UNDERSTANDING THE SILOS OF ASSESSMENT, STRATEGIC PLANNING,

INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO

ACCREDITATION

by

Dana Marie Juenemann

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Meredith Park, EdD, Committee Chair

Denise Nixon, PhD, Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to understand how collaboration, or lack of collaboration between community college-level silos, affected the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission. The theory that guided this study is Smith's theory of seven silos of higher education, as it explains the relationships between the areas of assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and their impact on accreditation. This study sought to discover how collaboration and communication between administration, faculty, and staff, as well as between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness, affected accreditation efforts at Moses Community College. The site was one community college in Kansas that had findings during its last Higher Learning Commission visit. The sample included the administrative team, assessment team, site steering committee, and others involved in the institution's assessment, strategic planning, and accreditation. Data were collected using interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and provided to the participants for member checking. Data were analyzed holistically using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS).

Keywords: silos, assessment, strategic planning, accreditation, culture, communication

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God; this would not have been possible without my faith.

To my kids, Layne, and Macie, who are my *why*. Thank you for being the best kids, supporting me, and pushing me to be the best version of myself.

To my husband, Derrick, who would not let me quit, even when I could not see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Acknowledgments

      I would like to thank Dr. Park for agreeing to be my chair and take this journey with me. This dissertation would not have been possible without her guidance, support, and belief in me. I would also like to thank Dr. Nixon for being part of my committee and for the guidance she provided throughout my journey. I could not have done this without the unwavering support from my friends and family.

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List of Abbreviations

Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO)

Higher Learning Commission (HLC)

Institutional Actions Council (IAC)

Institutional Effectiveness (IE)

Institutional Research (IR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR)

Kansas Training Information Program (KTIP)

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

Vice President of Academic Affairs (VPAA)

Moses Community College (MCC)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In the landscape of higher education, it is important to understand how assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness (IE) relate to and affect accreditation status. Institutions must understand how communication within and between these areas can affect commitment to excellence, positive culture, and continuous improvement, which could affect accreditation status. As Brown (2017) explains, accreditation goes beyond the classroom, seeping into every department and area of colleges and universities. This study explores three areas critical to accreditation—assessment, strategic planning, and IE—and attempts to understand their relationships with each other and the overall culture of the institution as it relates to accreditation. Drawing from the insights provided by Brown (2017) and the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) accreditation documentation (Higher Learning Commission, 2019a, 2019b, 2020b, 2023a), along with the work of Maciąg (2019) and Middaugh (2009), this research seeks to shed light on how the separation of these areas hampers the holistic effectiveness of institutions of higher education.

This chapter discusses the background of assessment, strategic planning, and IE in depth. First, the background of assessment, strategic planning, and IE are discussed as they relate to accreditation. Next, the historical context of assessment, strategic planning, and IE is explained in relation to the history of accreditation. The social context of each area and the relationships between faculty and administration are discussed. Then the theoretical context is discussed, and the *Seven Silos of Accreditation* is introduced. Both the problem statement and purpose statement are presented, as well as the significance of the study. Finally, the research questions are revealed.

Background

In higher education institutions, collaboration between the vital areas of assessment, strategic planning, and IE is crucial. The areas of assessment, strategic planning, and IE directly affect accreditation status, and they are each mentioned in the Higher Learning Commission's Criterion for Accreditation (CHEA International Quality Group, 2022; Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). These criteria for accreditation are what institutions must meet to obtain and maintain accreditation (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). These criteria are used to assess an institution's quality and effectiveness in providing education and to ensure that they meet the standards of academic excellence (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). Assessment, strategic planning, and IE are either a department or a silo in higher education, meaning they can function independently and do not overlap with any other area (Galvez & Fuentes, 2021; Lloyd, 2016) The lack of overlap of these departments or silos can cause a disconnect between each area and, ultimately, duplication of effort, which can affect accreditation status. Over the last several decades, accreditation has become explicitly linked to federal funding, which has led higher education institutions to prove they are providing a high-quality education and student experience on their campuses. In turn, accreditors are tasked with holding institutions accountable for the quality of all programs on their campuses. This accountability in higher education accreditation brought the explicit need for assessment, strategic planning, and IE of these programs to institutions.

Historical Context

In higher education, assessment of student learning and teaching has been discussed since the early 1990s. Assessment is defined by Banta and Palomba (2014) as the systemic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken to improve student

learning and development. Throughout the last 30 years, some institutions have fully bought into assessment and its explicit relationship to accreditation, and some have not. Higher education assessment of academic programs and student learning in recent years has become a tool for accrediting bodies to keep institutions of higher education accountable and ensure institutions are federally funded (Powell, 2013; Suskie, 2014). Assessment and accreditation, until recently, were innocuous processes, meaning institutions wrote self-studies and conducted assessments. The process was not considered complicated, meaning it was not directly tied to accreditation status or federal funding (Suskie, 2014). Essentially, accreditation agencies are clubs that their member institutions belong to, in which they are working towards ensuring that higher education is living up to the standard the accreditation agency has set. Over the last few decades, accreditation has become high stakes because if an institution is not accredited, there is no federal or state funding. However, incorporating assessment into accreditation transformed the idea that assessment should be used to improve teaching and learning continuously instead of assessment being simply data collection for accountability. Having enormous amounts of data is designed to keep institutions accountable regarding assessment. Those institutions collecting large amounts of data are accountable to their accrediting bodies. However, assessment is more than merely collecting data since having only large amounts of data is ultimately a failed assessment undertaking (Banta & Palomba, 2014).

As studies on higher education accreditation analyze the tenets surrounding strategic planning and IE, much focus is on the holistic student experience in higher education (Kahn & Hundley, 2022). Increased assessment activities on any campus means getting faculty and staff involved. For instance, staff and faculty members will be asked to collect and analyze assessment data, which is then used to evaluate the effectiveness of academic programs. Faculty and staff

contribute to the evidence-based assessment process by providing insights into student performance. This involvement makes the problem of assessment complex as it is dependent on faculty or staff commitment to the process and their experience with data collection (Kahn & Hundley, 2022; Marsh & Farrell, 2015). Historically, faculty and staff resent and fear being told to collect data for assessment of student learning for accountability instead of improvement (Good, 2023; Leaderman, E. C. et al., 2019; Mccullough & Jones, 2014). Faculty resentment and fear stem from the fact that faculty members understand that such assessments are not only aimed at examining student learning but also at conducting institutional and staff accountability checks (Leaderman, E. C. et al., 2019).

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is one of the accrediting bodies that incorporates IE into their criteria, which is and should be part of institutional accreditation (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). Most institutional accrediting bodies have been responsible for ensuring the quality of all programmatic offerings on the institution itself. The breakdown occurs within the collaborative cycle if no evidence exists that an institution has met the accreditation criteria. The HLC includes multiple areas in its criterion for accreditation and requires member institutions to involve not only administration but also faculty, staff, and, in appropriate cases, students (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). Members of the HLC, during assessments, examine multiple areas (e.g., mission and integrity, ethical and responsible conduct, and publication policies) to provide evidence for accreditation, but the most important areas include administrative or evaluative committees at institutions which are considered 'silos' (Brown, 2017; Lloyd, 2016).

Silos refer to isolated or distinct areas or units within an institution, each responsible for a specific function, policy, or aspect of the institution's operations. These silos are typically

specialized in their respective areas and may operate independently or with limited collaboration with other silos (Brown, 2017). When these departments or silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE fail to communicate with one another in higher education, issues arise. Issues then become two-fold in the redundancy of tasks or, alternatively, the lack of a task being completed or data being collected because of the assumption that the task or data collection belongs to another committee. Historically, each of these departments exists to ensure that each area of accountability has sufficient staffing and the ability to perform as expected. However, the more fragmented or siloed each area becomes, the more data are often not shared freely, or tasks are not completed in a collaborative manner. Often, this disunity amongst silos also results in communication breakdown, which ultimately hampers the collection of sufficient and accurate data during accreditation assessments. In some cases, this fragmentation might also result in the collection of accreditation assessment findings that might lead to consequences inflicted by the accrediting body, such as probation.

Social Context

Overall, culture at any higher education institution can be a pervasive issue. A collaborative culture when working with other departments on something as large as an accreditation self-study is largely expected by regional accrediting bodies. The self-study of any accreditation report is not supposed to be written by a single person. Instead, it is supposed to be a team effort by a site steering committee with multiple perspectives and a collective voice. The voice of the self-study should come from the greater campus community, including assessment, strategic planning, and IE offices (Juenemann et al., 2019). Often, these offices do, or should, have faculty and staff input. Faculty and staff's buy-in in any effort on campus is essential for creating lasting relationships between faculty and staff (Bond & Blevins, 2020). This

collaboration between staff and faculty leads to collaboration between assessment, planning, and institutional effectiveness (IE).

The relationship between administration and faculty can be strained depending on how each sees the commitment of the other to the institution; often, it is the faculty who is suspicious of the administration who may lack vision for the institution (Wilton & Méthot, 2020). Once faculty becomes suspicious of an administration, or that relationship becomes fractured or strained, then improvement is difficult and any assessment, planning, or IE effort towards progress will be impossible without buy-in from the faculty(Kirwan et al., 2022). Understanding just how important this issue is, how deep these silos between assessment, planning, and IE may be, and how the faculty and staff roles play into these silos is pertinent in understanding how each silo affects accreditation status.

Moreover, without faculty and staff buy-in, institutional improvement efforts regarding assessment are doomed to failure (Groover et al., 2019). The mutual relationship between the administration and both faculty and staff must be respectful and trusting. Trust that each is willing to do what is best for the institution and respects others' knowledge and time. Without trust between faculty and administration as well, efforts are also doomed to failure. Both faculty and staff are highly suspicious of administrations that put themselves on pedestals and refuse to put in the hard work to see any assessment or improvement efforts through to fruition, again leading to the failure of any improvement efforts (Groover et al., 2019; Wilton & Méthot, 2020). Understanding just how deep these divisions between faculty or staff and administration can become and how wide these divides are can increase the capacity to know how best to heal and bring about unity. Moreover, increasing the understanding of how the faculty and staff roles play into these divides is pertinent in understanding how they ultimately affect accreditation status.

Theoretical Context

The amount of literature, research, and theory on assessment and accreditation has grown over the last few decades. However, the literature does not discuss in depth how multiple departments or areas on campus work with each other to create a culture of unity on campus that affects accreditation status positively. The working theory of the "silos of accountability" is that there are seven silos of accountability in higher education, which are different yet similar in certain regards (Brown, 2017). Within the "silos of accountability," it is noted that each area of accountability is responsible for its part in higher education. Still, silos do not always or rarely cross over areas of accountability. Brown's (2017) theory regarding "silos of accountability" was developed during increasing calls from the public for accountability in higher education.

As the theory was being developed in the literature, it was clear that between the silos, there was no discourse with one another or consideration for the other areas of accountability (Brown, 2017). Each of these silos exists to serve a different function in higher education, yet they all serve an institution with one goal. Much of the current theory is based on the idea that these silos do indeed exist, yet they should function together in a meaningful way (Brown, 2017). A major part of the current theory is centered around either assessment and accreditation, planning and accreditation, IE and accreditation, or just the individual idea of accountability (Brown, 2017). Great significance can be found in the fact that the areas of assessment (e.g., mission and integrity, ethical and responsible conduct, and publication policies), strategic planning, and institutional research each play an enormous role in any accreditation self-study and site visit, yet often in literature, they are not discussed holistically. Alternatively, if each area or silo is discussed, it is discussed as a silo or in a vacuum. Curiously, assessment, strategic planning, and IE cannot exist without each other, yet they act independently on many campuses.

The concept of siloing between the departments of assessment, strategic planning, and IE gives way to the working theory of silos of accountability in higher education which involves seven silos of accountability (Brown, 2017). Each of these silos plays a significant role in the function of any institution. The idea that each area is a silo and works as a silo is a concern for those working in these areas.

Problem Statement

The problem is that the areas of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness are siloed or departmentalized in many community colleges, with little to no collaboration between each of the areas (Brown, 2017), thus potentially affecting accreditation status negatively (Higher Learning Commission, 2023a). Little discussion in the literature of how these administrative/evaluative committees or silos work together to affect accreditation status occurs; still, it is generally understood that each of them plays a significant role in the accreditation status of any institution of higher education (Higher Learning Commission, 2019a, 2020b, 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Maciąg, 2019; Middaugh, 2009). To fully understand this problem, it is important to understand how communication and collaboration between these silos function in higher education and can potentially negatively affect accreditation status.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to understand how collaboration, or lack of collaboration between community college-level silos, affects the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission. For this research, silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness will be defined as administrative/evaluative areas within a community college.

Significance of the Study

This study is highly significant since institutional accreditation has become a complex issue in the last two decades. Because accreditation status is tied directly to federal funding (Lindgrensavage, 2016), understanding the importance of assessment, strategic planning, and IE and their effect on accreditation status is paramount. Over the last several decades, evidence has accumulated that assessment has played a key role in the accreditation of any institution. However, the collaboration between silos and how it affects accreditation assessments remains unclear. This study aimed to understand not only the effects of these areas on accreditation status, but also the practical significance of the collaborative nature each area has on the collaborative culture at any institution.

Theoretical

If institutions are in the process of an accreditation cycle or visit, and they are highly siloed, chances are greater of findings that can result in loss of accreditation status. The idea that assessment, strategic planning, and IE must exist in a vacuum is concerning in the fact that each institution must have these silos to function. According to Brown (2017), the silos of accountability must exist in silos to ensure accountability within higher education. The problem with a silo is that it does not share information or tasks. Silos do indeed exist, and the silos should also be able to collaborate with other silos to reduce errors and duplication of tasks. The lack of shared information will result in duplication of tasks and a lack of communication throughout the institution.

This case study can contribute to organizational theory by shedding light on the dynamics of silos within community colleges and their impact on the institution's ability to meet accreditation standards. This study may provide insights into the theoretical concept of

organizational silos and their consequences. It may additionally, help enhance theories related to cross-functional collaboration within educational institutions. By examining the barriers to collaboration and the factors that facilitate it, the study may offer theoretical frameworks for promoting effective interdepartmental cooperation.

Empirical

This case study may generate empirical evidence that can be applied to community colleges nationwide. By analyzing real-world instances of collaboration or the lack thereof, it can offer concrete insights into the factors affecting accreditation outcomes. The study may validate or challenge existing accreditation models and frameworks. This case determines whether siloed or collaborative approaches align more closely with successful accreditation efforts and compliance with HLC standards.

Practical

Because there is so much emphasis on accreditation in higher education, there is great practicality to this study. Each silo is required by accreditation agencies, and each silo affects one or more accreditation criteria. Often institutions are on probation, meaning they have findings in a criterion specifically related to one or more of the silos, and their institutional accrediting body has found them out of compliance (Higher Learning Commission, 2023b). Most often, during a visit with HLC, findings are in Criterion 4. B, which specifically deals with assessment processes, improvement of student learning, and best practices. What is not always understood on any campus is that assessment carries over into all areas of campus and should explicitly be tied to the strategic plan (Joughin & Macdonald, 2003; Middaugh, 2009). Ensuring that assessment and planning are tied together allows institutions to use the data collected from each and analyze the data for improvement. If an institution views the strategic plan as the

blueprint for progress and assessment to measure improvement, then it makes sense that the two should be intertwined. Through this study, stakeholders may be able to understand the effect of siloing the areas of assessment, strategic planning, and IE, as well as the direct impact their siloing has on the accreditation status of their institution.

Findings from the case study may also inform the practices of community colleges by highlighting the practical implications of collaboration on accreditation success. Institutions can use these insights to improve their internal processes. Policymakers in higher education may benefit from understanding the practical implications of silos on accreditation. The study may influence policies and recommendations aimed at fostering collaboration, streamlining accreditation processes, and improving the quality of education at community colleges. The study's practical significance extends to accrediting bodies such as HLC. It can inform their criteria, emphasizing the importance of interdepartmental collaboration in achieving accreditation goals. Thus, this case study, overall, holds theoretical significance by contributing to the understanding of organizational silos and cross-functional collaboration. It has empirical significance through evidence-based insights, and it offers practical significance by informing institutional practices, policy development, and accreditation processes, ultimately aiming to improve the quality of education in community colleges.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do collaboration and communication between administration, faculty, and staff, as well as between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness, affect accreditation efforts at Moses Community College?

Sub-Question One

How do the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness and the administration encourage collaboration with the entire campus community?

Sub-Question Two

How is the collaboration between the people involved in the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness productive or counterproductive?

