing critical reflection of methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis (Noble & Smith, 2015).

#### **Reliability.**

Reliability in a qualitative research study refers to the consistency within the employed analytical procedures (Noble & Smith, 2015). The researcher will be able to improve the reliability of the study by standardizing the process adopted for each of the participant interviews. The researcher will be conducting all interviews using the Interview Questionnaire, which will allow for the use of a consistent script of strategically ordered and thoughtfully worded interview questions. The setting where the interviews will take place will be determined

based on the need to ensure confidentiality and create an atmosphere, climate, and surroundings that would engender trust from the research participants.

**Validity.**

To establish validity, the researcher must ensure the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision with which the findings accurately reflect the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). Although different data collection methods are utilized, the findings from each should collectively establish the same or similar conclusions. The researcher can increase the validity of the findings through meticulous record keeping throughout the review of documentation and interview process, demonstrating a clear decision trail, ensuring interpretations of the research data are both consistent and transparent, and continuing the study until data saturation has been achieved (Long & Johnson, 2000). The researcher acknowledges that different research participants may have diverse opinions or perspectives on the research topic. The research sample must include enough cases to uncover most or all of the perceptions that are essential to the research (Mason, 2010). Therefore, the sample size in the study will follow the concept of saturation, beginning with a sample of three institutions, but continuing the study and sampling until there is sufficient information to replicate the study, the ability to obtain additional new information is attained, and continuing the coding process is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

To further establish the validity of the study, the researcher will utilize the triangulation method through multiple data collection methods (Mason, 2010). Institutional documentation of accreditation and business unit processes related to the research study will be reviewed and analyzed along with participant interviews onsite within each institution. Multiple data collection sources will be utilized to allow the researcher to gather data from a variety of

perspectives. The researcher must also do a credible job of completely describing and understanding the research topic, demonstrated through the use of rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts to express deep levels of meaning and nuance, yielding a trustworthy final model of the research findings (Grossoehme, 2014).

The triangulation of the multiple data methods and sources will take place through strategies such as audiotaping the participant interviews, documenting field notes regarding the accreditation and business unit processes, and having participants review summarized data. Using participant review of the case study summaries will enhance the validity of the research study findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Once the individual case analyses have been completed, the data from each individual case will be analyzed, categorized, and compiled into a summary to be reviewed by the participants for accuracy. The participants will be asked to review and identify any errors, omissions, or clarifications that might be needed and provide feedback to ensure the final themes and concepts created adequately reflect the phenomena being investigated.

#### **Summary of reliability and validity.**

The nature of the qualitative research case study approach requires the researcher to design and incorporate methodological strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the research findings. To improve the reliability and validity of the research study, the researcher will be responsible for the account of any personal biases that may influence the research data and a continuous critical reflection of the research methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis. To improve the probability of collecting data that is both reliable and consistent, the researcher will attend to all relevant details in the design and deployment of the research participant interview process, ensuring that it is deployed in a standardized manner.

To establish validity, the researcher will insure the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision with which the findings accurately reflect the data through the use of meticulous record keeping, thorough descriptions of participants' accounts of the research phenomenon, and participant reviews of the research findings.

### **Transition and Summary of Section 2**

The researcher intends to utilize the qualitative multiple case study research methodology and design to explore the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for NC business schools and programs. The population for the research study includes regionally accredited higher education private institutions based within the state of North Carolina offering ACBSP accredited baccalaureate and graduate degrees. Five higher education institutions comprise the research population. Three of the five higher education institutions in the total population meet the convenience sample criteria for this research study of being a member of NC PBL. To ensure the results of the research study are valuable, the researcher must follow the appropriate research methodology and design, including measures that enhance the reliability and validity of the study. Using a structured interview process, multiple data sources and methods, and triangulation of the data, will promote the reliability and validity of the study findings.

The primary strategic objective of Section Two was to present the details of this research study. The section includes information on the role of the researcher and the study participants; the research method, design, population, and sampling techniques; as well as the data collection and analysis procedures, including the methods to ensure reliability and validity intended for use in this study. The anticipated themes of the study, research findings, applications to professional practice, and recommendations for actions and further study will follow in Section Three.

### **Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that business schools within private universities offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina present to the marketplace. Educational institutions utilize value propositions to attract prospective students into their programs of study. The value propositions offer a glimpse into the benefits the student can expect to gain as a participant and graduate of the specific programs within each particular university's schools and the schools' offered academic programs and degrees.

As part of the overall institutional marketing strategy, individual value propositions are created for each school within the university setting, highlighting the benefits offered by the individual school's programs of study. The value propositions often relate either directly or indirectly to the level of quality offered by the components of the programs of study. Many of the individual discipline areas voluntarily or in response to program area requirements pursue discipline-specific accreditation as a measure of continuous improvement and quality standards. The purpose of Section 3 is to describe the analysis and interpretation of the findings of the research study results related to the influence of accreditation on the value proposition for a business school.

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

A business school's overall success is dependent on the school's ability to market the business programs' adherence to quality standards that directly align with the goals of its stakeholders. In order to increase the marketability of the business schools' programs of study, many schools are relying on accreditation processes to increase the quality of their offerings and provide quality assurance to key stakeholders (Eaton, 2012). National accreditation agencies,

such as the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), offer accreditation opportunities to provide external validation of the adherence to quality standards and the implementation of continuous improvement processes within the business schools' programs of study. Any endeavor pursued within an institution of higher education should have the same focus as those pursued within other businesses and industries – to utilize resources in an effective and efficient manner to create a positive impact and assist in achieving the overall mission of the organization (Burton, 2012).

The requirements for obtaining and maintaining the most popular national business program accreditations are resource consuming and do not yet have a documented level of influence on the business schools' value propositions associated with the accreditation process or accreditation status. Prior research studies indicate institutions utilize the accreditation process as a checklist of goals related to quality and marketability of the programs of study, rather than focusing on accreditation as a strategy and a tool for defining the set of coherent actions that help meet the challenge of ensuring the programs meet the actual expectations and needs of key stakeholders (Foss, Stubbs, & Jones, 2011). The researcher explored the ways schools approach the accreditation process, along with the perceived benefits associated with the accreditation process, in an effort to develop an overall understanding of the influence the ACBSP accreditation status and accreditation process have on the value proposition the business school presents to the marketplace.

The cost and intrusiveness of the current higher education accreditation system often raise complaints and leaves individuals debating about whether the accreditation process positively influences the overall value of the schools' programs as perceived by key stakeholders



(Eaton & Neal, 2015). It is important for institutional stakeholders and members of the accrediting organization to have an understanding of the influence that the accreditation status and the accompanying continuous improvement processes have on the overall value proposition presented to the marketplace. The current research study was necessary to explore the influence accreditation has on the value proposition presented to the marketplace, which is an essential component of the marketing strategy formation for both the business schools and the accrediting organizations. The specific problem explored is the lack of understanding of the influence that ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that private business schools offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina present to the marketplace. The study results will provide the ACBSP organization, as well as business schools across the world, with data that will assist key decision makers in developing an understanding of the influence ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that the business schools present to the marketplace.

The business schools within the state of North Carolina that have elected to pursue accreditation through ACBSP were the focus of this study. Three educational institutions within various geographical areas of North Carolina elected to participate in the research study. Three individuals with different roles, including a faculty member, and at least one administrator participated from each of the participating institutions. The majority of the interviews were conducted onsite at each institution, with the others being conducted over the phone. All of the interviews were recorded via audio recording devices with additional notes taken by the researcher regarding the environmental aspects with all data included in the subsequent interview transcriptions. The complete data from each interview session is contained in each transcript and coded using a numerical representation of the school and the participant. All institutional identifiers within the transcripts were replaced with generic titles or other codes to maintain

participant confidentiality throughout the study. The interviews were conducted using the interview questionnaire (Appendix C), with additional probing questions as needed. The questions asked were intended to assist the researcher in gaining data related to the four research questions associated with this study:

- Why does a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution choose to consider national, program-specific accreditation?
- Why does a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution choose to pursue ACBSP accreditation?
- How is the value proposition the business school presents to the marketplace influenced by the school becoming ACBSP accredited?
- Do employers look for candidates that have specifically graduated from a school with ACBSP accreditation?

Each interview transcript was sent to the relevant participant for review and to ensure the accuracy of the data recorded.

Additional data reviewed for this study included secondary data sources obtained by the researcher through the institutional participants. The secondary data included the business unit's ACBSP Accreditation Self-Study report, ACBSP Quality Assurance Report, school and institutional website pages, and ACBSP institutional reports. The review of secondary data sources allowed for a thorough review of the institutional processes and procedures described in the interview sessions and served as validation of the data received from the participants.

The data analysis process began with an identification of the themes that emerged from the interviews. Although the participants within each institution held varying positions and had

varied experience overall with ACBSP accreditation, data saturation occurred quickly, as almost all participants shared information and responses to the interview questions that were similar. Using NVivo software to code and identify the themes from the research data revealed themes that were consistent across each data source. Each interview varied in length and in the amount of detail that was provided in response to the interview questions. The differences that occurred with the interview times, and details included in responses, did not affect the researcher's ability to unmistakably define distinct themes within the research data, as each was notably articulated and together formed the basis of the research analysis.

The findings of the study indicate that although ACBSP accreditation does have some level of influence on the overall value of a business school's programs of study, most participants define the level of influence on the factors included in the value proposition as being indirect and without regard from an external stakeholder's perspective. The value propositions defined by most of the participants for their individual institutions centered on the preparation of students for the business world through experiential learning environments. Although the participants attributed many of the improvements in some program areas to the accreditation standards, most indicated that if their organization no longer decided to pursue accreditation, there would be little to no change in the manner in which they offer programs of study or to the overall value recognized by institutional stakeholders.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

Eight themes emerged from the analysis of the research data. The themes were identified using the NVivo software, and the evaluation of the data using the criteria of word count frequency related to specific terms expressed by the participant throughout the interview session, the degree of emphasis each participant placed on the factors associated with the theme, and the

inclusion and significance of the theme within the secondary data sources. The eight themes identified included the following: continuous improvement, feedback mechanisms, internal quality control, data collection, access to resources, marketing of ACBSP, accreditation outcomes, and accreditation as a lifestyle.

### **Continuous Improvement.**

In both the field of education and within the business environment, it is essential to develop a system for assuring quality through continuous improvement. Accreditation is often the process schools utilize to ensure the highest level of quality and offer quality assurance to key stakeholders, as the accreditation standards are aligned with the Kaizen Theory and offer a tool for continuous improvement (Eaton & Neal, 2015). The research participants spoke quite frequently about the positive changes that occurred within the business unit because of the implementation of the ACBSP accreditation processes. One participant indicated that the accreditation processes and standards have created a common goal that brought their business unit together, stating specifically that it “improved our status on campus, improved our budgets in our departments, and we’re not settling for mediocrity because we can’t – our accreditation won’t let us.”

The creation of quality improvement processes and strategic planning across the business were attributed to even more significant changes than those created by regional accreditation in areas such as overall accountability, efficiency, and assessment practices. The value of a continuous improvement process is defined by its ability to identify a gap and place strategic improvement processes in place to close the gap (Heavey, Ledwith, & Murphy, 2014). Although the overall value of this process was not clearly defined in quantitative terms by any of the research participants, many spoke of the value realized through the customer satisfaction levels

that exist as a result of the continuous improvement processes and quality assurance measures. The continuous improvement process and level of strategic planning that occurs adds overall value to the business unit's programs of study as is evident by one participant's statement: "If we're doing the processes correctly, then we're going to produce better students, and then they're [employers] going to in return reap the reward of us producing better students."

A program must demonstrate relevance and currency of faculty, programs, and courses to be marketable. It must also have a high level of focus on quality performance to sustain the marketability (Johnson & Stage, 2018). The participants highlighted the benchmarks that were created by the continuous improvement processes and the manner in which they were used to create needed curriculum changes and strategic planning goals for the business unit. ACBSP accreditation was also credited with creating an elevated attitude of striving toward excellence through the implementation of a regular cycle for the creation, evaluation, and necessary modification of student learning outcomes, program learning outcomes, and shifts in curriculum focus. Programmatic changes were further influenced by ACBSP accreditation, as faculty members strove to focus on the curriculum contents' relevance with the business world, utilizing the feedback from stakeholders to ensure the inclusion of the most relevant topics within each program of study.

Programs of study, along with their outcomes and other measurement tools, are often benchmarked to determine if any modifications would help increase enrollment and retention, as well as produce a higher result in employment outcomes. The continual improvement of the programs of study is further enhanced by the attitudinal changes that occur with faculty and staff who are committed to the accreditation process and share the common goals among themselves and with others in the business unit. With shared common goals, student learning outcomes,

program outcomes, and course outcomes, the faculty become united in their pursuit of optimal performance within the classroom, and the accreditation standards provide a measure of accountability in teaching practices. One participant emphasized the pursuit of optimal performance by noting how the accreditation process “focuses the priorities.” The participant stated that, “having that very clear set of criteria, standards, the matrix that has to be done provides an integrity to the curriculum.” Another participant noted the improvement in faculty performance in the classroom because with the accreditation process “there is this accountability that there is going to be some judgement.” The participant also noted that programs and teaching methods are improved as accreditation processes “encourage people to share ideas.”

The participants noted the impact of the accreditation process on faculty hiring practices as well, as the standards influenced the creation of more stringent requirements for faculty positions, as well as a focus on the importance of filling positions based on program needs rather than faculty preferences. Several participants referred to the accreditation standards' influence on the hiring processes for their individual schools, as one participant stated, “our postings for hiring have gotten a lot more elaborate... so that elevates our pool of candidates.” The required creation of a Human Resources Planning process, included in one of the ACBSP accreditation standards, forces institutions to be proactive in their staffing processes, creating the opportunity to continually improve the level of quality of new hires considered for positions within the school, while also elevating the consideration of the workload for all faculty members.

### **Feedback Mechanisms.**

ACBSP accreditation standards include requirements for feedback across all areas of the business school. Although most of the participants noted that they did collect feedback before accreditation, most also emphasized that the data collected for accreditation purposes help create

a structured format with regard for the utilization of the feedback for overall improvement purposes. One participant noted that their business school used to collect data once every five years, but the accreditation process has “instituted the expectation for specific data to be collected on a regular, ongoing process to keep the data current and useful for analyzation and continuing improvement purposes.” The record keeping processes required by the ACBSP accreditation standards were noted by most participants as helping the school become more disciplined in uncovering unidentified needs of the school and necessary curriculum changes.