Sub-Question Three

How does the campus buy-in in terms of faculty, administration, and staff to silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness practices exist on this campus?

Definitions

1. *Accreditation – review* of the quality of higher education institutions and programs (CHEA International Quality Group, 2022)

2. *Accreditation Liaison Officer –* primary point of contact between the institution and the accrediting body (Higher Learning Commission, 2023b)

3. *Assessment –* the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs to improve student learning and development (Banta & Palomba, 2014)

4. *Higher Learning Commission –* one of the six institutional accrediting bodies

5. *Institutional Effectiveness –* the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring performance against mission in all aspects of an institution (The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2022)

6. *Institutional Research –* activities that support the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data

7. *Institutional Review Board –* designed to protect the rights of human participants

8. *Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System* – a system of related surveys conducted annually by the Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022)

9. *Kansas Board of Regents* – governing board for the state colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical colleges in Kansas

10. *Kansas Training Information Program* – wage database for institutions in the State of Kansas

11. *Probation* – failure to meet one or more of the Criterion for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, or Federal Compliance requirements and results in removal from Pathway for Reaffirmation of Accreditation (Higher Learning Commission, 2023b)

12. *Qualitative Data Analysis Software* – software to assist with qualitative data analysis and interpretation

13. *Strategic Planning* – the deliberate, disciplined effort to produce decisions and actions that shape who an institution is and why it does what it does (Society for College and University Planning, 2024)

14. *Vice President of Academic Affairs* – chief academic officer of a higher education institution

15. *Moses Community College* – institution of study

Summary

This chapter presented the background of the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE as they relate to accreditation status. Discussion of the historical, social, and theoretical context of assessment, strategic planning, and IE also occurred, as each context is imperative to understanding the relationship to accreditation status. This chapter discussed the history behind

why the areas of assessment, strategic planning, and IE are in individual departments or silos and the importance of higher education's understanding of how each department or silo affects the accreditation status. Understanding the departmentalization of assessment, strategic planning, IE, and their relationships to accreditation is paramount for institutions because of the way each of these areas plays a significant role in the outcome of any accreditation review and the way they work together or separately. Next, this chapter stated both the problem and purpose statement of this study. Finally, the significance of this case study was discussed. Overall, this case study aims to shed light on how the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE affect accreditation status.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In higher education, institutions across the country are fighting to remain relevant as they are increasingly under fire for a multitude of trials. Of all the trials, one that institutions have some control over is their accreditation status. However, this status could be directly tied to the way their organization is structured in terms of *siloing* or departmentalizing their organization in terms of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness (Kirwan et al., 2022). Higher education is highly departmentalized at many American institutions, and in many instances, the different administrative/evaluative committees or departments are unaware of what the other department is undertaking (Kezar, 2005). Thus, a review of the literature regarding the siloing of assessment, strategic planning, and IE is conducted. This chapter presents a theoretical framework and literature review on three of the seven silos in higher education: assessment, strategic planning, and IE. Each of these silos plays a pertinent role in both the success of students and the success of an institution. The theory of silos in higher education is the basis for this literature review.

Theoretical Framework

Higher education is "siloed," meaning there is little to no collaboration between silos or administrative/evaluative committees, even when the silos directly affect one another. Silos in and of themselves are both the department or committee itself and the mentality of these groups where participants do not want to share their information or skill sets (Mizuta, 2022). Using this concept and the distinct silos, according to Brown (2017), the idea is that not only are the silos departments or committees within the institution but the members who are a part of them. The idea behind silos being a department gives structure to an organization, yet also could set an

organization up for a lack of communication and collaboration (de Waal et al., 2019). This phenomenon comes about for multiple reasons in higher education. Organizational structure is necessary, and to some extent, siloing affects that structure. Often, siloing is an effect of institutional culture, and that culture is a result of long-standing traditions (de Waal et al., 2019).

According to Jeff Brown's *Seven Silos of Accountability Theory* (2017), there are seven silos in higher education, each playing a pertinent role and having a specific place in each institution. Brown (2017) identified the seven silos in higher education. Each silo draws from one or more of the three institutional logics (Brown, 2017). The three institutional logics include: state (focus on compliance), profession (focus on learning), and market (focus on performance) (Brown, 2017). For the purposes of this study, assessment, IE, and accreditation will be the silos discussed from Brown (2017), and the silo of strategic planning will be added as strategic planning affects collaboration and improvement efforts (Mizuta, 2022). As each silo emerges at an institution, they become significant to that institution. Defining the silos and interactions both within and between the silos is dependent upon each institution, and each institution will define how each silo will react to external pressures and forces (Brown, 2017). These silos must be able to be defined as both a silo and within the context of their institution. Without definition, each silo potentially fails as a silo and in the context of the health of the institution.

In terms of the silo of assessment, the department of assessment itself is often siloed because it is thought of in terms of student learning, and what can be assessed in and out of the classroom are vastly different (Balser et al., 2017; Reed et al., 2011). Assessment draws from professional logic or the emphasis on learning (Brown, 2017). According to Brown (2017), assessment is different from other silos because it tends to consist mostly of administrators with little faculty involvement. Faculty collect the data, and ensure that students are learning, which is

vital to accreditation (Brown, 2017; Colina & Blanco, 2021). Assessment becomes even further siloed as faculty are not always part of the assessment discussion (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017).

Looking at the silo of assessment and the relationship to the silo of accreditation, assessment is often a tool for keeping institutions in line or for keeping their accreditation status (Colina & Blanco, 2021; Ocean et al., 2022; Saurbier, 2021). Using assessment as a tool for accreditation causes tension between the institution and the accreditor, as well as between the administration and the faculty. These tensions come from the fact that assessments may be used to form judgment about a program's success (Banta & Palomba, 2014). These judgments are often made by accreditors and give a label to that program or institution. Unfortunately, the silo of assessment is seen as means to accreditation on many college campuses. The task of completing assessment is checking a box stating assessment is occurring on campuses to ensure that accreditation status will continue. True assessment for improvement and effectiveness is different and more of a process. Assessment for improvement cannot be done in just a few weeks or months. What assessment is and in terms of accreditation is both for improvement and accountability (Gambino, 2024; Mcclellan, 2011).

IE and institutional research (IR) are considered two separate silos of accountability, according to Brown (2017). However, they often work in tandem to support institutions with policy, planning, assessment, and decision-making. IE, as a silo, could be the least siloed of the seven silos, as its work affects each of the other silos in some way or another. IE, according to Brown (2017), draws from all three institutional logics and emphases. Because IE pulls from each logic, IE has multiple meanings and interpretations, making it the most widely understood and often intertwined with assessment. Both IE and assessment should be used to guide improvement. Embedding assessment within an IE cycle ensures that assessment data will guide

improvement and other IE data (Banta & Palomba, 2014). In a way, these two silos form a partnership; each silo has data and can analyze that data in a way that is valuable to the other (Sambell et al., 2012), making these silos unique. Each of these silos drives student and institutional success, yet culture plays an important role.

Accreditation has evolved from regional to institutional accreditation in recent years. Accreditation is designed to ensure quality in higher education; it is also tied directly to federal funding, making it *high stakes* for institutions (Colina & Blanco, 2021). Because of the necessity of accreditation for all institutions with students utilizing federal student aid, performing poorly on an accreditation visit is not an option for any institution. This accountability is part of higher education's increasing standardization and regulation (Brown, 2017). Accreditation focuses on compliance and learning (Brown, 2017). Accreditation, according to Brown (2017), draws from the institutional logic of the state (emphasis on compliance) and profession (emphasis on learning). The process of accreditation draws strength from the fact that it is completed through peer review, and it is a self-regulated process (Brown, 2017). In essence, the member institutions of the accrediting agencies own the accrediting agency, and they are responsible for their own accreditation and professional accountability (Brown, 2017).

Related Literature

Siloing in higher education is an effect of higher education institutions' need to structure their organizations in a way that allows for departmental organization (de Waal et al., 2019). Silos do provide benefits because they provide boundaries allowing for the members of those silos to work without interference from outside influences, and they allow for departments to focus and be held accountable for tasks (de Waal et al., 2019). Silos or departments give an organization or institution a clearly defined structure allowing for members of the silos to have a

sense of belonging, flow of information, and chain of command, all of which are necessary in higher education (de Waal et al., 2019; Mizuta, 2022). However, while these silos can be effective in creating structure, they can also create an institution with a lack of communication when these silos fail to collaborate with others and do not share information or resources with other silos (de Waal et al., 2019). Often these silos have developed over time and for a myriad of reasons. Understanding that there is a need for collaboration between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE is essential in higher education, just as each silo is important. It is also understood that the collaboration or lack of collaboration between each silo has the potential to affect accreditation status. According to Frondizi et al. (2019) using assessments for improvement is like using them for accountability, as they can demonstrate both. However, when assessment, strategic planning, and IE are conducted in silos, it results in duplication of efforts or ends in pushback from faculty and staff. To ensure that these efforts are successful on campus, leadership must look at any initiative from multiple perspectives and have many discussions with multiple stakeholders to ensure collaboration from all areas on campus. The literature discussing IE, the culture of assessment, and assessment design has significant gaps allowing for research and study (Simper et al., 2022).

Assessment Silo

The assessment silo is different from the silos of strategic planning, IE, and accreditation in higher education. Often, assessment consists of administrators, but it is increasingly becoming more faculty-driven (Brown, 2017). Understanding assessment as an individual silo means being able to ascertain what assessment means to higher education. According to Banta, Palmoba, and Biesta (2014; 2015), assessment in education is measuring and analyzing what an individual knows and can do to improve. Moreover, assessment occurs when campus leaders are upfront

and explicit about their purposes for assessment. Assessment for those involved in assessment or participating in assessment activities means that they understand that they are assessing what students know or can do. However, often, faculty and staff assess student learning. Student learning ties directly into the health of a program, activity, or service at any institution. What is not always known or understood by faculty and staff is that assessment is and should be used to assess the institution's courses, programs, activities, and services, not the people participating or attending. Still, this concept is often difficult for those working on the front lines of assessment to grasp. The understanding and knowledge that assessment should show and explain how programs work and if/how they contribute to student growth and development are often not explained well and not followed through well at many institutions.

Good assessment occurs in a cycle. Assessment cycles all have the same basic principles, which include defining outcomes, measuring outcomes, analyzing outcomes, and adjusting or *closing the loop* (Wao, 2020)*.* When assessment is planned, implemented, and followed well, institutions can look at programs and services holistically. Once assessment begins, all faculty, staff, and administration involved can see if and where improvements and changes need to occur. Often, *closing the loop* is the most difficult part of the assessment because it involves looking at the results and making changes based on what the assessment results show. Faculty and staff can resist change if they are not involved in this part of the assessment process and, therefore, are unaware of why the change is being made. Discussions of assessment should involve faculty, yet they often only involve certain faculty (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017). Institutions assess student learning outcomes in programs and courses to tell if students are mastering content in their academic areas (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017; Heston et al., 2023).

During the discussion of assessment, talk of teaching and learning occurs, as assessment is used to improve learning (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Finley, 2023). This discussion usually involves pedagogy, the relationship between teaching and learning (Biesta, 2015; Meijer et al., 2022). Teaching and learning must work in tandem for students to be successful. Effective teaching occurs because learning is occurring. Effective teaching and learning are both a result of effective pedagogy. According to Biesta (2015), effective pedagogy needs assessment that aligns with learning. Both must work together. For effective pedagogy and, thus, effectual assessment to occur, faculty must understand both and be comfortable with both. Moreover, faculty must develop skills and tasks according to their pedagogical styles, goals, and classrooms (Bearman et al., 2017; Fernández Ruiz & Panadero, 2023; Nieminen et al., 2022). For pedagogical development to occur, it is important for faculty to understand their beliefs about assessment and classroom management. Explicit instruction of assessment cycles, data collection practices, and other assessment principles must occur to assist faculty with understanding how pedagogy. However, experience may influence assessment practices or approaches. Assessment practices or approaches come from faculty experiences, values, knowledge, what is being taught, and institutional policy (DeLuca et al., 2021; Hundley, 2019). Faculty participation and involvement is what makes this silo much different than the others. The faculty plays a much larger role in assessment than in the other silos, as faculty have a large role in assessment of student learning both in and out of the classroom. Because faculty play a role, and faculty beliefs, knowledge, and experience affect how they teach, assess, and manage classrooms (Box et al., 2015; Yan et al., 2021), faculty also influence how assessment is conducted at any institution. These influences and beliefs give assessment duality in meaning; on one level, it is for student learning and

improvement of student learning, and on the other level, it is for accountability of faculty and student learning (Colina & Blanco, 2021; Ross et al., 2020)

To influence the assessment silo, faculty must understand that their beliefs about pedagogy inform teaching practice and drive instruction decisions to help students succeed through their assessment practices (Clark, 2010; Forde-Leaves et al., 2023; Khajeloo et al., 2022). Assessment practices must take place in a continuous cycle to be truly effective. Because student learning is a pillar of assessment, students must understand what they are expected to master in terms of their learning. Students cannot be expected to participate in their learning if they are unaware of the expectations (Khajeloo et al., 2022). Through the silo of assessment of student learning, it is important to understand that faculty and students must be active participants for the assessment to be effective (McArthur, 2020).

Assessment must also be sustainable in both practice and theory (Beck et al., 2013; Penn, 2023)and in order for it to be both in practice and theory, it must bring in all of the elements of what it means to be a lifelong learner (McArthur, 2023). Ensuring that assessment is sustainable ensures that institutions are increasing the chances for student success and providing programs and services that meet the needs of their students (McArthur, 2023). Faculty also understand and engage in sustainable assessment, complementing summative and formative assessment practices (Beck et al., 2013; McArthur, 2020). Each of these assessment practices puts the students at the forefront of their learning by allowing them to participate and be active in both the learning and the assessment process. By actively engaging the student and the faculty, assessment takes place with others and allows for collaboration in a meaningful way. Making meaning of the data from assessment is vital because it leads to more than data-driven improvements (O'Neill, 2019).

Data-driven improvements should come out of the silo of assessment, yet these improvements are not only ideas emerging from the assessment silo. An often-overlooked area of improvement from assessment is professional development. Professional development for faculty and staff can be targeted based on the data from assessment findings and the knowledge gained from assessment (DeLuca et al., 2021; Hurney et al., 2016). The idea of planning professional development from assessment findings would ideally be something that would gain traction in higher education. However, throughout higher education, professional development in the disciplines is often left to the individual faculty member (Bond & Blevins, 2020). The silo of assessment is complex and often intimidating for faculty, administration, and staff.

Faculty Knowledge of Assessment

Assessing what students have learned is not a new concept in higher education. However, the pressure from external accrediting agencies has increased over the last several years, and accreditation has put assessment into the spotlight. However, all this attention to assessment has pressured institutions to attempt assessment to guarantee continued accreditation status (Colina & Blanco, 2021). Accreditors want to know how faculty design assessments to measure students' learning and how they close the assessment loop to ensure improvement of their teaching and student learning. Astonishingly, few institutions across the United States are gathering the data, allowing their faculty to see just what and how much their students are learning, what will help their students learn better, and what activities will help them align their teaching and learning with expectations (Clark, 2010; Forde-Leaves et al., 2023). Higher education faculty are often experts in their field, but they are often not experts in the concepts of effective assessment design related to pedagogy. Since faculty are central to closing the loop in assessment. Yet this concept is often directly related to professional development (Favre et al., 2021; Jonson et al., 2017).

For faculty to understand and use their data and to make meaningful improvements, they must be able to close the loop, which is the last step in any assessment cycle (Favre et al., 2021; Jonson et al., 2017). The difficulty with this step arises when faculty are not involved with it. As the shift from gathering data to being accountable for gathering and using that data for improvement has occurred, faculty have been largely left out of the final step of the assessment cycle in many instances (Banta & Blaich, 2010). Assessment for reporting or just as a tool for gathering data for the sake of data is that the data sits on a shelf. Collecting data for data indicates that data are being collected to check a box on a form instead of collecting data to improve teaching and learning, as well as the holistic student experience. Mountains of data do not tell the story of student learning. Often, data are used to say that institutions have data on learning, but that data, without analysis and interpretation, does nothing to *close the loop* or show that learning has occurred or that there has been analysis of that learning and teaching. One of the major issues with accountability versus improvement is the simple fact that there is less likelihood of faculty and staff involvement if the push is for accountability (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith & Gordon, 2019). Data analysis and interpretation by faculty indicate to external agencies that programs and institutions can close assessment loops and make data-driven improvements. However, faculty are not often participating in this part of the assessment process. Massive amounts of data are collected and left without being analyzed or interpreted, resulting in findings during an accreditation site visit. In site visits for the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), 84% of accreditation findings are due to assessment found in Criterion 4.B, which deals specifically with using the information gained to improve student learning (Higher Learning Commission, 2020a, 2020b). Data are being collected to ensure faculty are completing their assessments. However, according to Favre et al. (2021), as faculty are asked to complete

these assessments and subsequently close the loop, ensuring both quality learning and quality

assessment processes, faculty often become disengaged in part of the process. This

disengagement occurs for many reasons, and faculty usually are unsure of how to analyze and

interpret the data they are collecting effectively, or faculty may not understand that once data is

analyzed and interpreted, changes must be implemented (Hussey et al., 2020) Once these steps

are complete, the process begins again.