The accreditation standards also include the Balanced Scorecard advantage of requiring the implementation of feedback and organizational learning into the modification and adaptation of strategic goals when indicated. Two of the participants indicated the feedback requirements were the catalyst for the schools to reach out more frequently and in greater depth to the institution's stakeholders. The participants referred to accreditation quite often when discussing the need for a level of accountability and improvement in curriculum-related performance measures, referring to accreditation as the catalyst for helping create a force to instill the necessary processes and procedures. Participants said that data collection processes often became more specific, targeted, and measurable when following accreditation processes, with a variety of forms of feedback collection instruments being used to collect the feedback data.

The feedback gained for accreditation purposes comes directly from student surveys, exit interviews, alumni surveys, Business Advisory Council meetings, faculty evaluations, program and course outcome measurement tools, and other forms of stakeholder feedback collection instruments developed by each institution. The feedback collected from external stakeholders influences the strategic planning process and increases the level of adherence of program standards to market expectations. The faculty and administrators are using the collected data to

influence the continuous improvement of their programs of study, as evident in the statement by one participant: "...we pay more attention, what are the kind of things they are identifying as being important and we are providing our students that content..."

### **Internal Quality Control.**

Institutions within higher education from across the world are concerned with the level of quality that exists with each program of study (Papadimitriou & Blanco Ramírez, 2015).

According to the ACICS website (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, n.d.), accreditation is defined as "a status granted to an institution that meets or exceeds the stated criteria of educational quality." The research participants all attributed some portion of their internal quality control measures to the ACBSP accreditation standards. The purpose of the accreditation process is to provide quality assurance for academic institutions, control access to state and federal funds, foster employers' confidence in the quality of education of their job applicants, and enable the transfer of credits between schools (Lindgrensavage, 2016).

Participants indicated the influence of accreditation on each of these defined areas with the exception of one – the fostering of employers' confidence in the quality of education of their job applicants.

Several of the participants highlighted the manner in which ACBSP accreditation raises the level of credibility and elevates the perceptions associated with the quality of the program offerings within the school. It was also noted that perception of the participants was that the accreditation status indicates a standard of excellence as it verifies the legitimacy and level of quality of the school and represents the implementation of best practices inspired from around the globe. Higher education institutions often utilize accreditation to provide a comparative model of quality assurance that guarantees key stakeholders of continuous development and



growth and the maintenance of accreditation standards throughout the institution or its programs of study (Kalinina, 2013). ACBSP accreditation was perceived by the participants as establishing a clear set of criteria and standards that increases optimal performance and allows schools to demonstrate an increase in academic rigor.

The increased level of rigor in academics was noted by the participants, who saw a relationship to the influence ACBSP accreditation has on the strategic planning process, the faculty hiring process, assessment metrics, and curriculum design. The participants often spoke of the influence the accreditation process and standards have on the strategic planning process, indicating that the accreditation standards create a required progression of analysis and continual improvement of the standard learning outcomes, program outcomes, and course designs associated with the offered academic programs. The faculty hiring process was one area the participants often mentioned as being influenced overall by the accreditation standards, as they require a more stringent evaluation of prospective faculty members' credentials, more elaborate hiring practices to ensure certain required staffing levels, percentage allocations of full-time vs. adjunct teaching assignments, and consideration of faculty loads.

Assessment metrics are a strategic part of the accreditation standards in elevating the level of continuous improvement within the academic programs and were noted by the research participants to help improve the quality of the programs as well as the quality of teaching and learning within some of the institutions. The implementation of assessment metrics helps ensure academic excellence through demonstrated success in meeting the established outcomes. The assessment metrics and stakeholder feedback lead to curriculum design decisions and the occasional shift in curriculum that helps mold the program of study into one that is evidence of a

culture of collaboration and student-centric focus, as it is designed to prepare the student for the evident needs within the current business world.

Although previous studies indicated that accreditation helps foster employers' confidence in the quality of education of their job applicants (Lindgrensavage, 2016), current research study participants presented limited knowledge of any employer-expressed value in the accreditation process or accreditation status for the graduates of their schools. When asked specifically if employers required the accreditation status for employment or tuition reimbursement programs, most participants indicated they had not heard of any employers specifically indicating any interest in the accreditation status for job applicants or tuition reimbursement requests. The participants indicated that they feel as if most employers and other external stakeholders are not aware of accreditation at all, but especially not national or program-specific accreditation, the processes associated with it, or the implications of the accreditation status. When asked about the value of ACBSP accreditation from an external stakeholder's viewpoint, one participant replied, "I'd say the majority of people outside of the university have no idea about you know ACBSP versus AACSB or anybody else." Another research participant replied with a similar response: "Right now I don't think anybody that I know of in the external world, when I say the word 'accreditation' I have to explain what accreditation is first before I even to go to ACBSP. And then I have to explain, you know, what it means for business programs, so that jargon, that terminology doesn't really exist in the business world."

For those employers who are aware of business program specific accreditation, it is recognized as an indicator of quality programs and there is some level of value associated with the accreditation status. As one participant indicated, accreditation does play some role in

establishing the credibility of the programs of study for some employers, especially at the graduate level, “MBA students if they’re out there and their employer is going to fund their education that’s one of the questions the employer wants to know before they do tuition remission.” The participant also remarked that undergraduates are often not asking about accreditation because they and their employers are often not aware of it, stating that “[accreditation] is only important if we market it, and that is where my concern is, because we’re not marketing it.”

### **Data Collection.**

Research participants were quick to mention the data collection process that is required by ACBSP standards. Accrediting organizations rely on a peer review process to measure institutional and program-specific criteria for accreditation status (Dill, 2014). Accredited schools and programs are required to meet each standard initially, gaining accreditation, but are also required to report continuous adherence to the standards on a regular reporting cycle, usually every two to five years. Several participants, most often those at the faculty and dean levels, referred to the data collection requirements as the attributing force for the business unit to engage in a continuous cycle of self-evaluation.

Accreditation standards are designed to assure stakeholders that the quality and continuous improvement processes required to ensure that success is evaluated in relation to the school’s mission, expected outcomes, and supporting strategies (Dill, 2014). The participants spoke of the importance of the accreditation standards’ influence on the development and assessment of student learning outcomes, program outcomes, stakeholder feedback opportunities, assessment metrics, and accreditation documentation. Although not all participants were able to clearly articulate the precise differences between the data collection processes and procedures

before and after pursuing the ACBSP accreditation, most participants did offer a perception on the increased level of detail and consistency associated with the data collection processes which they attribute to the adherence to the accreditation standards. Several participants also referred to the vital role the accreditation standards play in the development of assessment protocols, which help close the assessment loop.

### **Access to Resources.**

Accountability is a key area of concern for most higher education institutions. Governments demand assurance that the funding allocated to colleges and universities is well directed. Within each participant institution, the participants often referred to the access accreditation provides to additional resources. It was also noted by the administrators interviewed that accreditation adds leverage in the competition for resources. The accreditation process includes many of the attributes of the Balanced Scorecard approach, which allows educational leaders to develop a more balanced perspective of organizational performance, as it includes a broader perspective than a financial analysis alone. The participants at the dean level emphasized accreditation's influence in helping them gain access to resources, noting improved budgets, outside influences, the improved overall status of the business unit, increased efficiency, and accreditation requirements as the catalysts for increasing resource allocations in their direction. One dean stated that accreditation is often used as the "trump card" in the request for resources, as accreditation requirements are often enough encouragement for administrators to allocate the funds requested in the direction of the business school.