When assessment occurs in academic areas across campuses, it is becoming increasingly

important that faculty understand the tenets of effective quality assessment and develop those

assessments along with their pedagogical belief systems (Bearman et al., 2017; Fernández Ruiz

& Panadero, 2023). Through this development, assessment can and will drive any campus

forward (Wilton & Méthot, 2020). Assessment can be a robust tool for improving academic, co-

curricular, and institutional support areas. Using assessment as a tool for continuous

improvement in all these areas gives any institution the tools to drive continuous success in and

out of the classroom. The effectual design does not just come about by accident; it ensues

through the understanding of pedagogy and the collaboration between faculty (Kirwan et al.,

2022). Explicit instruction in assessment must take place for faculty to understand how their

previous experiences, personal beliefs, and pedagogy can be used to shape their assessment

practices. Assessment approaches come from experiences, faculty values, course content,

assessment knowledge, and institutional policy (DeLuca et al., 2021; Hundley, 2019).

Because of their proximity to students, the stakeholders directly in contact with students

are the best people on campus to assess their academic and co-curricular areas (Banta &

Palomba, 2014). Faculty members must be involved in assessment because they know what

students know and the best ways to teach students (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith &

Gordon, 2019). However, when discussing faculty involvement in these efforts, the term *faculty*

is used loosely, implying that all faculty should participate in these activities and efforts (Danley-

Scott & Scott, 2017). Unfortunately, suggesting that all faculty is involved can be a faulty

assumption and should not be made. The assumption that only full-time faculty should or will

participate or that they will invite part-time or adjunct faculty to participate in assessment

activities needs to be revised (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017). Bringing all faculty, including

adjunct and part-time, into the assessment discussion does not occur frequently, potentially

leaving gaps in data and where improvements need to be made.

One major issue arises in courses with the largest student enrollment: general education

courses. Regularly, these courses are taught by non-tenured, part-time, or adjunct faculty at

larger institutions, and an emphasis on assessment and improvement should take place in these

courses (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017). Not only are the general education courses often taught by

adjunct and part-time faculty, but an emphasis on assessment in these courses coming from

accrediting bodies is included in the criteria for accreditation (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017).

While it is not explicitly stated in HLC's Criterion 4 that general education courses must be

assessed explicitly, it is stated that there must be "substantial participation of faculty,

instructional, and other relevant staff members" (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b).

Although substantial participation could have multiple meanings, not including or inviting part-

time or adjunct faculty to participate in the entire assessment or improvement process has the

potential to paint an incomplete picture of what is happening in classrooms and across campuses,

which can also lead to misinterpretation of findings and misinterpretation of data (Danley-Scott

& Scott, 2017). Either misinterpretation can lead to a lack of improvement and issues during any

accreditation cycle. According to Frondizi et al. (2019), faculty members should assess learning

in the disciplines. Faculty members are generally responsible for assessing their discipline, but participation in assessments also depends on faculty status. Tenured or tenure-track faculty tend to teach courses and work with students in concentration courses (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017). Not having all faculty assessing and taking part in discussions about assessment leads to a lack of continuity in assessment and understanding of assessment and assessment methods (DeLuca et al., 2021). Tenured track or tenured faculty will have a much different understanding of assessment if they work at one institution than adjunct faculty working at multiple institutions (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017). However, this lack of inclusion of adjunct, part-time, and non-tenure track faculty indicates that all faculty are not included in the actual process of assessment. (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017). Without all faculty involvement, any assessment process lacks robustness, allowing all voices to be heard as the assessment process moves forward in assessment for student success (Finley, 2023). Not involving all classifications of faculty also allows for incomplete data to be gathered. Faculty failing to participate in assessment will result in accreditation findings related to assessment, which can end up with the institution on probationary status. The idea that part-time or adjunct faculty do not need to participate leaves an incomplete picture of what is happening in classrooms across campus and can potentially be detrimental to departments and the institution (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017).

One of the other misleading ideas on many campuses with larger faculties is that tenured or full-time faculty will ensure that part-time and adjunct faculty will be invited to take part in assessment, which is untrue (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith & Gordon, 2019). Often, there is a disconnect between the groups, and part-time and adjunct faculty are not included in the assessment processes. For a complete picture of academic assessment on any campus, it is

imperative that all faculty be invited to participate and that a collaborative environment is fostered by leadership (Finley, 2023).

Involving all faculty is crucial to creating a truly collaborative assessment, planning, and accreditation culture. For this to happen, assessment and planning cannot be a once-in-a-while action; both must be daily tasks (Keith & Hundley, 2023d). Through careful planning, implementation, and sustaining of assessment, assessment can and will become a daily task at institutions, which could affect accreditation. The administration's lack of vision and commitment are significant barriers to faculty buy-in and collaboration in planning and assessment initiatives. Faculty must be involved in any assessment or planning initiative for success; moreover, administration-initiated initiatives are challenging because, without faculty backing, change is difficult. The goals and values of an institution should play a leading role in any new effort, and there should be significant faculty involvement for it to work well (Banta & Palomba, 2014).

Assessment Processes

Academic assessment is most often thought of when discussions of assessment occur, but there are multiple levels of assessment at institutions. After all, assessment should occur at all levels and in all areas of any institution. According to Frondizi et al. (2019), in support of the findings of Previtali and Cerchiello (2021), institutions must ensure they create a plan of action, keeping all levels or areas of the institution in mind when creating assessment plans. Assessment processes also vary by institution, but they all share the same basic steps. In each process, institutions identify outcomes. Outcomes are required at the institutional, program, and course levels. Outcomes are then mapped using a curriculum map. Next, measures are written for each outcome, and data is collected. Data is then analyzed and interpreted. Finally, changes or

improvements are made, and the loop is closed (Higher Learning Commission, 2023a). However, once the loop is closed, those improvements or changes must be assessed for effectiveness. Assessment processes are cyclical and ongoing. Using some version of this process, institutions will have a better chance of success. Institutions also have increased chances for success if assessment initiatives are linked to what is already in place. Recreating assessment processes solely for the purpose of accreditation is counterproductive because it decreases the likelihood of success and buy-in from stakeholders. Collaboration and communication are two goals of assessment. In that case, assessment plans must create collaboration and communication campus-wide to be successful and strengthen the institution's goals and mission (Keith & Good, 2023).

Assessment processes in higher education vary widely across campuses. Assessment is a product of accreditation (Colina & Blanco, 2021), yet how assessment is conducted across higher education varies within the literature. It is understood in higher education that assessment is to be completed at the course, program, co-curricular, and institutional levels. Assessment is also to have quality student learning outcomes, and outcomes must have measures to ensure students are learning both in and out of the classroom. According to Lucander and Christersson (2020), campus leadership stands to gain the most from quality assessment practices, while faculty and students struggle to see the effects of assessment on teaching and learning. The disconnect between faculty and administration is where the process often breaks down, and the assessment loop is not closed. Instead of assessing for improvement, assessment is completed for accountability. Part of the process of assessment in the later stages may include identifying issues of importance and addressing those issues. Choosing to address the problems of major importance means that campuses can identify where they want to ensure improvement occurs and what is considered best practice for assessment for improvement for them as a campus

(Heston et al., 2023; Shriberg, 2002). Identifying strategic priorities is a well-known and understood part of creating the strategic plan; similarly, when creating an assessment plan, institutions create goals and outcomes for programs, departments, or institutional service areas they are assessing. Creating assessment plans is time-consuming for the faculty and staff involved. Assessment planning is similar to the overall assessment process, yet the assessment plan incorporates several more steps. Creating an assessment plan begins with creating a mission statement for the program, department, or institutional service area. Next, program goals are written. Then, measurable program outcomes are written, often depending on programmatic accreditation, and the accreditation agency writes program outcomes. After, program success outcomes are written. Often, success outcomes include graduation, completion, enrollment, and persistence rates. Curriculum mapping is the next step in an assessment plan. A programmatic curriculum map indicates where skills students are learning are introduced, reinforced, and mastered; this map also indicates where program outcomes are being explicitly assessed. Assessment plans provide programs, departments, and service areas with the ability to collect, analyze, and reflect on data (Higher Learning Commission, 2023a). Assessment and strategic plans are similar, which helps ensure quality assessment practices and creates an overlap in strategic priorities and assessment goals. The overlap of strategic priorities and assessment goals is an area for further study, as the strategic plan assessment is largely absent from the literature on assessment. However, in nearly all software dealing with planning and assessment, the ability to tie the strategic plan to any assessment plan is a built-in functionality.

Culture of Assessment

The culture of assessment on campus is only as successful at being fully realized as a tool for progress and innovation if there is full buy-in from the administration, faculty, and staff. On

the opposite side of complete buy-in and productive cultures, there are cultures of fear, where the administration wields power, control, and threats of punishment if there is non-compliance from faculty or staff (Fuller, 2019; Simper et al., 2022). The administration should play a vital role in assessment; however, that role should not be one of fear and loathing. Administration needs to define their role in assessment as any assessment project gets started. That role should be to lift the project as the project gets started, but the project should also be sustainable, and administration should have a role in ensuring that sustainability as well (Finley, 2023; Hundley & Keith, 2023; Keith & Hundley, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d). Creating a sustainable assessment and planning culture that includes the faculty and letting them lead large parts of the process is essential. Amaechi and Obiweluozor (2021) explain that it can be difficult to get some faculty members of any institution to participate in anything that happens outside of their classrooms or on a committee they serve. Faculty involvement in assessment is essential. In discussing academic assessment, faculty are the experts in teaching and know what students know (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Leaderman, D., 2019; Pastor et al., 2019; Smith & Gordon, 2019). Assessment is often an administrative directive, and faculty are told they must have this data to ensure the program they teach is effective. Assessment ensuring effectiveness is part of a larger initiative to ensure that program review, also part of accreditation, is partially outcomes-based (Bresciani, 2010; Eubanks, 2023; Finley, 2023; Hinton, 2012; Masterson et al., 2023). When assessment occurs as a directive from the administration to faculty and staff, assessment is seen as something else to be done. When directives such as these come from the administration, they are not seen as a culture change or a change for improvement but as a tool for accountability or another box to check off. The culture of improvement and assessment should be both in and

out of the classroom (Clark, 2010; Forde-Leaves et al., 2023; Hussey et al., 2020). This culture is essential for both accountability and improvement (Hope, 2018; Keith & Good, 2023).

Creating a culture of assessment first involves bringing all stakeholders to the table. Collaboration must come from the top down regarding not only assessment but accreditation as well (Finley, 2023; Keith & Good, 2023; Lloyd, 2016). Assessment is often a target of external accrediting agencies and has often, in recent years, been written into those standards and criteria (Welsh & Roscoe, 2023). Each of the six regional accrediting bodies has a criterion regarding assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2014). External pressure from accreditation agencies often drives internal pressure from the administration to develop and sustain some assessment activity (Welsh & Roscoe, 2023). Internal pressure also includes a driving force to include faculty in all assessments, which is one of the most effective ways to lead assessment and planning efforts, creating a culture where improvement is valued (Smith & Gordon, 2019).

The area of assessment is generally thought of as being a task undertaken in the classroom; however, assessment should the concern of everyone at the institution, not just those individuals in leadership, which means changing the culture to involve everyone on campus (Balser et al., 2017; Banta & Blaich, 2010; Banta & Palomba, 2014; Kasi Jackson et al., 2023). If improvement is not the end goal of assessment and compliance is, then assessment falls short of the goal (Simper et al., 2022). By forcing compliance through data collection and assessment policies, faculty will fail to buy into any assessment practice or process. To gain participation and traction for improvement and to create a culture of improvement and collaboration, leadership needs to understand that faculty and staff are more likely to be accepting and participate if the data are to be used in a meaningful way (Banta & Blaich, 2010; Banta & Palomba, 2014). Assessment and compliance become more complex if colleges look at

assessment simply to keep faculty accountable. If this is the case, and assessment is not used for improvement, faculty will be much less likely to participate and be involved in any form (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith & Gordon, 2019). A culture of assessment where faculty feel that their input is valued, will be more successful than one where faculty feel that they are producing data to be held accountable (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Pastor et al., 2019; Smith & Gordon, 2019).

Cultural shifts of complete buy-in of improvement must include support from leadership to gain buy-in from the rest of the campus community (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Finley, 2023). While it is known that top-down initiatives struggle to gain traction with faculty particularly, leaders need to participate in establishing a culture of assessment, improvement, and accreditation on their campuses. Leadership has the ability or potential to help establish culture by ensuring connections and allowing for time to collaborate on improvement and assessment tasks (Finley, 2023). Requiring assessment and doing the work of assessment and improvement without allowing faculty and staff the time or opportunity to work together is counterproductive. Campus leaders must allow faculty and staff the time to do the work of assessment and analyze and use the data meaningfully to get the most out of that data (Banta & Blaich, 2010; Banta & Palomba, 2014). Campus leadership must model a culture of improvement so that faculty and staff will become involved. Without leadership modeling the culture of improvement, the less likely faculty and staff want to be involved in any culture of improvement (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith & Gordon, 2019). Faculty often resist what they perceive as menial or, in general, tend to be suspicious of administrators who lack vision and commitment.

Strategic Planning Silo

Brown (2017) does not categorize strategic planning as a silo of accountability, but strategic planning directly relates to accreditation status. Accrediting bodies require demonstrating and using an effective strategic plan at their member institutions. HLC integrates strategic planning into Core Component 5.C, which requires member institutions to integrate planning, assessment, and budgeting processes (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). Integrating these areas indicates that strategic planning should indeed be a silo, or a silo that needs to be discussed more in-depth. Integrating strategic planning into accreditation criteria and standards indicates strategic planning needs to be much more developed overall in higher education as a specific area of study.

Strategic planning as known in higher education, did not emerge as a mainstream task and with the ability to drive change until the 1990s and 2000s (He & Oxendine, 2019; Hinton, 2012). Theoretically, strategic planning is developed and derived from the management theory (Langrafe et al., 2020). Because management theories are more fully formed, they are more widely accepted by higher education (Hope, 2018). These theories draw on incorporating stakeholders in the strategic planning process and ensuring that the institution's mission is carried out and not just as a statement written for accreditation (Hundley & Keith, 2023; Keith & Hundley, 2023d; Sabharwal, 2021). Incorporating stakeholders into the process of writing the strategic plan is part of the strength of the strategic planning process (Society for College and University Planning, 2024). However, among the leading theories of strategic planning, involving stakeholders is not explicitly stated; instead, the theories require developing a long-term plan, finding a way to gain an edge over the competition, and considering the overall environment of the institution (Aleong & Aleong, 2011; Garstecki, 2019; Hundley & Keith,

2023; Keith & Hundley, 2023a, 2023d). These individual theories are important as each drives an area of the strategic plan in higher education. More recently, the Society for College and University Planning has defined strategic planning as a necessity for institutions to "survive and thrive" as well as a "deliberate, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an institution is, what it does, and why it does it" (Society for College and University Planning, 2024)

Driving change can be a double-edged sword in higher education. While change is often met with resistance, it must be done in a way that is meaningful and done for the improvement of both student and institutional success. Ideally, to drive change, stakeholders of the institution should be able to identify areas for improvement as part of the strategic planning process. The Society for College and University Planning (2024) explains that input from both internal and external stakeholders is part of the process. Strategic planning aims to serve as a tool to guide institutions and drive change. Because of this, multiple variables go into creating a strategic plan in higher education, and those plans should be working documents (Falqueto et al., 2020). As a working document, the plan itself is responsible for multiple tasks dependent on the institution's culture and the institution's needs (Society for College and University Planning, 2024). This document explains the process and the mission, vision, and values of the institution, as well as outlines goals, priorities, and resources (Bresciani, 2010; Masterson et al., 2023; Society for College and University Planning, 2024). Driving change is easier when priorities are laid out in black and white and when all stakeholders understand the why, where, and how change should occur.

The relevance of the strategic plan and the process involves more than just the document itself. Data and stakeholders are both important parts of what makes any plan relevant, then

assessing what is working and what is not must also occur. Strategic planning should be data-driven, but this cannot and should not replace the steps taken to develop a plan; instead, it should enhance and refine planning (Bresciani, 2010; Masterson et al., 2023). Data should be part of the discussion when discussing strategic planning. Driving the plan with data creates a more meaningful plan. Driving any strategic plan forward with data allows for an understanding of needs as well as what resources may be available to fulfill those needs at the institution (Bresciani, 2010; Masterson et al., 2023). Analyzing and interpreting data for use by stakeholders is one of the key steps in the planning process.

The planning process is equally as important as carrying out the plan. The planning process should be deliberate in higher education so that it does indeed set attainable priorities, directions, and accountabilities, all while understanding that there are often many concepts that make the plan rather broad (Bresciani, 2010; Hall & Lulich, 2021; Masterson et al., 2023). Creating a comprehensive strategic plan allows for it to be linked to both the institutional mission and vision as it should be. The structure and resources should link explicitly to the mission, vision, and overall goals (Balser et al., 2017; Hundley & Keith, 2023; Keith & Hundley, 2023d). As institutions link their plans to each of these, they often realize they have other issues. Often, institutions fail to come to this realization until they are faced with an accreditation visit and their strategic plan is under scrutiny from an outside agency.

Often, one issue HLC discovers during the examinations of strategic plans is the mission statement. Mission statements are required for both the strategic plan and accreditation. HLC states in Criterion 1 that member institutions must adhere to their mission statement (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). Often, these statements are considered to guide the institution toward the perfect strategic planning cycle (Keith & Hundley, 2023d; Lake & Mrozinski, 2011).

Some of the mission statements are long and drawn out, almost reading like the roadmap for the strategic plan. Others are short and succinct. The trouble comes when institutions do not have consistent mission statements or do not actively use them (Hall & Lulich, 2021). For a mission statement to be effective in planning or accreditation, it must be a statement that is clearly written and guides the institution (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). The problem with mission statements and strategic planning occurs when institutions are not actively engaged in either process and lack vision and goals, thus lacking a defined plan (Bresciani, 2010; Hope, 2018; Masterson et al., 2023; Society for College and University Planning, 2024). Once the mission statement is clearly articulated, the statement can be part of writing the strategic plan.

Strategic planning is a task of institutional leadership and involves multiple stakeholders (Bresciani, 2010; Masterson et al., 2023). However, what often happens in higher education is that leadership writes the strategic plan sent out to faculty and staff. Then, the plan is executed at the top levels. If any plan is only executed at the top levels, it causes a disconnect between the strategic plan, the planning process, leadership, and faculty (Baker et al., 2017). Stakeholders should all be tasked with making meaning and bringing value to that organization, which includes being part of the strategic planning process (Baker et al., 2017; Langrafe et al., 2020). A disconnect between the plan and the process causes a lack of engagement with stakeholders who were not part of the planning process or are not engaged with the execution of the strategic plan. The stakeholders who feel disconnected from the planning process or the strategic plan will fail to engage with the process or the strategic plan itself. Stakeholders' relevance to the strategic plan and the process is based on their contributions (Falqueto et al., 2020). The more stakeholders involved in the planning process and who have buy-in to the plan, the better.

Unfortunately, the planning process in higher education does not always get a strong commitment from stakeholders (Bresciani, 2010; Falqueto et al., 2020; He & Oxendine, 2019; Masterson et al., 2023). Lack of involvement from all stakeholders leads to a lack of understanding and commitment to any strategic plan. A process that empowers stakeholders and allows stakeholders to write and execute a plan maximizing both the organization's potential and the individual's potential within that organization is a process that allows for a much stronger and more integrated strategic plan (Society for College and University Planning, 2024). Processes that do not allow for the input of stakeholders allow for the siloing of strategic planning through a lack of collaboration between stakeholders. There is a direct correlation between the creation of the plan itself and the results of the plan (Aleong & Aleong, 2011; Garstecki, 2019). If the plan is created in a silo with little input from stakeholders, then the expectation is that the plan will be executed with little to no input from stakeholders. The value of strategic plans lies not just in the results but in their creation and execution, with input from all stakeholders (Hall & Lulich, 2021). The culture on any campus can determine the success or failure of any assessment, strategic planning, or IE effort. These efforts directly relate to accreditation, and those involved must understand how each activity plays a role. Ensuring that the culture of improvement is firmly embedded from the top down but not simply a top-down directive is imperative for a shift in culture and collaboration. To ensure that both happen, one of the most important pieces is communication with stakeholders (Balser et al., 2017; Keith & Hundley, 2023d).

Shared governance, which is the process of having multiple stakeholders involved in making decisions for an institution (McCaffery, 2019) makes the culture of strategic planning slightly easier in some instances yet more challenging in others (Falqueto et al., 2020;

Mintzberg, 1994). Because there are so many voices in a shared governance structure, there are multiple ideas of what is important in the strategic plan, yet many voices give the plan a robust quality. Multiple voices also enhance communication and collaboration in any process.

Institutional Effectiveness Silo

Institutional effectiveness (IE) is often the most confused and intermingled with assessment and institutional research (Brown, 2017). According to the Society for College and University Planning (2024), IE is the improvement efforts of an institution to organize improvement initiatives, which may include assessment, evaluation, institutional research, program review, accreditation, and other forms of measurement. IE is similar to assessment in that it does focus on data and improvement efforts but is different in that it includes much more than just student learning at the inception of the silo.

The silo of IE had beginnings in the 1980s when the term was coined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to define how institutions were to adhere to standards (Ewell, 2012, as cited in Brown, 2017). IE aims to study and assess all areas of any given institution while making judgments about the overall effectiveness of those areas or departments (Brown, 2017). As a silo, IE is unique because IE is a direct response to an accreditation mandate to ensure that institutions are effective. Assessment during this time frame, and until recently, was only part of academics and conducted as a function of student learning. IE differed as it encompassed academic assessment and all other measurable activities of the institution. The key difference between IE and assessment was the use of data for improvement (Delprino, 2013; Hoshaw et al., 2021). IE moved the needle from improvements made institution-wide without documentation to improvements made in a way that can be documented and traced (Hinton, 2012; Hoshaw et al., 2021). Assessment for

improvement is much different from how faculty view assessment in many cases. Assessment is often done in a vacuum within the classroom, and the evaluation of that assessment is done by that faculty member without any discussion of the data within the department or in collaboration (Higher Learning Commission, 2023a). IE is responsible not only for the data behind ensuring effectiveness but ensuring that data is useful and meaningful. IE departments or silos may also be responsible for being aware of changing accreditation standards, federal regulations, recommendations from accreditors, and the strategic plan (Society for College and University Planning, 2024). Essentially, IE in higher education ensures that institutions are not only effective but that they are staying in compliance with all other standards and regulations. All six institutional accrediting agencies have now written IE into their criteria for accreditation (Brown, 2017). However, according to Hoshaw et al. (2021), it is accreditation that will move any institution forward in search of improvement and accountability.

Accreditation

Accreditation in higher education is designed for institutions to demonstrate they are performing to a set standard. In the United States, there are six institutional accrediting agencies and multiple programmatic or specialty accrediting agencies. Institutional accrediting agencies are responsible for accrediting entire institutions, while programmatic agencies are responsible for accrediting specific degree or certificate programs. Both types of accreditations require an explanation of how effectively the program or the institution is operating, and both types require in-depth self-studies that are backed up with evidence supporting the self-study narrative (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). In 1988, the Secretary of Education William Bennett took another step in gaining trust and ensuring that higher education provides a quality educational experience by allowing federally approved accreditation organizations to include institutional

outcomes in their accreditation requirements Formatting...(Banta & Palomba, 2014). By

including institutional outcomes in accreditation criteria, accreditors effectively began to weave

assessment and strategic planning into accreditation.

Accreditation Processes

The process of accreditation is similar for both types of accreditations. For institutional

accreditation, there are multiple pathways depending on the stage of the accreditation. The initial

stage of accreditation for any institution or program is the seeking accreditation stage, which is

the initial stage of candidacy for membership into any institutional or programmatic accreditation

agency (Higher Learning Commission, 2023c). Once an institution has been granted initial

candidacy, the second phase begins, and they enter their chosen pathway. Depending on the

pathway, the institution will be required to submit comprehensive evaluations, which include the

assurance argument, Federal Compliance Review, student survey, on-site peer review, and

potential monitoring (Higher Learning Commission, 2023c). Each institution will have a

different approach to preparing for an accreditation visit. However, all institutions will have an

Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) and a site steering team. This team is designed to guide the

accreditation process and the writing of the assurance argument or assurance argument, thus

giving the document the voice of the institution (Higher Learning Commission, 2023a).

Assessment and Accreditation

Accreditation is a complex and delicate balance of accountability versus improvement.

Internal processes versus external processes of accreditation in higher education, as well as the

ideas of accountability or quality, are often discussed and well documented. Still, the internal and

external ideas of accountability are not always discussed and aligned by individual institutions

(Keith & Good, 2023; Welsh & Roscoe, 2023). Often, the standards or criteria for the accrediting

agency are interpreted differently by individual institutions and peer reviewers. It is important to understand that improvement and accountability are both important for accreditation (Banta & Palomba, 2014). Both improvement and accountability play an important role in ensuring a high-quality, holistic student experience in and out of the classroom.

The term accreditation may lead to fearmongering on some campuses. The accrediting body is asking the institution to prove they are doing what they say they are, and the site visit may be intimidating. The goal of any accreditation visit is to give an external review of internal processes, but it should not be a substitute for what is happening at any institution (Banta & Blaich, 2010). Another goal of any accreditation visit, either institutional or programmatic, is to ensure that the institution or program is demonstrating its outcomes and working to improve student learning and the student experience. The idea of accountability within the context of accreditation is to report on the performance of that institution or program (Colina & Blanco, 2021). This idea is markedly different from the idea that accountability is the accrediting body looking over the shoulder of the institution, waiting for them to make a mistake so they can act on it. The differences in accountability and improvement and how they relate to accreditation have caused issues on many campuses because of this strange dichotomy between them. As more and more accrediting bodies demand assessment be implemented, campuses are curious about how much assessment is for improvement of student learning and how much is for accountability (Colina & Blanco, 2021; Souza & Rose, 2021). Unless institutions become comfortable with the idea of weaving accountability and improvement together, assessment is key to the institution and, thus, key to their accreditation efforts; findings will occur with every accreditation cycle. The silo of assessment is and will increasingly be critical to the accreditation process because it is key to ensuring that students learning and teaching are improving (Colina & Blanco, 2021).

When faculty and staff hear the term *assessment*, they often understand that term to be synonymous with accreditation (Colina & Blanco, 2021). However, faculty often think of accountability instead of improvement when considering assessment, which is one of the far-reaching impacts of requiring assessment in the accreditation criteria. Formal assessment is common in academic areas and is becoming increasingly common in co-curricular areas as accreditors have written co-curricular assessment as a requirement for their standards and criterion (Higher Learning Commission, 2020a). Since assessment was written into accreditation in the 1980s, there have been changes in how it has been used for accreditation (Banta & Blaich, 2010). Accreditors have gone from wanting evidence of assessment at their member institutions to evidence of assessment being used to improve teaching and learning. The data gathered and analyzed during the assessment process is then used to improve teaching and learning (Eubanks, 2023; French et al., 2014). Data can be gathered, but nothing can come of the data until it is analyzed and interpreted. Accrediting bodies ask institutions what is being done with the data they are collecting and how is the data they are collecting being used for improvement of student learning. However, the difference is that improvement efforts and the improvement process often involve reflection and engagement of stakeholders in the improvement efforts. An important part of assessment efforts is allowing time for reflection and engagement in improvement efforts (Keith & Good, 2023). As there is more external pressure put on institutions to use assessment and to fit their assessment into the standards or criteria for accreditation, institutions will continue to drive student learning (Lozano et al., 2019).

Collaboration and communication lead to well-designed and well-executed assessment, improvement, and accreditation processes at individual institutions. These processes allow faculty and staff to work collaboratively on their projects (Banta & Palomba, 2014). Giving

faculty and staff time to work in these systems and time to collaborate allows all involved to focus on assessment, improvement, and accreditation tasks by having conversations about data, strengths, weaknesses, concerns, new programs, initiatives, and goals for the institution. These conversations are what bring about improvement and change. Work time is needed for collaboration and reflection, and the *so what* pieces of these conversations often lead to change. Change is often linked to improvement, and again, change is linked to collaboration. While leadership or administration has a vital role in guiding this process, it is also important to the process that an assessment professional or similar professional plays a vital role in the process. Assessment professionals can also help guide faculty and staff in a way that the administration may not, especially on campuses where these initiatives are faculty and staff driven.

Improvement efforts should be campus-wide. Campus-wide efforts often involve every stakeholder on campus, including faculty, staff, students, and administration. Often, improvement efforts may fail because one or more of these groups are left out of the effort. Creating any culture shift or change must come from both administration and faculty to succeed. If faculty and staff are to use assessment for improvement, they must be part of the process, for assessment for simply reporting will fail as a tool on any campus (Banta & Blaich, 2010). Each silo must have faculty and staff involvement to be successful, and the approach will determine just how involved the campus will become (Amaechi & Obiweluozor, 2021). Any campus that feels it can participate in initiatives because its leadership focuses on getting the entire campus involved in assessment and planning projects are more effective (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith & Gordon, 2019).

Summary

Assessment, strategic planning, and IE often occur in individual silos in higher education. Although for any institution to be truly successful, all three must occur collaboratively and cohesively. Moreover, faculty must be brought to the table and be part of the conversation (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Smith & Gordon, 2019). The productive effectiveness of any strategic planning or assessment initiative depends on productive leadership and faculty buy-in (Kirwan et al., 2022). Both must happen, or any effort will be superficial and ineffective. Often, assessment initiatives fail because they come from external pressures, yet those pressures want a large portion of the campus to be involved (Salem et al., 2020; Taylor & Heath, 2012). Faculty are often less than willing to participate in assessment or planning if they feel their voice is not valued or do not understand the rationale behind the initiatives. Without transparency and communication from leadership about why and how assessment and planning are occurring, including the goals, faculty will not buy in, and the result will be pushback and resistance.

Much of the research concerning assessment and faculty involvement deals with how faculty views assessment in their classrooms. The research and theory regarding assessment ties into how faculty view pedagogy in terms of how they teach and how their students learn but have little to do with how they assess learning in terms of accreditation (Beck et al., 2013; Box et al., 2015; Clark, 2010; Forde-Leaves et al., 2023; Khajeloo et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2021; Yorke, 2003). These assessment theories are well-developed and well-researched. However, they still exist in a silo regarding assessment. Theories in strategic planning relate to business and management, yet they have been adapted and are applicable in higher education. It appears that the fact that they do indeed exist in their silos is expected and understood. All silos still fall

under their silo of accountability, which is supported by Brown's (2017) theory of Silos of Accountability.

As external accrediting agencies ask for more regarding assessment and IE, there must be collaboration and communication with all stakeholders. Faculty, staff, and administration must be part of the discussion, thus creating a holistic culture on campus. These discussions and open dialogue could also create cohesive processes, along with cultures that value the use of data to make informed decisions, which will be essential to the success of both students and the institution. For all of this to happen in a manner that is in the institution's best interest, those involved in leadership understand that their faculty are indeed the driving force behind any improvement efforts, and faculty buy-in and effort in the improvement efforts are paramount. Without faculty buy-in, any improvement effort will fail before it begins. Top-down directives cannot be commonplace in assessment, strategic planning, and IE. Neither can lack of communication and collaboration. If either is present, any improvement effort stalls and becomes stagnant, as faculty will fail to buy in, and the culture on the campus has the potential to turn toxic towards improvement or change. Understanding how these areas can function as parts of the same whole is imperative to affect improvement and accreditation status. Accreditation status is something that is not discussed in detail. Instead, it is discussed as a function of accountability (Lubinescu et al., 2001). It is well known that if improvement and accountability are not done and done well, accreditation status will be negatively affected. However, what is less known is how each silo can work together to affect accreditation status positively.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this case study was to understand how collaboration or lack of collaboration between the people and process in the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness affected the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission. This chapter presented the research questions and the site and participants selected. Case study participants from Moses Community College (MCC) participated in interviews and focus groups to provide data helpful for understanding how the institution functions, collaboratively or not. The researcher's role and positionality are discussed in depth. Procedures for data collection of individual interviews, document analysis, and focus groups are explained and discussed. Data analysis of all three data sources is explained next. The trustworthiness of the study in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability are explained. Finally, the ethical considerations, which include both permissions and participant protections, are discussed in this chapter.