The faculty and dean participants noted that the accreditation standards also influence the faculty resources. The allotment of faculty workloads has specific guidelines under the ACBSP accreditation standards. There are also requirements for the credentials of qualified faculty

members for each program area. The accreditation process includes many of the attributes of the Balanced Scorecard approach, which allows educational leaders to develop a more balanced perspective of organizational performance as it includes a broader perspective than a financial analysis alone. The allocation of resources is affected by these accreditation standards in that as the productivity levels of faculty members are noted in the data collection process, it is often revealed that faculty members are meeting or exceeding the recommended workload requirements of accreditation.

Some administrators spoke of how the accreditation standards allow them to request additional staffing or financial support and decrease other obligations for faculty members outside of their teaching requirements. One administrator stated that the accreditation standard “allows me to go to administration and say we need someone in this area or we need this to be accredited and we need resources to do this.” Several participants spoke of their interest in ACBSP specifically due to the organization’s focus on teaching excellence rather than research. Two of the participants noted that ACBSP, with the focus on teaching excellence and scholarly research requirements considered only as a component of teaching standards, provides an opportunity for teaching-based institutions to access additional resources due to the assessment criteria and results that are focused for teaching-based institutions.

Each of the participants interviewed mentioned some level of increase in their circle of influence outside of the institution due to the participation in the ACBSP accreditation process. Several participants spoke of their level of involvement with the ACBSP organization, through attendance at regional and national conferences, through serving as evaluators for the accreditation process, and through volunteering as mentors for other institutions; and they spoke of the effect those relationships had within their institution. They described how the increase in

the level of collaboration and sharing of best practices across institutions and discipline areas helped create innovative, engaging ideas incorporated into their own institution's curriculum.

### **Accreditation Outcomes.**

Achieving accreditation at either the regional or the national level is a time-consuming, arduous process that encompasses a high level of documentation noting the quality assurance and continuous improvement processes in place within the higher education institution. Previous research studies indicate that many schools choose to pursue accreditation with the desire to utilize the accreditation status to create a positive impact on their business school's value proposition. Although data has shown the positive effect that sound quality assurance and continuous improvement processes have on the business environment (Kohlbacher, 2013) and the outcomes of most business schools (Bryant, 2013), data was not available regarding the influence of accreditation on the value proposition for a business school or the higher education institutions' programs of study.

Every participant of the research study indicated multiple positive outcomes of pursuing accreditation and earning the accreditation status. Participants mentioned the achievement of outcomes, including additional opportunities for networking and collaboration across discipline areas and schools; the increased ability for the school to produce better students due to the engaged curriculum and the decrease in the ability to settle for mediocracy; the alignment of disciplines with the professionalization of business organizations; and the mark of quality and respectability that the accreditation status affords the institution. One of the participants stated, "When we're trying to create a unique undergraduate experience, one of the ways that we can do so in the business program is through the ACBSP standards, whether it's engaged learning, or if

it's experiential learning or service to the community, or you know whatever we are doing we are living the life of accreditation.”

Exploring the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition for business schools and programs helped determine the perceptions of some of the key stakeholders regarding the benefits of ACBSP accreditation in comparison to the resources required to obtain the accreditation status. Although each participant noted the benefits and desired outcomes associated with accreditation, many also noted that these benefits were indirect benefits for the stakeholders in many ways, and stated that most stakeholders do not recognize the influence of accreditation due to a lack of understanding of the accreditation process, unawareness of the meaning of the accreditation status, and the ignorance that exists regarding the importance of the various criteria accreditation represents. One participant stated that accreditation has a “ripple effect” – it creates indirect benefits that stakeholders might not recognize immediately as the outcome of the accreditation process. Several participants referred to the resources required to earn and maintain the accreditation status, but most focused more on the return on the investment they would like to see increase with more marketability of the ACBSP status, as evident by the comment by one participant: “ACBSP accreditation hasn't gained that sort of recognition in the broad public. So from that standpoint it has not benefitted us as much as we would like.”

### **Marketing of ACBSP.**

One of the concerns that was presented by most of the current research study participants was directly in line with previous research results, indicating apprehensions regarding the lack of complete brand recognition for ACBSP accreditation. Previous research indicated that administrators at colleges and universities have expressed concern regarding the level of understanding the public has of the accreditation process and its overall value (Council for

Higher Education Accreditation, 2016). The perceived value associated with ACBSP accreditation is strategically important to most institutions, as the accreditation status is utilized to help educational programs remain relevant and competitive in the educational marketplace.

Marketing includes identifying customer value, creating it, and then communicating value to the consumers within the target market. An increase in the perceived value has a positive influence on brand equity, which is associated with an increase in an organization's ability to win brand-loyal customers (Datta, Ailawadi, & van Heerde, 2017). Value propositions are a critical part of both marketing theory and practice. Products or services with strong value propositions are more likely to receive selective attention from consumers, to be included in their consideration sets, to be evaluated positively, and to be chosen at the point of purchase (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003).

Many of the participants described their efforts to promote the accreditation, describing the importance of the status and what it represents, while also attempting to increase brand equity for ACBSP, as consumers compare it to the other top accrediting organization for business schools. Several of the participants noted concern with the lack of understanding that most stakeholders have regarding accreditation processes, the accreditation status, and the accrediting organizations. In the educational realm, the student who prefers one accreditation to the other in selecting a business program represents a brand-loyal customer. An employer who prefers to hire graduates from educational programs accredited by a specific accreditation agency is also a representation of a brand-loyal customer in an educational institution. Two participants specifically noted their perspective that the other top accrediting organization, AACSB, was more widely known and seen in higher regard than ACBSP due to a lack of understanding of the differences that exist between the two organizations.



A vast majority of the participants at the dean and faculty levels noted their desire for ACBSP to become more widely known and accepted among those who are aware of the accreditation process and status. They also noted their desire for an increase in awareness in those who are unfamiliar with accreditation, the accreditation status, and accrediting organizations. One participant stated the desire for ACBSP to take the lead in developing a higher level of awareness stating, "ACBSP needs to be proactive in building awareness." Other participants discussed more of a joint effort between the accrediting organization and the educational institutions in increasing the ACBSP brand awareness and marketing the accreditation benefits to the stakeholders through an effort to educate students and encourage them to become marketers of the benefits they gained from being a graduate of an ACBSP accredited school.

#### **Accreditation as a Lifestyle.**

Friedman and Kass (2016) emphasize the importance of understanding the significant organizational and culture change that must occur to successfully complete the accreditation process and achieve the accreditation status. Three of the participants spoke quite often throughout the interview process on the importance of viewing accreditation as a lifestyle for the members of the organization, not as a checklist or one-time event. One of the participants emphasized the importance of noting that the accreditation process is the "right way to operate, it is not an accreditation process alone, it is the right way to operate a business unit." The participants all noted areas where they felt as if the accreditation standards needed to be embraced by those within the business unit and seen as a process for improvement, not an event for accreditation alone.

As indicated in previous research, if not carefully managed, the accreditation process has the potential of creating a negative impact on the culture of the school (Salto, 2017). The current research study participants noted that some faculty members are hesitant to embrace accreditation and often begrudgingly participate in the accreditation process, cooperating only if explicitly asked or required to do so. It was also noted by one of the participants that the push to comply with various requests for information, the requirement to follow certain procedures, and the increase in accountability increases the faculty's frustrations with the accreditation process. Although there is pushback from faculty to adhere to accreditation standards, participants indicated the hesitancy is due to traditional lack of oversight and the fear of what an increase of oversight and accountability will do to the level of freedom for faculty. One participant stated, "You know historically a lot of us have been able to do absolutely whatever we want to do in a classroom with very little oversight. And, so you know this pushes faculty to do some things that they're not used to doing and don't want to do."

Some of the participants indicated that the somewhat negative impact created by the accreditation process is often related to the overall manner in which the process implementation occurs as the school maintains adherence to the accreditation standards. As presented in previous research, faculty and staff often express dismay with the amount of energy and other resources needed to successfully achieve the accreditation status (Nigsch & Schenker-Wicki, 2013). One of the current research participants indicated the faculty members' lack of understanding of the benefits of the accreditation standards stating, "I don't think most professors understand that it's the better way to operate more efficient... they just see the end as a task to be done so that administration will meet their requirement." However, the participants often noted the importance of including faculty members in the processes that are designed for

adherence within the business unit to the accreditation standards. Several of the administrator-level participants spoke of the importance of gaining buy-in from the faculty in order for the accreditation process to be embraced across the business unit. Faculty participants spoke of the importance of creating the image from the administrators' perspective that accreditation is a way of life for the business school and is not an option, with a continual highlight of the benefits of accreditation and the influence the standards have on the continual improvement of the business unit.

### **Relationship of themes/patterns to research questions.**

The themes identified relate to each of the research questions for this study in that they identify the participants' perspectives on the benefits derived from the pursuit of accreditation, the differences between the accrediting organizations, and the outcomes associated with pursuing ACBSP accreditation. The relationship between the themes/patterns to each of the research questions is as follows:

### **Why does a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution choose to consider national, program-specific accreditation?**

The benefits gained from the pursuit of accreditation identified the reasons why a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution might choose to or not to consider national, program-specific accreditation. The theme on Continuous Improvement highlights many of the benefits schools gain from pursuing an accreditation process, which includes methods in which the program-specific accreditation exceeds the regional accreditation standards. The increase in the level of feedback mechanisms and the pursuit of excellence in the Feedback Mechanisms and Accreditation Outcomes sections identify additional reasons for the

pursuit of a program-specific accreditation. Many of the participants noted, in relation to these themes, the importance of pursuing accreditation to obtain a quality assurance measure and noted level of accountability, which was further enhanced by the accreditation standards and processes.

**Why does a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution choose to pursue ACBSP accreditation?**

ACBSP is a teaching-based accrediting organization. The focus of the ACBSP organization is on the development of assessment standards that are appropriate for teaching-based institutions. The other top accrediting organizations for business schools within the United States focuses primarily on research-based institutions. Many of the participants stated that they considered both, but selected to pursue ACBSP accreditation because of its focus on teaching excellence rather than research. One participant noted the importance of ensuring that the accrediting institution that was chosen by that particular institution could not have a “publish or perish” attitude because that was not in alignment with the mission or vision of the school. Several of the participants noted this same concern in different descriptions, as they referred to the importance of pursuing accreditation with an accrediting organization that was focused on the particular attributes of their institution.

**How is the value proposition the business school presents to the marketplace influenced by the school becoming ACBSP accredited?**

The participants discussed their vision or perspective on the value their school offers to stakeholders. The value proposition for each business school was very similar, with a focus on creating an engaged learning opportunity for students to develop critical thinking and analyzation skills in a student-centric environment. Many of the participants discussed the attributes of their value propositions as they discussed the important aspects of each of the themes identified in the

research data. In each theme, there are aspects of the importance of creating a curriculum that engages students, offers opportunities for influence from external stakeholders, develops a culture of mentoring and coaching, and creates a standard of excellence in all aspects of the programs of study.

The culture of collaboration was mentioned in the value propositions for each institution and was further discussed in almost every theme presented in the research data. The manner and methodology utilized for teaching has been analyzed and included in accreditation standards and is an intricate part of each institution's perspective on the essential components of value delivered to the students. The inclusion of experiential learning and collaborations outside the institutional environment is noted in the Access to Resources and Outcomes themes with discussions that occurred regarding high-impact practices and the development of engaging external lessons incorporated into the curriculum for each program of study.

**Do employers look for candidates that have specifically graduated from a school with ACBSP accreditation?**

The Access to Resources theme includes data collected on the additional resources provided by the accreditation process and status. Two of the participants did note the accreditation status opened the door for some of their previous students to pursue opportunities with graduate schools and some specific employers. However, the majority of the participants indicated that they were unaware of the accreditation status being required as an employment criterion or tuition reimbursement qualification for any of their graduates.

Several participants mentioned that it might become a future question or requirement in the employment process if accreditation is more widely known throughout the business environment. Two of the participants mentioned an interest in ACBSP becoming more widely

publicized with the major employers in their area, but hesitated to pursue that initiative due to the possibility of comparison with AACSB. The research data categorized under the theme Marketing of ACBSP indicates that participants feel as if a further understanding and recognition of ACBSP and other accreditation processes and statuses would enhance the stakeholder's awareness, recognition, and perceived value of accreditation overall.

### **Summary of the findings.**

Value propositions are intended to be used as a strategic tool to communicate how the organization aims to provide value to customers. To be effective, an organization's value proposition must deliver unique and differentiated benefits to key stakeholders (Zolezzi, 2015). The value proposition is only effective if it is aligned with the expectations of the organization's key stakeholders and delivers the consumer benefits they desire in a format that is differentiated in some manner from competitors. Establishing processes to receive continuous feedback from key stakeholders with a focus on quality and continuous improvement helps an organization create an effective method for meeting the unique needs of its target market (Anderson, Narus, & Van Rossum, 2006). Successful organizations push their value proposition to the next level by focusing on the highest level of achievable quality for their product or service offerings and by implementing a continuous improvement process that allows for a focus on benefits that exceed the expectations of key stakeholders and provide differentiation from competitors (Zolezzi, 2015).

The research findings indicate many benefits associated with ACBSP accreditation. The outcomes of accreditation are all associated with the value-producing benefits offered by the business schools and their programs of study. Although none of the participants were able to directly link the influence of the accreditation processes or status with an overarching direct

influence on the value proposition for the school or its programs of study, all of the participants indicated the accreditation process had an indirect influence on the many aspects of the overall value offered to the institution's stakeholders.

A critical aspect of the value proposition for each school is the ability to distinguish clear differentiation from competitive offerings that are important to targeted customers. Many of the aspects of the participants' institutional value propositions were similar and included attributes that were identical to those offered by their competitors. ACBSP accreditation was utilized by several of the schools to offer a distinguishing difference as a "stamp" of quality and teaching excellence. However, many of the participants from all three institutions spoke only of the many benefits of the accreditation process and the manner in which it indirectly affected the value offered, but never spoke of how the accreditation status or process helped create differentiation from competitors within the educational market.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

One of the most important marketing tasks is to create and communicate the value that drives the level of satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability the organization desires from its customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). The backbone of a successful marketing program is the ability to identify, create, communicate, deliver, and monitor customer value. The findings from this study will provide the ACBSP organization as well as college and/or university administrators with information regarding the influence of national accreditation of business schools and programs on the business schools' value propositions and ways the organizations can utilize the benefits associated with accreditation to better market the program offerings.