Research Design

To fully understand the intricacies and siloing between the departments of assessment, strategic planning, and IE, it was essential to gather the narratives of those involved in each of these departments within Moses Community College (MCC). The statistical data or research supporting or explaining the phenomenon of siloing the areas of assessment, strategic planning, IE, and their relationship to accreditation was lacking, according to Brown (2017), and was an area for further research. Appropriately, I gathered qualitative data in the form of interviews and focus groups, thus allowing for the stories of both the individuals representing MCC and the story of MCC itself to be told.

Qualitative research was most appropriate for this study because there are multiple stories to tell when discussing accreditation status and its relationship to assessment, strategic planning, and IE. Those stories were told through individual interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. A case study was the most applicable method, as the research focuses on how MCC conducts assessment, planning, and IE activities, and the case study methodology allowed me to understand the nuances of this case (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, case studies allowed for the telling of the story of the subject of the case (Yin, 2018). The stories of those involved in assessment, strategic planning, IE (IR), and accreditation at MCC allowed for greater understanding and knowledge about the silos. The stories brought the intricacies regarding assessment, strategic planning, IE, and accreditation to light. Looking at the differences and similarities between assessment, strategic planning, and IE allowed me to frame my study as an intrinsic case study, as this type of case study allowed me to focus on the case itself (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The aim of my study was to understand how the areas of assessment, strategic planning, and IE play a role in accreditation status. To fully describe the phenomenon of siloing in each of these areas, I first explored and understood if and why it was occurring. To fully understand the siloing of these areas, it was important to conduct a case study. The intrinsic case design allowed me to understand these phenomena fully. The design allowed for the examination of the structures of assessment, IE, and strategic planning at MCC; thus, the design allowed me to fully understand the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE and the role each plays in the accreditation self-study and other accreditation processes. Examining assessment, strategic planning, IE, and their relationships to accreditation processes allowed me to see if and how silos affected the relationships between the areas of assessment, planning, and IE, as well as how each

affected or did not affect accreditation status. Through the case study, I attempted to fully

understand the intricacies of the relationships between assessment, strategic planning, and IE.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How does collaboration and communication between administration, faculty, and staff as

well as between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness affect

accreditation efforts at Moses Community College?

Sub-Question One

How do the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness and the

administration encourage collaboration with the entire campus community?

Sub-Question Two

How is the collaboration between the people involved in the silos of assessment, strategic

planning, and institutional effectiveness productive or counterproductive?

Sub-Question Three

How does the campus buy-in in terms of faculty, administration, and staff to silos of

assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness practices exist on this campus?

Each of these questions ties into the *Seven Silos of Accreditation* (Brown, 2017) and

attempts to understand how the silos are working or not working at the site of the study.

Setting and Participants

Through the process of choosing the site, it was important to find a site that had recently

undergone an accreditation visit. The site was recently on probation for findings related to

HLC's Criterion 4, which specifically relates to assessment, strategic planning, and IE, which

was also important for the purposes of this study. I initially narrowed the choices to three sites.

Yet, one site stood out in particular because this site had findings not only related to Criterion 4, but also Criterion 3. Both criteria relate to assessment, teaching, and learning in the *Criteria for Accreditation.* The information that potentially would have come out of the other two sites would have made those sites readily identifiable, which also made the site the best choice. Moses Community College (MCC) was not identifiable and was similar in size and structure to most community colleges in Kansas.

Site

Moses Community College was the selected institution for study and is a two-year institution in Kansas. The institution is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. As a requirement of this case study, the institution is within five years of a site visit in some capacity. MCC has recently had a site visit from HLC. MCC is an associate degree-granting institution in Kansas and part of the Kansas Board of Regents. MCC is governed by a five-member Board of Trustees using a shared governance structure. The president of the institution directly answers to the board. Reporting directly to the president is a four-person executive administrative team made up of the vice president of academic affairs, vice president of student services, vice president of administrative services, and athletic director. Each respective department reports to the appropriate executive team member.

The institution is in northern Kansas. The county is rural, with access to a suburban area within a 50-mile drive. The campus has a 12-county service area near two of the seven Regents Universities. The 2022 Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data shows an enrollment of 1651 students, with 41% male and 59% female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

MCC offers on-campus housing and a variety of athletics. As an associate degree-granting institution, it also offers several certificate programs. Accreditation was initially granted by the Higher Learning Commission in 1977, with the most recent site visit being conducted in 2021, resulting in a probationary status instead of full accreditation (Higher Learning Commission, 2023d). During the most recent site visit, the institution was found to have issues with the assessment of student learning, which is part of Criterion 4, Core Component 4.B in the *Criteria for Accreditation*. This Criterion specifically deals with the ongoing assessment of learning, and it also happens to be the most cited component in all Higher Learning Commission (HLC) compliance reviews. Resulting from the site visit were findings in Components of Criterion 4, as well as in Criterion 3, and in Criterion 5. According to HLC, Criterion 3 addresses the quality of teaching and learning resources and support, which includes evaluation of faculty and infrastructure of resources (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b) Criterion 5 specifically addresses IE and resources, which are most often tied to the financials of the institution (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b). MCC was scheduled for an Institutional Actions Council (IAC) review in October to address if they corrected these findings, including another site visit with a focused review in Fall 2022. A decision was made in July of 2023, resulting in the removal of the sanction. Their next site visit and comprehensive review will occur during the 2026-2027 academic year, at the conclusion of that site visit, their continued accreditation status will be determined (Higher Learning Commission, 2023d).

Participants

For the purposes of this study, participants were directly involved with assessment, strategic planning, IE, and accreditation. The total number of participants were 10. Participants included the president, vice president of academics (VPAA), IE director, HLC accreditation

liaison officer (ALO), assessment coordinator/director, site steering committee members, and assessment committee members. MCC is unique in terms of structure and demographics. MCC has a female President holding a master's degree, who was named president upon the board termination of the previous president. The VPAA of this institution is currently an interim male, and he serves as the ALO to HLC. Assessment is committee-driven and led by the Director of Assessment, IE, and Planning. The committee's structure includes the dean and faculty from each academic area of the institution. The site steering committee comprises representatives from multiple areas of campus, giving a wide range of input. Each of these committees is made up of a wide variety of members.

Recruitment Plan

Through the recruitment process, the total number of potential participants was between 25-35 due to the makeup of the site steering committee and the assessment committee. The final sample size for this study was 10 participants due to the fact that at small colleges, many participants may take on multiple roles or serve on multiple committees. The sample from the institution consisted of the president, vice president of academics (VPAA), IE director, HLC accreditation liaison officer (ALO), assessment coordinator/director, site steering committee members, and assessment committee members. Informed consent was discussed with each participant as well as how their responses and data will be used in the study. Each participant was emailed the consent form to complete and was told that they may withdraw their consent at any point in the study.

Participant contact information was collected from the MCC website, and participants were contacted first via phone and then through follow-up emails. Introducing both myself and the topic of my study in a semi-formal conversation rather than in an unsolicited email was of

utmost importance. Informal conversation allowed for participants to ask questions about the study itself and consent before they agree to participate. Follow-up emails were sent with recruitment forms and consent forms for participants to participate in this case study. Once permission was obtained, interviews and focus groups were scheduled.

Researcher's Positionality

Understanding the researcher's role in research and conducting research ethically and unbiasedly meant being aware of my bias and knowledge. I am the current assessment director at my institution. I am involved with HLC and other specialty accreditations on our campus, which gives me unique knowledge but also allows me a different understanding of assessment. My role allows me to see my research question and study from a purely inquisitive lens. My role also requires a true understanding of how other institutions function in assessment, planning, and IE and how it positively or negatively affects accreditation. This inquisitive lens allows me to have an objective viewpoint. Before beginning interviews, I conducted background research into MCC to better understand its organizational structure and background with HLC. I needed to have a firm grasp of what, if any, assessment findings they had during their most recent site visits and their current accreditation status. My role throughout the interview process was to facilitate the interviews and help them through the question process. As an interviewer, allowing the interview participants to tell their stories is important. It is through this story that trends emerged. The same was true for focus groups. My job was to facilitate but not insert myself to get the data I want. Allowing the participants to tell their stories was important and allowed those stories to speak for themselves, thus guiding the study (Seidman, 2019).

Interpretive Framework

As a pragmatist, it was important for me to understand how assessment, planning, and IE

work well together or fail together. Pragmatism seeks to understand the outcomes of problems or functions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My goal was to understand how the practices of each institution contribute positively or negatively to its accreditation status with the Higher Learning Commission. Understanding the processes was key to understanding the outcomes. I wanted to understand different assessment, planning, and IR practices, helping to understand the problems that assessment can cause during accreditation visits. Relating what I knew to what others knew is important to me throughout this case study. My pragmatic lens and my strategic strength gave me the ability to see and understand things. Using this lens, I attempted to correlate the relationships between what I know and understand and what others know and understand. As a pragmatist, I believe in the practicality of what works, and, in my view and using my strategic strength, I want to understand why something works and what makes it practical. I also wanted to know what drives people and if those decisions are based on past experiences, either good or bad, which also falls under the scope of pragmatism.

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), philosophical assumptions are the beliefs that guide a researcher. Knowing my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions in general, helps shape how I see the world and who I am as a person. These beliefs are essential to guiding the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is my goal to better understand the relationships between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE and their relationship to accreditation through this research. As a researcher, I will put my values on hold to allow the participants' stories to be told throughout this case study.

Ontological Assumption

Creswell and Poth (2018) define ontological assumptions as the characteristics of the

researcher's reality. In my view of reality, a few values are important, and overall, they are, first and foremost, my faith, my family, and creating a harmonious environment around me. Through my spiritual nature and my profound faith in God, my reality is shaped by the belief that my faith will endure all trials and tribulations. There is nothing that I cannot do or persist through in this view of reality because of my faith in God and Christ. Because of my faith, I have my family and raise my family in the Church. I was taught to value my family and my marriage second only to my faith. By doing so, I have created an environment of faith, hope, and love (*Holy Bible, New International Version*2020). My final value is a harmonious environment. Finding harmony and peace in those around me is possible through my faith in God and because my family brings out the best in me as both a woman of God and a researcher.

Epistemological Assumption

Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that epistemological assumptions and knowledge give way to power from understanding. I am constantly searching for more knowledge and a greater understanding of the world in which I live and work. By seeking knowledge, I find that understanding different views comes naturally. Understanding different views allows me to see the world differently and makes my search for knowledge slightly different. Knowledge in my mind is something that fulfills my soul and brings me full circle in my daily life. In the epistemological assumption, it is important to understand that any quest for knowledge should also be holistic. I seek knowledge in such a way that I keep an open mind and stay true to who I am as a woman and woman of faith and spirituality.

Axiological Assumption

The role my values play in my research and my life is the focus of axiological assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Without knowing and understanding my values and

staying true to all my values, I would not be staying true to myself. Upholding my values is what makes me ethical and keeps my integrity intact. Without those two pieces of the puzzle, I fail as a woman of faith, a role model, and a researcher. I value honesty, integrity, transparency, and collaboration in my professional life as well as in research. Being careful when writing my interview and focus group questions was of utmost importance. The wording of these questions inhibited my axiological assumptions to influence my participants' responses. I know the value of assessment data and the culture of assessment at an institution. The culture of academic assessment I have created on my own campus as the assessment director indicates how much I value the culture of assessment. If participants are aware of my reputation, they could infer my values. However, I am relatively unknown in our state, as the role of assessment director generally falls under the umbrella of academics. The depth of my understanding and my experiences with positive and negative accreditation visits give me insight into how institutions function well and fail to function in assessment and strategic planning.

Researcher's Role

Ensuring research is conducted ethically and without malice means I am aware of my own biases. My own knowledge of assessment is because I am the current assessment director at my institution; however, I had no authority over any of the participants in my study. I am involved with HLC and other specialty accreditations on our campus, which gives me unique knowledge while allowing me a different understanding of assessment, but I do not serve on any state or HLC committees pertaining to MCC. My role also allowed me to see my study and research questions from an inquisitive lens. Understanding how other institutions function in relation to assessment, planning, and IR, and how it affects accreditation either positively or negatively, will allow me to maintain an objective viewpoint. However, my bias may also be

apparent as I understand assessment and accreditation are explicitly linked, and I work at an institution on probation with HLC for findings in Criterion 4 and 5. I have an innate understanding of both assessment and accreditation and how to move through the probation cycle, and I may have an idea of what best practices may be. Moving through this case study, I endeavored to keep my bias bracketed and understand that what works for one institution is not always does not always work for another institution.

Before beginning interviews, I researched the institution to better understand the organizational structure and background of HLC. I needed to have a firm grasp on what assessment findings they had during their most recent site visits and their current accreditation status. My role throughout the interview process was to facilitate the interviews and guide the participants through the question process. As an interviewer, I allowed the interview participant to tell their story, enabling trends to emerge. The same is true for focus groups. My job was to facilitate but not insert myself to get the data I wanted. Allowing those stories to speak for themselves was imperative to guide the study.

<div align="center">**Procedures**</div>

Procedures were followed to maintain the credibility of the study and the researcher. Permission was sought from both Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the MCC's IRB; permission was granted in writing (see Appendix A). Recruiting those individuals I wished to interview personally was also essential. Blanket recruiting for this type of study was ineffective. Because I wanted to know the why and the story behind each institution's assessment, planning, and IE practices, it was imperative that I contact those individuals first via phone using MCC's directory and discuss my study with them.

The sample size was 10 for the entire study, which follows the guidelines for qualitative studies at Liberty University, which is 12 to 15. Participants were recruited individually via telephone utilizing the public directory on MCC's website, and then follow-up emails were sent. Once participants have been chosen, interviews and focus groups will be scheduled. Interviews were scheduled in one-hour time blocks via Microsoft Teams, taking place over two weeks. Those interviews were then placed into transcripts, and focus groups were scheduled within the next week. Before focus groups took place, documents for document analysis were collected and analyzed. Focus groups took place over three to four days via Microsoft Teams, as well. Once all interviews and focus groups were completed and transcribed, transcriptions were sent to all participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. Member checking allowed participants to check the accuracy of the transcriptions and ensure that their answers to the interview and focus group questions were complete and correct.

Data Collection Plan

My data collection plan had three different data sources: interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. The first data source was interviews. These interviews were the baseline for the rest of my data collection. By beginning my data collection with interviews, I gained a better understanding of processes at MCC. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and sent to participants for member checking. Next, a document analysis of the documents provided by MCC was conducted. Focus groups followed as the third data source to understand MCC's processes and procedures regarding assessment, planning, and IE. After the interview and focus groups were completed, transcripts were sent for member checking. Once all data collection was complete, data analysis began.

Individual Interviews

Before individual interviews began, participants were contacted via telephone using MCC's website to obtain contact information for each person needing to be interviewed. Discussing the study via the phone and obtaining consent verbally was important in order to introduce my study before sending a blanket email. After this initial discussion and the participant verbally agreed to participate in the study, the email consent forms were sent to the participant using the email addresses obtained from the website to obtain written permission to conduct the interviews.

Individual interviews were then conducted in one-hour sessions (Yin, 2018). Interviews were essential to understand the viewpoints and experiences of those involved in assessment, planning, IE, and accreditation. Through interviews, each person was allowed to tell their own story and the story of the institution. Participants were also able to tell the account of their role at their institution and how that role shapes the collaboration of assessment, planning, IE, and accreditation. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and were recorded and transcribed using the functionality provided by Teams. Upon completion of the interviews, transcriptions were sent to the participants for member checking.