The pursuit of accreditation is resource consuming for many colleges and universities (Eaton, 2012). The results of the research study were intended to help explore the influence that

the accreditation process has on the business school's value proposition from a key stakeholder's perspective. An exploration of the value associated with the accreditation status, derived from a case study approach, has implications for college and/or university administrators in their development of an understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions of both the expected and unexpected benefits and costs associated with the accreditation process. Research results regarding the benefits of accreditation indicate the accreditation outcomes have not been used as a source of data for marketing purposes for both the accredited institutions and the ACBSP organization.

Quality assurance and overall quality management have become a focus for most every industry, but especially so within higher education and within higher education politics across the world (Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann & Krücken, 2017). Many industries rely on quality management models and quality assurance programs to ensure the value of the goods or services produced is in alignment with the overall quality expected. A value proposition offers the consumer guidance in selecting one product or service over another, as it summarizes the value that the consumer can expect from the product or service as well as the ways in which that particular product is exceptional in relation to its competitors (Price, John, Christenson, Scharnhorst, Oellerich, Jones, & Morris, 2016). The findings of this study provide guidance as to the accuracy of value propositions and the inclusion of unique characteristics the accreditation outcomes provide within the value propositions, especially when related to the level of quality assurance some believe the accreditation status provides to external stakeholders.

An institution's value proposition serves as a promise of the perceived customer value the school intends to offer to each of its key stakeholders. The business schools' stakeholderes rely on the promise as an indication of the value to be expected through the programs of study offered



at the institution. Proverbs 20:25 offers a reminder of the importance of following through with promises made and ensuring they are made with integrity. It is important for the value proposition to be truthful and to deliver the promise of value that is useful to the consumer.

Although the value propositions offered by the participant institutions are both truthful and seem to be made with the utmost level of integrity, they are not complete in indicating the value the customer receives by attending an accredited institution. To follow the guidelines of a biblical approach to business, the institution must ensure appropriate use of resources and a comprehensive promise that includes the integral value-added aspects of the institution's program offerings through the inclusion of the effects of accreditation in its value proposition and marketing collateral.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The research participants described many of the impacts of the ACBSP accreditation processes noting each one as being influential on various aspects of the value offered by the business schools. However, the majority of the influential factors either directly or indirectly attributed by the participants to the creation of positive changes in the value offerings are not highlighted by the business schools in any of their marketing efforts or within their value propositions. The research participants noted several influential aspects of accreditation that are of value to the institution's stakeholders, although most of the value propositions did not contain the majority of that information as presented by the research participants, within the institutional documentation, or as noted in the marketing documentation seen on the institution's website. The lack of documentation and inclusion of that information in the value proposition is at times intentional, but in other situations was described as due to a lack of resources or effort from the marketing team. It is recommended that the inclusion of data regarding the positive outcomes

associated with accreditation and an inclusion of the accreditation status for applicable programs of study in all marketing materials and presentation be a top priority for institutions pursuing ACBSP accreditation.

ACBSP accreditation's influence on the value proposition for a business school appears to be expansive, but not easily noticed by both internal and external stakeholders due to the lack of marketing efforts focused on these positive aspects of the accreditation process in relation to the perceived value desired. A recommendation is that business schools that are ACBSP accredited should include notations of the accreditation's benefits in the form of stories that show the affect of accreditation on the internal and external stakeholders, i.e., students, faculty, graduates, and employers, as a way of marketing the ACBSP accreditation and the value it creates for stakeholders. As one participant noted, "those who realize the importance of accreditation publicize it with the stakeholders when they are meeting with prospective candidates for different programs, when they are meeting with employers, or when employers call and they know we're accredited and appreciate that."

There is a level of increasing pressure that is currently present in higher education in regard to the demand for higher quality degrees at a reasonable cost to students (Fincher & Katsinas, 2016). The organization can increase the perceived value of the program offerings just as other business organizations do by adding unique product attributes, implementing strong research and development capabilities to create superior product features, or differentiating the features of the product and highlighting the differentiation (Grewal, Roggeveen, Compeau, & Levy, 2012). It is recommended that the ACBSP accredited institutions note the benefits associated with accreditation that create a unique advantage when compared to their competitive institutions. Those unique product attributes, such as business-tailored program outcomes and

external feedback-enhanced curriculum changes, must be added to the value propositions offered by the institutions. Highlighting the differentiation that occurs within the programs of study, as indicated by the accreditation standards and status, will enhance the business schools' ability to create value and a competitive advantage in the higher education market.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The scope of the study was limited in that it focused on a small segment of higher education and only one of the three regional business school accrediting organizations that exist within the United States. The study's unique focus on the business schools within private universities offering bachelor's degrees within the state of North Carolina delivered results specific to these types of higher education institutions that may not be applicable to other institutions of higher education or other accrediting organizations. The focus on only ACBSP accredited institutions excluded the effects that might exist from one of the other two top accrediting institutions within the United States. The focus on these particular institutions limited the study to the perceptions of the value propositions specific to the size and nature of a particular type of institution of higher education rather than the inclusion of a variety of institutions, which may have affected the overall success of the schools' value propositions in ways that are unrelated to the study. Further studies that include a wider variety of institutions and the inclusion of multiple accrediting organizations will allow the development of a broader understanding of the role accreditation plays on the value offered by business schools' programs of study.

The research study participants selected included the ACBSP Champion, Co-Champion, other key decision makers or administrators of the business school, and the Provost for the institution. Although the research study participants had an association with the accreditation

standards and process, this association does not guarantee a high level of knowledge of the effects of the accreditation status on the various aspects of the business programs. The research participants may also have held views of ACBSP accreditation, its overall influence on the value proposition for the school, or the accreditation process that differ from other stakeholders associated with the business school. As a key decision maker for the business school, the research participants may have been inclined to offer a view of the influence of accreditation on the value proposition that is altered from reality to avoid detrimental outcomes associated with the internal support for accreditation. The inclusion of other key stakeholders in future similar studies would broaden the perspectives included within the findings of the study. Including external stakeholders, as well as additional internal stakeholders from other areas of the institution, would help clarify the various perspectives of the value of accreditation from multiple, varied perspectives.

The identified research problem focused on the influence of accreditation on the value proposition associated with the business schools' programs of study. The research problem can be addressed only if the institution has first identified the value proposition of its programs of study and have an awareness of the perception of such before and after the accreditation status was awarded. Future studies focusing on the influence of accreditation on a school's value proposition would benefit from a thorough exploration of the formation of the value proposition and the factors associated with it before the school pursued accreditation and after the accreditation process was implemented. A thorough understanding of the correlation between the accreditation standards and the perceived value of the schools' programs of study may be better identified through a quantitative study that focuses on the before and after effects of the value proposition in relation to the pursuit of accreditation.

The theoretical perspective for this research study may have limited the overall results of the study, as a focus on the organization's value proposition and the effectiveness it offers for institutions in marketing their programs of study limited the researcher's ability to determine the comprehensive influence of accreditation. The accuracy of the findings of the research study was dependent on the success of the Kaizen Theory, or theory of continuous improvement, being effectively implemented in the accreditation process. The findings were dependent on an accurate account of the ability to offer quality assurance through the implementation of a continuous improvement process and the overall influence this process has on the value proposition for a business school. Future studies, including those focusing on the overall effects of accreditation and the continuous improvement process included within the accreditation standards on a variety of aspects of the business school, rather than focusing specifically on the influence of accreditation on the value proposition alone, may offer additional knowledge regarding the benefits of accreditation and the overall value gained from the accreditation standards or status.

### **Reflections**

The findings of this study indicate a significant contribution that the accreditation process often offers to business schools and higher education institutions. Although many of the contributions were deemed by the participants to be indirectly related to the overall value offered by the schools' programs of study, it was apparent to the researcher that there is a relationship between the continuous improvement processes and the standards of accreditation. Although the standards do not directly dictate what must be accomplished or represented by the business school, they serve as a catalyst for many of the self-reflection processes to be implemented, often

resulting in significant changes to value-added benefits associated with the schools' programs of study.

The value propositions presented by most participants seemed to be lacking in depth and were more of a high-level overview of the participants' views of the particular methodologies utilized by faculty members and administrators to create a unique experience for students. Although the experience was deemed to be unique, participants from all three participant institutions repeatedly described student experiences in similar manners with identical factors. To create a value proposition that is effective, there must be a unique identifying characteristic that adds value for stakeholders while setting the proposition apart from competitors. Not only did the value proposition for each institution seem to be lacking in its ability to create a unique offering, each value proposition lacked evidence of the high quality attributed to the accreditation processes and standards. The participants failed to mention any aspect of the level of rigor, quality, or unique characteristics created by the continuous improvement processes implemented within the business unit.

It seems that the failed attempt to offer value through the ACBSP accreditation status and processes is common with most of the participant institutions and one that is not yet fully understood by the researcher. It appears from the study results that this researcher's initial views of the value of accreditation are in line with those discovered through the research study – there is great value added to the business school's programs of study through the accreditation process; it is just not communicated in any manner to most of the key stakeholders. This researcher's hope is that this study will spawn additional research studies to further delve into these types of idiosyncrasies associated with the phenomenon of interest associated with the current study and the outcomes of the ACBSP accreditation process and status.

### **Summary and Study Conclusions**

A program must demonstrate relevancy and currency of faculty, programs, and courses to be marketable. It must also have a high level of focus on quality performance to sustain the marketability (Johnson & Stage, 2018). The ability of the business program to be marketable is also dependent on the business school's ability to assure stakeholders that students are learning material that is relevant to their field of study and that they will be adequately prepared to take on leadership roles upon graduation. National accreditation standards from program-specific accrediting agencies are intended to assure that these program requirements are met and that a continuous improvement process is in place (BestBizSchools.com., n.d.). The findings from this study indicate the accreditation standards improve the organization's ability to focus on quality performance through the implementation of a detailed and robust continuous improvement process. The findings indicate the accreditation process offers many benefits associated with the creation and maintenance of programs of study that include data relevant to employment requirements through the feedback mechanisms utilized to gain information from external stakeholders.

According to the data gathered from research participants, the influence of the accreditation process and status on the value proposition for each business school is limited by what seems to be most often the key stakeholders' lack of understanding of accreditation standards and the benefits of the accreditation process. In order for business schools' value propositions to be utilized to assure stakeholders that program requirements are met and that a continuous improvement process is in place, the ACBSP accreditation standards and implications of the accreditation status must be understood by the stakeholders. The development of an understanding of ACBSP accreditation standards and the implications of the accreditation status

will be developed further through additional marketing efforts that include detailed promotion of the benefits associated with the accreditation processes and the implications of the accreditation status on the business school's programs of study.



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**Appendix A: Example of Estimated Costs and Potential Timeline for Membership and Accreditation through the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs**

Cost will vary based on numerous factors such as location, size, number of campuses, etc.

<b>Fiscal year</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Description of Cost</b>	<b>Amount</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	<b>Membership:</b> Completion of Member Enrollment Form for educational membership. Payment of the annual membership fee of \$2,000.	Annual membership dues.	\$2,000
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	Completion of the application for candidacy starts the accreditation process. The accreditation fee is \$2,500.	Candidacy application fee is paid half with the application and half when the self study is completed in year two or three.	\$1,250
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>	<b>Mentor Assignment:</b> The business program will complete a Preliminary Visit Questionnaire using the online reporting portal. The candidate will develop an action plan, with assistance from their mentor, for meeting the accreditation standards and criteria and establish a timetable for carrying out the plan. The cost will vary depending on the mentor's location.	Mentor honorarium (\$500 per visit)  Mentor expenses (Transportation, lodging, meals, etc.)  Add an additional \$1,800 for planning purposes if the mentor requires international travel.	\$500  \$800
	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year Total</b>	<b>Total for First Year</b>	<b>\$4,550</b>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Year</b>	<b>Membership:</b> Payment of \$2,600 for annual membership. The membership year is July 1 of each year through June 30.	Annual membership dues.	\$2,600
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Year</b>	<b>Self-Study Commences:</b> The business unit must be approved by the Chief Accreditation Officer upon recommendation from the mentor before the business unit begins the self-study. The self-study should cover a full academic year (Fall & Spring).	Second half of candidacy application fee is paid half with the application and half when the self study is completed in year two or three	\$1,250
	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Year Total</b>	<b>Total for Second Year</b>	<b>\$3,850</b>

<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>	<b>Membership:</b> The cost for annual membership is \$2,600.	Annual membership dues.	\$2,600
	<b>Site Visit Deposit:</b> A \$4,000 site deposit is <b>required prior to the visit.</b>		
	<b>Site Visit:</b> An evaluation team is assigned soon after receiving the Intent to Submit a Self-Study for Initial ACBSP Accreditation. The school is asked if a team member may not be a good fit or if they feel there could be a conflict of interest. The site team files its report with ACBSP within two weeks after their visit. The cost for the team visit will be deducted from the \$4,000 deposit. Any funds remaining will be returned to the school. Any required balance will be invoiced to the school. See note below.	Honoraria (Estimates) \$850 per visit chair \$550 per team member (2) (\$550 per visit)	\$1,950
		Travel for Three Evaluators	\$1,500
		Food and Lodging	\$1,250
	The Board of Commissioners reviews accreditation materials from institutions each November and April (twice a year).		
	The accreditation decision by the Board of Commissioners is reported to the members. Accredited business schools and programs receive their accreditation certificates during the ACBSP Annual Conference in June at a special ceremony.		
		<b>Total for Third Year</b>	<b>\$7,300</b>
		<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$15,700</b>

**Site Visit Budgeting:** For planning purposes, ACBSP recommends allocating between \$3,000 and \$6,000 for the evaluation team site visit. Site visit costs may fall below or exceed the amounts listed, depending on the institution's location and the number of campuses seeking accreditation within a school system. The accreditation staff can help with a more exact figure as you make your budget plans.

**Site Visit Payments:** The business school being visited is responsible for reimbursing ACBSP for all of the costs of the team visit. ACBSP will pay each evaluator after they file an expense reimbursement claim with receipts attached ACBSP will then bill the business school for all of the costs incurred by the team. A deposit of \$4,000 is required prior to the site visit. The

deposit balance will be reconciled, and the institution will either receive a partial return of the site visit deposit or be invoiced in the amount by which actual costs exceed the \$4,000 deposit.