Table 1

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career in your current position. CRQ

2. What is your current position? SQ1

3. How involved is your current position in assessment? SQ1

4. How active is your current role in the strategic planning process? SQ1

5. How involved is your current position in institutional effectiveness? SQ1

6. How involved is faculty in the assessment process on your campus? SQ1

7. How often are SLOs assessed in each course? SQ1

8. How do those flow into PLOs? SQ1

9. What is the review cycle for PLOs? SQ1

10. What role do SLOs and PLOs play in the Program Review Cycle? SQ1

11. What stage is your campus in regarding implementing a co-curricular assessment plan?

    SQ2

12. How involved is your assessment coordinator/director with the strategic plan? SQ2

13. How is your strategic plan assessed? SQ2

14. Why do you feel as though the strategic plan should be assessed? SQ2

15. How do your IR and assessment personnel work as a team, or are they departmentalized?

SQ3

16. What policies or practices have you implemented on your campus to help with

assessment? SQ3

17. How do you feel having faculty and staff buy-in of assessment, strategic planning, and IR

helps with the accreditation cycles? SQ3

18. How is the entire campus community involved in accreditation processes? SQ3

19. How do you include all faculty (full-time, part-time, adjunct) in assessment? SQ1

20. How do you include both faculty and staff in the assessment and assessment processes?

    SQ1

21. How do you include all campuses in accreditation processes or upcoming visits? CRQ

My research questions guided my interview questions. Interview questions were also

written to be expanded on and followed up on when needed. These questions must be open-

ended, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), so that participants can better explain their

campus assessment processes and how they relate to accreditation. Each of these questions represents research as best practice. As assessment and strategic planning become more of a driving force for improvement in higher education, they must be tools for daily improvement, not just documents and data collected to live on a shelf. Questions 1 and 21 are designed to tie back to the central research question by attempting to understand how the role of the individual ties back to their career, how that role is involved in all processes at MCC, and how that role attempts to affect the rest of the campus. Questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6,7, 8, 9, 10, 19, and 20 all tie back to sub-question one and attempt to understand processes in place relating to assessment, strategic planning, and IE on MCC's campus. Questions 11, 12, 13, and 14 relate to sub-question two, and all attempt to understand stages and roles in assessment, strategic planning, and IE at MCC. Questions 15, 16, 17, and 18 relate to sub-question three and attempt to understand policies and procedures and their relation to buy-in of assessment, strategic planning, and IE.

Document Analysis

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), document analysis is useful in providing background information and context for the interviews and focus groups. Documents collected included the assessment handbook, assessment plans, strategic plan, the assurance argument with supporting documents from 2021, the monitoring report from 2022, Internal Actions Council Reports from 2022, follow-up reports from 2023, and all communications to and from HLC, including substantive change documentation. All documents were collected electronically, and each document provided by the institutions was saved into the password-protected database. Documents were just a glimpse of what occurred or were the product of multiple planning sessions and were a way to support what was being said in interviews and focus groups.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted after initial interviews were done and document analysis occurred. Groups comprised of those participating in the interviews at the institution and members of the assessment, strategic planning, and site steering committees. Focus groups allowed follow-up questions, further discussion, and further explanation with those involved in the interviews and those involved in committee work (Yin, 2018). Once interviews were completed, transcribed, member-checked, and documents had been analyzed, focus groups were scheduled via email. Sessions were conducted via Teams. Using the Teams recording and transcription functionality, sessions were also recorded and transcribed. Upon completion, the transcriptions were sent to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

1. How often do committees related to assessment, strategic planning, and accreditation on your campus meet? SQ1

2. What are the roles of the committees? SQ1

3. How do committees or groups work collaboratively with assessment, planning, and IE? SQ3

4. What areas of concern do you have about assessment, planning, and IE, and how do they relate to accreditation? CRQ

5. What findings are you aware of regarding assessment? CRQ

6. How do you believe they could have been prevented? CRQ

7. What steps are you taking as a committee to prevent findings in the future? SQ2

8. How are findings handled? CRQ

9. How does administration plan and involve the entire campus with the accreditation process? CRQ

10. How involved was the entire campus with the previous accreditation study? SQ1

11. How is the strategic planning committee chosen? SQ2

12. How transparent is that process? SQ3

13. How do you involve the entire campus in the process? SQ1

14. How do you involve the community in the process? SQ1

15. How do you involve the student body in the process? SQ1

16. Describe the process of assessment at your institution. SQ2

17. How was this process created? SQ3

18. Who was involved in the creation of this process? SQ3

19. What does *closing the loop* look like on your campus? SQ3

20. What is the culture of communication and collaboration like on your campus? SQ3

21. What could be done to improve the culture of communication and collaboration between these areas? SQ3

22. How does administration create time for faculty and staff to work on assessment data for understanding and improvement of teaching and learning? SQ2

Data Analysis

Data was holistically analyzed using thematic analysis to find meaningful patterns in all collected data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). After the interviews were complete, each was transcribed from the recording. Once transcriptions were finished, each transcription was given to the interviewee so they could audit their statements. Member checking allowed each participant to ensure that their statements were correct and that there was nothing they wanted to

modify or change (Saldana, 2021; Yin, 2018). Once interviews were member-checked, they were uploaded to Delve tool.

Holistic analysis, which is the reflection of what I have learned from each interview and annotating each interview, was used to identify codes in each interview. Each interview was coded through multiple methods. Transcriptions were loaded into Delve, and then *in-vivo* coding occurred. *In-vivo coding* was used to take the words of those interviewed and codes from the literature about assessment, strategic planning, IR, and accreditation. Then, process coding was used to identify other interview patterns (Saldana, 2021). Once codes were discovered, they gave meaning to the data. These codes were used first to create categories and subcodes; then subsequently, they were used to create patterns. Patterns were used to generate pattern matching of the focus groups and incorporated into the patterns of the interviews and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Once the coding of the interviews, documents, and focus groups was complete and put into Delve, codes, categories, and subcodes were grouped into patterns using the grouping functionality in Delve. These patterns were used to create themes from the patterns realized in Delve and were labeled as themes in the case study. Once these themes emerged, the case was analyzed to see how the institution uses assessment, strategic planning, and IE to collaborate and communicate effectively (Yin, 2018). After themes were discovered, it was essential to explain those using explanation building (Yin, 2018). However, this was challenging; it was important to understand and explain the role of each of the elements of the interview, and the explanation of the role of each of these areas at MCC. Incorporating all three patterns was imperative for cross-analysis of each data set (Yin, 2018). After the patterns were built and analyzed, explanation building could occur. It was essential to use a holistic approach to data analysis and synthesis to

fully realize the themes in the data and understand better how each theme develops from the categories and codes. I expected roughly four to five themes to develop from potentially forty to eighty codes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important in any study. A trustworthy study is a study that has credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Conducting and publishing a valid study that reflects the participant's words and thoughts ensures that the study is valid, reliable, and objective, establishing trustworthiness. In a qualitative study, it is important not to make inferences in the words of the participants to fit the outcome the researcher wishes for the study. Instead, I had to ensure that the study was indeed trustworthy. To do so, it was of utmost prominence that, as the researcher, I maintained my neutrality. I reported what the participants said and not what I wanted their words to be by bracketing out my biases.

Credibility

The credibility of my research was achieved through multiple methods, including trust building and accuracy in the interpretation of findings using participant feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility throughout this study includes trust building, member checking, confidence in my findings, and triangulation. These provide the study with trustworthiness and demonstrate validity as well as reliability.

To ensure credibility, I gathered information that details my participants' lived experiences with assessment, strategic planning, and IE. I collected data over three to five weeks, which increased the validity of my findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this time, the interviews and focus groups established trust between the

participants and me. Member-checking was also used during this time to establish trust and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Building Trust

Building trust throughout my study involved building relationships between participants and me as part of the interview and focus group process. Throughout the interviews and focus group process, participants and I built a rapport that gave credibility to the study, thus contributing to confidence in my findings. The trust established between the participants and me led to participants telling their stories during both the interviews and focus groups, allowing for the richness of the data to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Member Checking

Member-checking allowed participants the ability to review the transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy in their answers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing participants with transcripts of their interviews and focus groups for analysis and review, participants became more engaged throughout the study, and findings became more credible and accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This interactive process also allowed me to build a relationship with the participants and evaluate the data in multiple ways.

Triangulation

Triangulation is using multiple data sources, theories, or participants to establish credibility(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this study, I used interviews, documents, and focus groups to provide data, each with multiple participants or authors. All data collected was triangulated through thematic analysis and triangulated ensuring the validity of the findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Transferability

Data and findings are described in a way rich in depth and detail to make my study transferable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptions of my findings are written so that they accurately describe the setting, participant, and story so that the reader feels like they are sitting in the room observing the scene. The detailed descriptions of the findings and lived experiences of the participants in this study allow this study to be transferable to other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). By describing the lived experiences of the participants, the rich detail and depth of the transferability of my findings may have greater connections in not only the 2-year sector but the 4-year sector as well (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

To show that the study is dependable, it was essential to show that the findings could be replicated in a similar context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An in-depth description of the procedures used allowed for replication if desired. Multiple data sources were used, including interviews, document analysis, and focus groups, all of which were valid and reliable data sources, thus increasing the study's dependability. The dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Methodologist conducted an inquiry audit by reviewing the process and products used for my study. Audits further establish dependability in any research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability

Conformability refers to taking steps to ensure the findings of the study are shaped by the participants and not by my bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the study, I checked my data to ensure accuracy using an audit trail. This was done using clear coding and pattern

analysis and reinforced through triangulation and member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As part of the audit trail, I kept notes and journals of my thoughts as I worked through my data. This journaling technique helped me bracket out any bias I knowingly had and any unconscious bias I encountered while conducting my study, as I am involved in assessment daily and have a different lived experience.

Ethical Considerations

First and foremost, my ethical concern was to conduct secure and ethical research for all involved in my study. Through careful thought, several ideas came to mind to prevent potential problems. First, before any interviews, document analysis, or focus groups were conducted, institutional review board (IRB) approval would be needed for my study and my site. Upon approval from IRB, the selection of my participants and making contact with them involved telephone communication. During this conversation, I informed them that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any point in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants were informed that their identities would be protected with pseudonyms. All participant protections and disclosure information were provided to the participants on all consent and recruitment forms. Each participant was informed that all data would be stored in password-protected databases with only myself having access for three years.

The second ethical consideration was choosing a site for this study. I selected one community college. The institution was selected for specific reasons. The site I chose was on probation with HLC until July of 2023 for findings concerning Criterion 4, dealing with assessment, during their last site visit. However, all findings are publicly posted on the HLC website, potentially making the institution identifiable. Until recently, there were only two Kansas institutions on probation with HLC, which is public knowledge and could potentially

make identification of the site possible. However, as of July 2023, there are no longer any institutions in Kansas on probation with HLC, making identification of the site for this case study improbable.

Permissions

Permission must be granted from the IRB at Liberty University and the IRB from the institution I was studying. Informal conversations took place at the Higher Learning Commission Spring 2022 Conference, and preliminary permission was granted for the study. I was not using my home institution and had no control or oversight over assessment, strategic planning, or IE at the institution to be studied. No data was collected until final IRB approval had been granted.

Other Participant Protections

The site was described during the study. However, the name of the site was protected by a pseudonym. Keeping the name of the site masked using a pseudonym further protects participants from identification. All recruitment and consent forms explain that the participant and site names are protected. Before participating in the study, participants were required to sign consent forms indicating that they understood the study and that they agreed to participate in the study. Participants were told that their identities could and would always be protected with pseudonyms and that their interviews would be completely anonymous. They were informed that their anonymity was not guaranteed during the focus groups because of the nature of the focus groups.

Data storage and access were also a potential ethical concern. Data is stored in a password-protected database on my computer, which is also password-protected with a password and my fingerprint. I am the only person with access to the data. All data collected from interviews and focus groups was transcribed, and all transcriptions are stored in a password-

protected database. The interview recordings are stored in the password-protected database on the same password-protected computer. All documents provided by MCC were scanned using a high-resolution scanner, ensuring the document is clear and readable. Both scans and electronic documents are stored in a PDF file format and in a password-protected database. Data will be retained for three years following the study's conclusion.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the research methods used to conduct this intrinsic case study. My research design was discussed by explaining the appropriateness of the qualitative intrinsic case study design for understanding the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE and their relationship to accreditation status. I gathered data through interviews, document analysis, and focus groups to fully understand how assessment, strategic planning, and IE play a role in the accreditation status at MCC. The Central Research Questions and Sub Questions were presented. The setting and participants were discussed. The site was explained, and the selection criteria for the site were explained. The recruitment plan for participants needed for this study to be successful was also discussed. Next, my positionality as the researcher was discussed, and my interpretive frameworks and philosophical assumptions were discussed to explain my values as a researcher. My role as the researcher and human instrument is also explained, and I explain that I bracketed my biases using note-taking and journaling, ensuring that my bias did not affect my research. The procedures of my study were explained in depth, including my sample size and the way I collected data. My data collection plan included individual interviews conducted via teams using the transcription functionality, which allowed transcriptions of the interviews to be produced, thus allowing for the participants to member-check their interviews. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, *in-vivo coding,* and

pattern matching. Next, documents provided by MCC were loaded into Delve and analyzed using pattern matching and explanation building. Finally, focus groups were conducted via teams using the transcription functionality. After member checking was complete, transcriptions were coded using *in-vivo* coding. Finally, the trustworthiness of my study was discussed in relation to the transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations. This section also includes permissions and other protections for the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this case study is to understand how collaboration, or lack of collaboration between community college-level silos, affects the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). This chapter analyzes the participants lived experiences with assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and their relationships to accreditation status with HLC. Data collection methods included interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. This chapter includes descriptions of the participants, themes, subthemes, and correlation of themes to the research questions.

Participants

Abel

Abel has been a faculty member at MCC for 20 years and has worked in higher education. He holds a master's degree and serves on the assessment committee. Abel was not part of the 2020 or 2022 site steering committees; he was a member of the Criterion 4 subcommittee. He is the division chair of his division, which makes him part of the assessment committee.

Abigail

Abigail holds a director role at Moses Community College (MCC). She has been in higher education for over 20 years and holds a master's degree. During her time at MCC, she held several roles. Abigail served on the 2020 site steering committee and the 2022 site steering committee. Now, she works closely with the assessment director to collect evidence. "I feel like I am constantly reminding people that I know they have things, and they need to get it to me," she stated.

Abner

Abner holds an administrative and faculty role at MCC. He has been in higher education for over 20 years and holds a master's degree while working towards his Ph.D. In his current role, he served on the 2020 site steering committee. During the 2022 visit, he also served on the Criterion 5 subcommittee. Additionally, Abner serves on the strategic planning committee and is part of the president's council.

Ada

Ada holds a director role at MCC and has been in higher education for over 20 years. Ada currently has a bachelor's degree. She began her career in the private sector before moving into higher education. As part of her role, Ada is familiar with the program review process because she is required to write them for her role. She served on the 2020 site steering committee.

Amnon

Amnon holds an administrative role at MCC and has been in higher education for less than 10 years. He holds a doctoral degree and serves on the assessment committee and site steering committee. He began his career at MCC as a faculty member. He came to MCC just before the writing of the assurance argument. As the 2020 site visit drew near and all Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALO) resigned, Amnon volunteered to help edit the assurance argument. He explained, "One, it was providing service, but two, I'll read this document and start to understand the school a little bit better and learn about this process and all kinds of stuff." Since that time, he has been more involved with assessment and accreditation.

Ester

Ester holds a director position at MCC and has been in higher education for over 30 years. For her first 16 years, she taught in the southern states but moved to Kansas to teach at

MCC. Upon Ester beginning her career at MCC, she began serving on various committees related to assessment. She was part of both the 2020 and 2022 site steering committees, as well as part of the assessment committee during both of those site visits. Ester holds a master's degree and serves on the assessment, strategic planning, and site steering committees.

Ezra

Ezra is a director at MCC and has been in higher education for 20 years. In her current role, she has been active in strategic planning and institutional effectiveness over the last two site visits. Currently, Ezra is less active in strategic planning but still very active in institutional effectiveness, as she is directly involved in enrollment management. She has a master's degree and was on the 2022 site steering committee.

Hannah

Hannah has been in higher education for less than 10 years and holds a master's degree. She works in student services. During the 2022 visit, Hannah was a member of the Criterion 4 subcommittee and participated in the evidence-gathering process.

Leah

Leah is in administration at MCC and has been in higher education for 20 years. Her journey to her current role has been long and winding. "The moment you think you are in control of your career, you are not," Leah explains. Throughout her time at MCC, she has held multiple positions. Leah has a master's degree and was on both the 2020 and 2022 site steering committees, the assessment committee as needed, and the strategic planning committee.

Mary

Mary holds a director role at MCC and has been in higher education for over 20 years. She stated she came to MCC "wanting to coach and began working in student services." During

the 2020 site visit she co-chaired the Criterion 1 subcommittee as well as was part of the 2020

site steering team. She holds her bachelor's degree.

Table 3

Participants

Participant	Highest Degree Earned	Committee	Role
Abel	Master's	Assessment	Faculty
Abigail	Master's	Site Steering	Director
Abner	Doctorate	Site Steering	Administration
Ada	Bachelor's	Site Steering	Director
Amnon	Doctorate	Assessment/Site Steering	Administration/Faculty
Ester	Master's	Assessment/Site Steering	Director/Faculty
Ezra	Master's	Site Steering	Director
Hannah	Master's	Site Steering	Staff
Leah	Master's	Site Steering	Administration
Mary	Bachelor's	Site Steering	Director

Results

After interviews and focus groups were completed, transcripts were member-checked by

participants for accuracy. Once this was complete, transcripts were uploaded into Delve tool and

went through *in-vivo* coding. After the first round of *in-vivo* coding was finished, the second

round of holistic coding began using the participants' words and sentences. From those words

and sentences, I used process coding by using the grouping function in Delve to group like

statements together. Grouping like statements together allowed for similar statements to be

coded together as themes. Themes emerged as participants' words and thoughts were grouped

into categories and subcategories using pattern matching. The themes were ranked according to

how often participants mentioned them throughout the interview and focus group process. Each

theme had subthemes emerge as similar statements were grouped as subcategories under the themes that fit into why those themes were occurring.

Table 4

Themes & Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
	Turnover
Inconsistency	Turmoil
	Lack of Communication
	Communication
Culture	Teamwork
	Campus Buy-In
	Program Review
Continuous Improvement	Budget Presentations

Inconsistency

The theme of inconsistency emerged in ten interviews and two focus groups, with nine mentions of inconsistency or change in leadership in the time leading up to the 2020 site visit. Leadership was constantly in flux, and there was a lack of continuity in leadership and the "disconnect between top administrators" was mentioned by Abigail. In reviewing the assurance argument and hearing the stories in the focus groups, it was discovered that in the years before the comprehensive site visit with HLC, this site had several presidential changes during the years before the site visit. "There was not consistency for, like, a good five years," stated Ada. During this time, according to Leah, MCC also had one president who made drastic changes in the college's administrative structure. During this time, there were also several resignations at the administrative level, which in turn caused inconsistency in committee structures, job descriptions, and the level of knowledge of what has been done on any campus. The lack of consistency in knowledge also led to "challenges related to needs within assessment and

institutional research and our ability to pull information and be able to then analyze that information," according to Ezra.

Turnover

Throughout each interview and focus group, each participant mentioned "turnover" in administration. Turnover happened not only in the role of the president but also in other administrative roles. In the years preceding the first HLC visit in the fall of 2020, MCC underwent the turnover of several administrators. According to documents, there were three different presidents in this time frame, each of whom restructured the administrative team of MCC. During the interview with Leah, it was discovered that one president was the cause of the most turnover. Within the first six months of her presidency, the president terminated the Vice President of Student Services and combined that position with the Vice President for Academics. By the time the board terminated this president and named the current president, the only administrator left standing was the current president. At this time, she held the role of president, chief financial officer, vice president of academics, and vice president of student services. During this time, one of the administrators, Leah, stated, "It was basically just me in the middle of a pandemic trying to prepare for a HLC visit." This turnover led to the loss of institutional memory and knowledge. It also led to a loss of continuity in the accreditation process and a lack of understanding throughout the original visit.

Turmoil

Body language during interviews played a role in this theme. Participants' explanations of "inconsistency" and "tumultuous time for us" during the changes in leadership were accompanied by body language exhibiting signs of tension as participants visibly changed their posture, hunched their shoulders, sighed, and gave non-verbal cues indicating they recalled a

difficult situation when recalling the events leading up to and following the 2020 site visit. All participants indicated that changing the administration frequently during the writing of an accreditation self-study led to a feeling of unrest and uneasiness. Participants expressed that unrest and uneasiness felt on campus transferred into the unknown, such as who was undertaking what role in writing the upcoming assurance argument. Leah explained that the person who was to write the assurance argument left "hid in his basement during the pandemic before retiring." Once the individual responsible for writing the 2020 assurance argument left, MCC had no one to write the assurance argument.

Lack of Communication

In conjunction with inconsistency, turnover, and turmoil was a lack of communication. This subtheme emerged quickly throughout the interviews and focus groups, as both communication and lack of communication were mentioned eight times by seven out of the ten participants. Due to the frequency of the changes in leadership and the resulting changes in leadership style, communication styles changed frequently at MCC. Changes in leadership and communication styles often led to a lack of communication campus-wide. The result was little to no communication about the process of assessment, strategic planning, IE, and accreditation. Not only was there little to no communication campus-wide, but Abigail also stated that "there was not a clearly defined group working on preparing the HLC report." The lack of a clearly defined group working on the HLC report led to a lack of small group communication as well about the process of accreditation.

Culture

Culture was mentioned repeatedly, and many subthemes affected the culture, leading up to both assurance arguments and site visits at MCC. This theme is critical in understanding how

the culture of the institution affected the accreditation status of the institution. Culture was

mentioned in seven codes that highlighted the importance of culture within the context of

assessment, strategic planning, and the relationships they had with accreditation. Mary stated

"Culture will be the number one thing we had to change to get off probation." This culture

change included changing the way communication, teamwork, and the concept of campus buy-

in.

Communication

The subtheme of communication emerged in the theme of culture. Nine codes were

identified relating to communication and culture. Before being placed on probation, the concept

of a lack of communication due primarily to the instability and change in leadership across the

campus was prevalent among participants. Erza indicated, "communication can be challenging."

However, during the culture change it became apparent that there were several opportunities to

improve not only the culture but "communication, understanding, [and] awareness," as Ezra

stated. Improvement in communication came through monthly Zoom meetings during COVID-

19, and those meetings have continued to be a positive change, according to Leah.

Teamwork

Teamwork as a subtheme emerged through the theme of culture, and it was mentioned in

conjunction with culture in the codes five times. Part of creating a culture at the institution

included changing how teams worked. From upper administration to faculty, it was clear that

there is respect for one another, and although, according to Leah, "people have different

strengths, we have worked really hard to build a team." Throughout the process, there was a

development in the departments of assessment and institutional research, which were two

separate departments but had a team mentality since the institution is small.

Campus Buy-In

The sub-theme of campus buy-in emerged as part of the theme of culture and, in coding, was mentioned three times. The campus culture changed in part through the buy-in of faculty and staff. According to Leah, to gain campus buy-in, it was important that the campus "see our leadership as all in." This statement was echoed by Ezra, stating, "I can't do the accreditation thing if I don't have them buying in." These statements were included in the eight codes that appeared regarding buy-in from faculty and staff regarding assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and accreditation which also included the idea from one focus group that the institution overall has developed a "culture of assessment."

Continuous Improvement

The final theme to emerge was the idea of continuous improvement, which came about through a discussion of the efforts MCC was taking to make all processes and practices regarding assessment, strategic planning, IE, and accreditation better. Overall, there were 10 codes regarding continuous improvement. The idea of continuous improvement included thoughts about getting everyone involved in multiple facets of campus. Leah expressed, "I think we've done a good job of finding a balance, and we continue to ask for feedback, which is huge, and we listen to the feedback." Feedback and improvements included program reviews, accreditation teams, and budget presentations. Program reviews, accreditation teams, and budget presentations are tied into the subthemes that emerged because of the theme of continuous improvement.

Program Reviews

The subtheme of program review is tied directly to continuous improvement, as program reviews are used to ensure improvement across the institution. The term program review was

explicitly stated 10 times. At MCC there is a program review process that occurs annually, then a comprehensive review is conducted of the last three years. These reviews are also tied directly to the budget. Program reviews are seen at every level on this campus and have evolved since the institution was placed on probation in order to include both academic and co-curricular areas.

Budget Presentations

The subtheme of budget presentations emerged as part of continuous improvement and ties well with the other subtheme of program reviews. During the coding process, this sub-theme was mentioned three times. The budget process and planning form a link between program reviews, financial decision-making, and the culture created at MCC through the budgeting presentations. Each department presents its budget yearly, and these presentations are open to the entire campus. According to Abner, the budget presentations were recorded as Zoom presentations during COVID-19. Still, that practice has been discontinued, and they are now open for any member of the institution to be present.

Research Question Responses

Through the interviews and the focus groups, three themes and eight subthemes emerged. These themes and subthemes answered the central research question and three sub-questions. Throughout the way themes and subthemes answered the research questions, there is overlap in themes and subthemes. The most common themes are culture and continuous improvement. Both appeared as themes in all four research questions. The most common subthemes were communication and campus buy-in. These two subthemes appeared in two of the four research questions. Each of the research questions is supported with data from the interviews and focus groups.

Central Research Question

The central research question states: How do collaboration and communication between administration, faculty, and staff, as well as between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness, affect accreditation efforts at Moses Community College?

The themes that answer the central research question are inconsistency and communication. Before 2020, turnover occurred in all upper-level administrative positions with "inconsistency for about five years," according to Ada. This inconsistency ultimately led to MCC having findings on their 2020 site visit with HLC. Through these themes, it became apparent that one of the major issues at this institution was the lack of consistency in leadership and the turmoil that comes with that inconsistency. During this time, little communication occurred about accreditation efforts. Administrators who oversaw any accreditation effort left mid-cycle, which left a void in institutional knowledge and collaboration between the three groups. Through the interviews, document analysis, and focus groups, it became abundantly clear that without collaboration and communication, silos become more defined not only in assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness, but silos occur between the faculty, staff, and administration became more defined as well. Both groupings of silos increased the potential for findings during an accreditation visit that would lead to a status of probation.

At one point during the writing of the 2020 assurance argument, there was such an increase in silos that there was essentially no one leading the writing team, as well as those on teams, were not asked to share their knowledge or ideas. This lack of communication and collaboration negatively affected the accreditation status of MCC during the 2020 site visit, and there were findings related to assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness (IE).

Sub-Question One

Sub Question one states: How do the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness and the administration encourage collaboration with the entire campus community?

The themes of culture and continuous improvement, as well as sub-themes of teamwork and communication, also played a large role in answering sub-question one. Overall, prior to 2020, there was little communication from the administration about these specific areas, as mentioned in multiple interviews. Communication was expected to occur; however, there was a lack of discourse campus-wide about who oversaw what task and how it was to be accomplished. Leading up to the 2020 site visit, there was incredible turnover in administration, which led to a lack of communication. Abigail stated, "We were not all on the same page and moving toward the same goals; we were all over the place. I feel that's kind of where we were previously and what caused us to be on probation."

After the site visit and subsequent probationary status for MCC, the administrative team made changes in order to ensure that the culture of the campus would change into one of collaboration and communication. The silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE were moved into one department with one director. Consolidation of these silos allowed all communication about these areas to come from a centralized source. During her interview, Leah indicated it was important to "support the process and help be a conduit" regarding communication. Supporting the process of assessment, strategic planning, and IE indicates that the administration placed ensuring that the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE are communicated to the entire campus and that there is a dedicated individual who communicates and ensures that these processes are being accomplished.

Sub-Question Two

Sub Question two states: how is the collaboration between the people involved in the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness productive or counterproductive?

Sub-question two was answered through the theme of culture with the sub-themes of teamwork and campus buy-in. A note of importance is that prior to the 2020 site visit at MCC, there was little collaboration and a loss of leadership, leading to probation with HLC. The campus was not communicating what they were doing in terms of assessment to one another or HLC. This lack of communication and collaboration was counterproductive in terms of these silos. However, following the 2020 site visit, it was noted by multiple participants that there was a major culture shift on campus. Leah noted that "culture was the number one thing we had to change to get off probation." This change in culture is highlighted in the theme of culture as the concept of changing culture to produce buy-in campus-wide was important across the board. Leah noted that buy-in from everyone on campus is important because "if there is no buy-in from the people who are implementing it or doing the work every day, things are dead before they are approved." Buy-in is exceptionally important in assessment, strategic planning, and IE. Without buy-in of these silos, there is no collaboration between the people in these silos. Each of them must be implemented campus-wide for them to be effective, or it "won't work if I don't have buy-in from faculty and staff," according to Leah.

Sub-Question Three

Sub-question three states: How does the campus buy-in in terms of faculty, administration, and staff to silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness practices exist on this campus?

Sub-question three was answered through the themes of culture and continuous improvement. The sub-themes supporting this sub-question are communication, campus buy-in, program reviews, and budget presentations. To promote a significant culture change, it was important to change how tasks, events, and other important items were communicated campus-wide. During the pandemic, upper administration began monthly Zoom meetings for all faculty and staff. This communication and transparency increased the buy-in of the entire campus, and these monthly meetings are still being conducted to ensure transparency and communication, according to Leah.

Communication is essential for buy-in. After 2020 and the subsequent probation by HLC, the way that faculty and staff were asked to participate in assessment, strategic planning, and IE changed. Following the visit, each area was required to complete a program review. These reviews happen annually, and a full comprehensive review occurs every three years. Program reviews are also tied directly to the budgeting processes. After the 2020 site visit, the budgeting process became much more collaborative and transparent to promote buy-in between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE. Budgets are now presented, and anyone on campus is open to attending these presentations. The transparency in the budgeting process allows collaboration between multiple departments as well as a greater understanding of what is happening in other areas of campus, as it is a great way for information to be shared, according to Ezra. The sharing of information has allowed for a continued culture of continuous improvement and positive communication.

Summary

This chapter tells the participants' lived experiences with assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and accreditation. Their stories allowed a greater understanding of

how and why probation occurs during accreditation cycles. Data collection methods included interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. Interviews and focus groups were conducted via teams. Documents were collected via email. Delve tool was used to organize and group the data into themes and sub-themes. The three themes of inconsistency, culture, and continuous improvement emerged, each with three sub-themes. These themes were then grouped under the research questions. This grouping or alignment with the research questions allows for a better understanding of how the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness affect accreditation status.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this case study is to understand how collaboration, or lack of collaboration between community college-level silos, affects the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). In this chapter, there is a summary of thematic findings as they relate to the case study conducted. Chapter 5 also contains an interpretation of the themes of inconsistency, culture, and continuous improvement. Discussion of the implications for both policy and practice occur, as well as a discussion of the empirical and theoretical implications for this case study. Both limitations and delimitations are defined and discussed. Finally, recommendations for future research are stated.

Discussion

This section discusses the major themes of this case study. The major themes that developed due to this case study are inconsistency, culture, and continuous improvement. Throughout this section, there is a summary of the findings and interpretation of the findings, with an in-depth discussion of each of the themes.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The themes of inconsistency, culture, and continuous improvement emerged through the processes of *in-vivo* and thematic coding. As these emerged, it was evident that not only did the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness have some effect on accreditation status, but leadership, culture, and how communication happens at an institution also have effects on accreditation status. Themes also developed subthemes allowing for a greater understanding of the importance of each theme within the context of the theme and the relationship to the silos.

Interpretation of Findings

Findings through a series of interviews, document analysis, and focus groups brought to light that instead of the siloing of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness having the most negative effect on accreditation status, inconsistency in leadership, culture, and continuous improvement proved to be a more adverse result. Each theme can be directly tied back in some way to one or more of the silos.

Inconsistency

Throughout the data collection process, consistency and inconsistency in leadership were the most common among participants. Leading up to May 2020, there was a great deal of turnover in upper leadership at MCC. This inconsistency and lack of institutional knowledge about the processes and practices at the institution when going into the writing of an assurance argument and site visit were detrimental to the outcome of the site visit. Overall, it became clear that the lack of leadership until May 2020 and the lack of a true accreditation liaison officer (ALO) until October 2020 had far-reaching negative effects on the outcome of the HLC site visit. Inconsistency in leadership guiding the institution leaves faculty and staff without a clear direction of where they are headed, as well as what tasks they are supposed to be undertaking as they are preparing for an accreditation visit. Throughout these findings, it can be noted that it is not just inconsistency with leadership, but the turmoil in the multiple leadership styles as turnover seemed to be consistent for the five years preceding the 2020 site visit. Inconsistency in leadership, which causes turmoil, also causes a disconnect between faculty and staff. Subsequently, this caused a lack of communication campus-wide. Anytime there is a lack of communication, silos become more of an issue. The silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness were not the only silos affected by the lack of communication from

leadership. However, the silo of assessment was the silo that was mostly affected by the lack of communication and the inconsistency and turnover in leadership. Due to this inconsistency, turmoil, and lack of communication, MCC was placed on probation following the 2020 site visit specifically for assessment-related findings. The siloing of assessment and the lack of communication about assessment to the entire campus hurt the outcome of the site visit.

Culture

Culture at any institution is of utmost importance. A culture of assessment and one dedicated to communication and understanding will bring about meaningful changes in an institution. It was noted that MCC had to change the culture to make positive changes in accreditation status. Cultural change had to come through communication, teamwork, and faculty buy-in. Faculty and staff must buy-in to any culture change for it to truly be effective. In the case of MCC, it was important for the leadership to be seen as the driving force behind the culture change. Discussing culture and communication throughout any process is essential; leaders cannot just appear on campus and expect to change things simultaneously. The most important part of culture is the culture of communication. Overall, changing one aspect of how any task, initiative, policy, practice, or new idea is sent out to the campus or communicated to the campus makes an incredible amount of difference in the way the campus functions overall and the way the campus responds to change or improvements.