**Annual Membership Dues:** Annual membership dues for non-accredited schools are \$2,000. Upon joining, dues are prorated such that joining in December of any year would require a \$1,000 payment for six months of membership. Annual membership dues for ACBSP accredited members and a program in candidacy is \$2,600.

**System wide Accreditation:** The accreditation is for programs offered at each campus. While the main campus can join as a member, when the accreditation process begins, all branch campuses must join as members. The cost for the additional campuses is one-half or less of the membership dues charged the main campus. All campuses are listed on the website and all receive the benefits of membership.

**Reaffirmation:** Accreditation is granted for ten years. There is no application fee for a member school going through reaffirmation or use of a mentor unless requested. The costs will be for the site team visit.

**Annual Conference:** While not directly related to the accreditation process, schools in candidacy are strongly urged to attend the Annual Conference and budget for this attendance. Due to travel cost variation, this cannot be projected in this document; however, the conference and meeting staff can assist if requested.

Source:

[https://www.acbsp.org/page/baccalaureate?&hhsearchterms=%22cost+and+accreditation%22&#rescol\\_1177247](https://www.acbsp.org/page/baccalaureate?&hhsearchterms=%22cost+and+accreditation%22&#rescol_1177247)

**Appendix B: North Carolina Bacc/Grad ACBSP Accredited Programs of Study**

The following higher education institutions within the state of North Carolina offer degrees at the baccalaureate and graduate level with ACBSP accredited programs of study:

- Campbell University
- DeVry University/Keller Graduate School of Management - Charlotte Campus
- DeVry University/Keller Graduate School of Management - Raleigh-Durham Campus
- Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University - Worldwide - Elizabeth City
- Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University - Worldwide - Seymour Johnson
- Gardner-Webb University
- Lenoir-Rhyne University
- Methodist University
- Pfeiffer University
- Strayer University - Garner Campus
- Strayer University - Greensboro Campus
- Strayer University - Huntersville Campus
- Strayer University - North Charlotte Campus
- Strayer University - North Raleigh Campus
- Strayer University - Research Triangle Park Campus (RTP)
- Strayer University - South Charlotte Campus
- Strayer University - South Raleigh Campus
- University of Phoenix - Charlotte
- Webster University - North Carolina Military
- Wingate University

### **Appendix C: Interview Questionnaire**

The following questions are intended to be used in the institutional interviews.

1. How familiar are you with accreditation and the accreditation process? Specifically ACBSP accreditation?
2. What is your opinion of program specific accreditation and its value to the institution and the fulfillment of its mission?
3. Has ACBSP accreditation impacted, and /or changed the manner in which you market the programs of study at your institution? If so, how?
4. In your observation, has ACBSP accreditation changed the business unit in its relationship with administrators, faculty, and staff? If so, please describe your observations.
5. What changes in academic programing, student learning outcomes, and faculty instruction have occurred since your school's initial pursuit of ACBSP accreditation?
6. How would you characterize student engagement among peers, faculty, and administrators since your institution earned the ACBSP accreditation? Were there any differences prior to ACBSP accreditation?
7. Has ACBSP accreditation affected the quality of teaching within the business school? If so, how?
8. Have you noticed any changes in the business school's relationship with external stakeholders since you earned the ACBSP accreditation status?
9. Were there any changes in your business unit's processes and procedures that have occurred since ACBSP accreditation? Please describe.
10. How do you define the value offered by your business school's programs of study?

**Appendix D: Recruitment E-mail**

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements to complete the Doctorate in Business Administration degree. The purpose of my research is to determine why a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution chooses to or not to consider national, program-specific accreditation and the influence of accreditation on the value proposition and employability of graduates. I am writing to invite your institution to participate in this research study.

If you are 18 years of age or older and have knowledge of ACBSP or other program-specific accreditation processes, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to:

1. Participate in a structured interview providing an account of your feelings, observations, and experiences regarding the program-specific accreditation process and accreditation status.
2. Provide institutional documentation for onsite review related to the accreditation process and/or quality assurance and value creation methods within the business school (i.e., institutional assessment plans, program assessment plans, and if applicable, the school's ACBSP Self-Study report).

It should take approximately one hour to participate in the research interview. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate in the research study, please reply to this request via e-mail with your willingness to participate and provide dates when you are available for the interview. I will contact you to schedule the interview and arrange for an onsite review of study-related documentation.

A consent document is provided as an attachment to this email. The consent document contains additional information about the research study. If you are willing to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Jamie H. Conrad  
Liberty University School of Business Doctoral Candidate

## Appendix E: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Influence of ACBSP Accreditation  
on the Value Proposition of NC Business Schools

Jamie H. Conrad  
Liberty University  
School of Business

You are invited to be in a research study exploring the influence of ACBSP accreditation on the value proposition of NC business schools. A business school's overall success is dependent on the school's ability to market the business programs' adherence to quality standards that directly align with the goals of its stakeholders. National accreditation agencies, such as the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), offer accreditation opportunities to provide external validation of the adherence to quality standards and the implementation of continuous improvement processes within the business schools' programs of study. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which accreditation influences the value proposition. You were selected as a possible participant because you represent a regionally accredited private institution of higher education offering ACBSP accredited or non-accredited baccalaureate and graduate-level business degree programs within the state of North Carolina, and your business students are members of the North Carolina Phi Beta Lambda organization. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Jamie H. Conrad, a doctoral candidate in the School of Business at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to provide the ACBSP organization, as well as business schools across the world, with data that will assist key decision makers in developing an understanding of the influence ACBSP accreditation has on the value proposition that the business schools present to the marketplace. The study is intended to determine why a business school within a regionally accredited educational institution chooses to or not to consider national, program-specific accreditation, ACBSP accreditation in particular, and the influence of accreditation on the value proposition and employability of graduates.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a structured interview providing an account of your feelings, observations, and experiences regarding the ACBSP accreditation process and program-specific accreditation status. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience before October 5, 2018 and last no longer than one hour. The interview will be recorded via an audio recording device to allow the researcher to review and transcribe the information for research purposes.
2. Provide institutional documentation for onsite review related to the accreditation process and/or quality assurance and value creation methods within the business school (i.e., institutional assessment plans, program assessment plans, and if applicable, the school's ACBSP Self-Study report). The documentation provided will be reviewed onsite and



will not be taken from the review site at the institution. The researcher will not photocopy or reproduce the documentation provided in any manner. The only replication of information from the supplied documentation will be in the form of confidential research notes recorded to document the applicability of information within the documentation to the research study.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the research interview groups will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the interview sessions.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Jamie H. Conrad. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [jconrad5@liberty.edu](mailto:jconrad5@liberty.edu) or 980-329-6401. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Betty Ahmed, at [beahmed@liberty.edu](mailto:beahmed@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu). *Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF ACBSP ACCREDITATION ON THE  
VALUE PROPOSITION OF NC BUSINESS SCHOOLS

by

Jamie H. Conrad

Final Dissertation Review

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Jamie H. Conrad, Doctoral Candidate

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Betty Ahmed, Dissertation Chair

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Janis McFaul, Dissertation Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Edward M. Moore, DBA Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Donna Love, Editor