Continuous Improvement

Ensuring that all areas of any campus are on the same track and are improving is the goal of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness. Allowing these silos to remain highly siloed and allowing each of them to lack collaborative communication with other areas of campus, assessment, strategic planning, or institutional effectiveness will not have the buy-in

that each needs to make meaningful improvements institution-wide. Creating a centralized office of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness at MCC effectively allowed for collaborative communication between the silos. It allowed for faculty and staff to have a centralized person communicating the importance of each of the silos. During the improvement processes, it is essential to note that assessment took the lead and created a program review cycle to ensure that each area of campus was being held accountable for either student learning or institutional outcomes. Many areas of campus tied their goals directly back to one of the strategic initiatives of the institution. By making the move to tie program reviews to the assessment of student learning but to the strategic plan as well, MCC made a move to effectively create a link between the silos of assessment and strategic planning.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Both implications for policy and practice exist for creating a culture of collaboration between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness. However, each will differ based on the needs of the individual institution. The importance of communication, culture, and continuous improvement cannot be understated in the discussion of implications for policy or practice.

Implications for Policy

The implications for policy vary by institution, although policy should relate to assessment practices, program review processes, and hiring practices. Policy relating to these areas will result in overall consistency throughout the processes and practices. The lack of policy about how assessment, program review, and hiring are conducted can lead to turmoil. Policy regarding each of these is of the utmost importance, and each has implications for practice and policy.

Implications for Practice

Assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness have far-reaching implications in practice. Each of these silos directly affects accreditation status. Therefore, institutions should create processes relating to assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness. The silo of assessment is known for having practices that are considered *best practice*, but what is considered best practice at one institution may not work at another institution. Therefore, when practices for assessment are considered, institutions must consider what works best for their faculty and staff. The same can be said for strategic planning and institutional effectiveness. The best practice is not applicable to all institutions in the same way. Instead, best practices should be individualized by each institution. However, the concept of communication and collaboration and practicing those between the silos should be practiced.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

Throughout the course of this study, it became clear that the themes of inconsistency, culture, and continuous improvement both reinforced and diverged from the literature surrounding the silos of accountability. The theme of continuous improvement with the theme that reinforced the literature surrounding accreditation. Assessment and accreditation revolve around the ideas of continuous improvement.

Empirical Implications

The silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness all affect accreditation status. However, often on campuses, accreditation and upcoming accreditation visits lead to the idea that the accrediting body is waiting for the institution to make a mistake instead of the notion that accreditation is simply an external review of internal processes (Colina & Blanco, 2021). As accreditation and assessment have become synonymous terms on many

campuses, this idea is reinforced through this case study, as the theme of continuous improvement came about through using assessment to remove the probation sanction placed upon the institution by the HLC. By looking at accreditation differently, it is entirely possible that institutions can change the culture of their campus in the time preceding any accreditation visit. Often, the time preceding an accreditation visit is filled with anxiety about what the accrediting body is going to find wrong or how they are going to punish the institution for not doing well. Instead, a culture change to looking at accreditation as an opportunity for improvement or simply as the external review of the internal process has the potential to make accreditation visits more about improvement and accountability and less about punishment for mistakes. It was noted in this case study that culture was what had to be improved or changed for the institution to get off probation. The finding that culture is an issue for institutions on probation indicates that findings have deeper roots than just not having something that is related to the criterion. If this is indeed the case, the idea of culture in relation to accreditation could be studied in a different format.

This case study noted the importance of buy-in from both faculty and staff in relation to culture. Buy-in reinforces the findings of Danley-Scott and Scott (2017) that all faculty should be brought into conversations about assessment. Assessment as a silo often is driven by administration, according to Danley-Scott and Scott (2017), and fails to bring faculty into the conversation, subsequently failing in the efforts to drive continuous improvement. MCC findings support this idea as before the 2020 HLC site visit, assessment was happening; however, the discussion about assessment was not being articulated well, and faculty were not always being brought into the conversations. As MCC increased faculty and staff buy-in and created a culture of assessment across the institution, the accreditation status changed during the 2022 site visit

from probation to fully accredited. The buy-in of faculty and staff for assessment and

accreditation played a major role in ensuring a positive accreditation status.

The case study worked well for this study. However, there could have been benefits to

phenomenology. Phenomenology would have still used the lived experiences of those who had

gone through an accreditation visit, which resulted in probation. Nevertheless, it would have

given a broader sense of those experiences and given other campus experiences. Often, findings

are not consistent between peer review teams, and the phenomenology design may have helped

to account for some of those discrepancies. The case study allowed for the focus on one

institution's journey through probation and allowed for a unique experience to be told. In

essence, the buy-in to all the silos was necessary for MCC to have a successful journey through

probation. Without buy-in from all parties and communication and collaboration, the outcome of

probation would have been very different.

Theoretical Implications

According to Brown (2017), there are seven silos of accountability in higher education,

and each silo draws from one or more institutional logic of state (focus on compliance),

profession (focus on learning), and market (focus on performance). This study focused on the

silos of assessment, institutional effectiveness, and accreditation and added the silo of strategic

planning as it is not defined as a silo by Brown (2017). Yet, strategic planning affects much of

what happens at institutions of higher education. The lack of strategic planning as a silo in

Brown's silos of accountability is a flaw in his theory. Throughout the interviews, document

analysis, and focus groups, there was significant evidence and discussion that strategic planning

is significant enough to not only the institution to be deemed a silo of accountability; moreover,

strategic planning directly impacts accreditation as it is mentioned in HLC's Criterion for

Accreditation under Criterion 5: Integrated Planning (Higher Learning Commission, 2020b) The mention of the plan in accreditation standards coupled with the fact that strategic plans should serve to guide institutions for the duration of the planning cycle indicates that planning should be considered a silo of accountability drawing from both state and market logics.

The silo of assessment remains a silo of accountability and is supported both by Brown's (2017) theory and through this case study. However, the idea that assessment should remain a silo without cross-collaboration with other silos of accountability is not supported by this case study. Assessment affects every area of an institution through the theme of continuous improvement. Assessment for the sake of accountability or checking the box will not lead to continuous improvement and will not lead to faculty buy-in (Danley-Scott & Scott, 2017) Instead, the silo of assessment must look different and be part of the institutional culture and fabric, as assessment should become a daily task and not a once-in-a-while task. As assessment as a silo of accountability moves from a true silo of accountability to more of a collaborative office, there is importance placed on the relationship of assessment to student learning, cocurricular learning, institutional effectiveness, and strategic planning.

Institutional effectiveness is also a silo of accountability, according to Brown (2017), and is supported through theory. However, this case study supports it as a silo with cross-collaboration, much like the silo of assessment. Much like assessment, IE is responsible for ensuring or reporting about every area of an institution. In essence, IE and assessment work in tandem to ensure that institutions function as effectively as they should. Assessment and IE are two halves of the same whole. While each function as a silo in some instances, it is also necessary for them to function together and work collaboratively as well in order to ensure that institutions are working towards a culture of continuous improvement.

Accreditation as a silo alone is part of Brown's (2017) theory that does not stand up throughout this case study. While accreditation is necessary for the accountability of higher education, accreditation itself, at some point, encompasses nearly every other silo of accountability. Both institutional and programmatic accreditation ask institutions to ensure that they are doing what they say they are doing using the concepts of both accountability and improvement. Accreditation is less about looking over the shoulders of any institution waiting for them to make a mistake and more about an external review of internal processes. Overall, accreditation should not be a silo in and of itself because it encompasses and asks that institutions use assessment, strategic planning, and IE to be used to meet demonstrate they are meeting the criterion for accreditation.

Limitations and Delimitations

For this case study to be effective, it was important to place both limitations and delimitations on the study. While the limitations are not under my control, the limitations may add depth and breadth to the study in a way that would not have been possible had the institution still been on probation. The delimitations are under my control, and if I had left the study as a comparative case study, the chances of data becoming compromised would have greatly increased.

Limitations

The site chosen for this case study is no longer on probation with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). While this site corrected its findings with assessment, it might have taken steps to correct any issues with the siloing of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness. Several changes in faculty have been made at the chosen site, which means there are several participants I was unable to interview or have in focus groups. This changed the

nature of the study significantly. The most notable change is that the vice president of academic affairs, who was there for both HLC visits, is no longer with the institution, and an interim is in place.

Delimitations

This study was limited from a comparative case study of three institutions on probation for assessment findings with HLC to a single case study of one institution. This decision was made in part because the other two sites would have potentially been readily identifiable based on the data collected and descriptions. The other limitation I have placed upon this study is the participant pool. Participants were selected based on their participation in assessment, strategic planning, IE, and the HLC accreditation process or site steering teams from the 2020 or 2023 site visits.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study aimed to research how silos affected accreditation status, the themes that developed leaned heavily toward how leadership, culture, and communication affected accreditation status. This was a significant and interesting concept of what positively or negatively affects accreditation status. This study was designed as a single case study; however, there are concepts behind assessment, strategic planning, and institutional research as silos that would benefit from being studied with phenomenology. The data collection methods would remain the same with the addition of surveys and journals. Throughout the lived experiences of assessment, strategic planning, and accreditation, it is obvious that there is much more to the stories and a greater need to study this more in-depth.

The silos of assessment and strategic planning have a significant relationship, but the assessment of the strategic plan is not something that has been studied or discussed. In many

cases, the connection between the two is loose at best. The development of strategic planning as a silo in and of itself is something to be studied further regarding the silos of higher education. As the silo of strategic planning is developed and studied, the relationship strategic planning has to the other seven silos has the potential to emerge as being significant. Overall, strategic planning is an important part of the landscape of higher education, yet it has not been identified as a silo, nor in many cases is it explicitly assessed.

Conclusion

A case study was conducted to understand better the relationship between the silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness and their relationship to accreditation status. According to Brown (2017), there are seven silos of accountability in higher education, with assessment, institutional effectiveness, and accreditation being three of the seven. Strategic planning is not considered a silo of accountability in higher education, but strategic plans guide much of what institutions do and undertake during their cycles. Overall, the importance of each of these silos and how they collaborate and communicate as departments cannot be understated, as each of them has a profound effect on accreditation status in some way or another. The silos themselves do indeed influence the accreditation status of any institution; however, it is clear that consistency in leadership, culture, and continuous improvement also have a profound effect on accreditation status. Communication and collaboration start with leadership and buy-in from faculty and staff. The silos of assessment, strategic planning, and IE will continue to function as silos without collaboration and communication if there is not an institution-wide culture of collaboration and communication.

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Appendix A

IRB Permission

February 15, 2024

Dana Juenemann

Meredith Park

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-1341 UNDERSTANDING THE SILOS OF

ASSESSMENT, STRATEGIC PLANNING, INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND

THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO ACCREDITATION

Dear Dana Juenemann, Meredith Park,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in

accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug

Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review.

This means you may begin your research with the data-safeguarding methods mentioned in your

approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in

which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2. (iii).

Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic,

aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public

behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely, G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP

Administrative Chair Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Site Permission

[redacted]

Dear Dana Juenemann

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Understanding the culture of assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and their relationships to accreditation, I have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty and staff invite them to participate in your study and to utilize our archival data for your research study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

X provide our membership list to Dana Juenemann and Dana Juenemann may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in her research study.

X grant permission for Dana Juenemann to contact faculty and staff to invite them to participate in her research study.

X the requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to The researcher.

X am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

President

[redacted]

Appendix C

Recruitment and Consent Forms

Recruitment Verbal

Hello [Potential Participant],

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this case study is to understand how collaboration or lack of collaboration between community college-level silos affects the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be faculty or administrators and involved in assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, or the site steering committee for the last HLC visit at the chosen site. Participants will be asked to participate in individual interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. It should take 2-3 hours to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

Would you like to participate? [Yes] Great, can we set up a time for an interview? [No] I understand. Thank you for your time.

A consent document will be emailed to you in the recruitment letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview or focus group.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education, at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the relationships between assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and their effect of accreditation status. The purpose is to understand how collaboration or lack of collaboration between community college-level silos affects the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission. At this stage in the research, silos of assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness will be defined as administrative/evaluative committees within a community college.
I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be faculty or administrators and involved in assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, or the site steering committee for the last HLC visit at the chosen site. Participants will be asked to participate in individual interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. It should take 2-3 hours to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate please contact me at ███████████████████ to participate. If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview or focus group.

Sincerely,

Dana M. Juenemann
Doctoral Candidate
███████████████████████████

Recruitment Follow-Up

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the culture assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness has on accreditation status as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. Last week an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to contact me if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is [Date].

Participants must be a member of the administrative team, assessment team, strategic planning team, institutional research team, or site steering team from the last HLC visit. Participants will be asked to [take part in video recorded interviews, provide documents, and take part in focus groups. It should take approximately 3 hours to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview or focus group.

Sincerely,

Dana M. Juenemann
Doctoral Candidate

Consent

Title of the Project: Understanding the silos of assessment, strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and their relationships to accreditation

Principal Investigator: Dana Marie Juenemann, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Education Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be part of the administrative team, part of the assessment team, part of the strategic planning team, part of institutional effectiveness, part of the site steering team, or have taken part in the last HLC visit at Cloud Community College. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this case study is to understand how collaboration or lack of collaboration between community college level silos, affects the process of accreditation as conducted by the Higher Learning Commission.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in a virtual, audio and video-recorded individual interview of approximately one hour conducted via Teams.
2. Check your interview transcripts for accuracy. This will take approximately one hour.
3. Participate in a virtual, audio and video-recorded focus group of approximately one hour conducted via Teams.
4. Check your interview transcripts for accuracy. This will take approximately one hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include increased understanding on the topic and improved assessment, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness practices related to accreditation.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports 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.

Appendix D

Transcript Example

Juenemann, Dana Marie 52:02

So in your current role, how involved in assessment are you?

A

Probably more than they want.

You know, I had to be in the beginning because, I mean, I had to do our performance agreement.

I had to help figure out like and I helped Brandon go through and write.

I had to especially this second time around like once we were on probation, I was.

I was heavily involved and I had I had my own.

I've got enough people that report to me.

I've got a marketing program review sitting here on my desk right now.

I gotta finish reading, but I have enough reporting to me that I have to be involved.

You know, some people don't want anybody reporting to them.

Some presidents don't, and and sometimes my board is like you gotta get more people off of your plate.

But I have marketing.

I have athletics and I have the foundation.

And then I have the VP's.

I think that's it.

But umm, so, they have theirs to do different than an academic, but they still have to do them.

And so and then also having worked as a CFO and our budgets tying to that helped me have that perspective and having come up from student affairs.

And then I just kind of had to learn some things triage from academic affairs.

I don't I by no means, and even remotely as experienced as a Cindy or a Brandon or you in assessment.

But I'm I know enough to call people out on their crap and enough to help defend it.

Also, to defend what they're doing, because I have told our faculty and staff, I will not go on probation again.

Juenemann, Dana Marie   53:42
Umm.

A ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

We will not, while as long as I'm here, it will not happen because it was costly and it was. It was.

So I . . . I mean I . . . I made sure we kept track of how much ended up costing us and time wise.

The hours, I mean that's a whole 'nother thing.

And then just the just all of it, are we better for it?

Absolutely.

But I'm involved in enough in the program review process.

I support what they're doing.

They come and talk to me about, OK, we have in service coming up and in the afternoon they're doing with just those that have to do the program reviews, cocurricular and Academic having like a two hour session of going through it because some are doing more than they need to be doing because they don't redirections, some aren't doing enough, but also bouncing off ideas of how do you guys answer this one?

Because I'm struggling with this piece of it.

Or whatever.

Umm, I try to go.

I don't sit through the whole thing, but I try to get just go and show some support.

Just come in there for a while and or maybe at least the beginning, and then in and out, because it's important work and I wanna make sure that that people, I think the visibility of seeing me there and acknowledging it.

So I make sure I do read my program reviews.

I do write a response.

I'm not always the most timely, but I do get it done.

Umm, I go to all the of the IG or watch this year I'll be able to go because we're not on probation, but . . .

All of the budget presentations that they have because they've got a tie it all back to budget.

So . . . and those are just, they're not that long, but I like to go because every year I learned something about people's programs.

And one great thing that we did was we made them open to everyone.

So, you can zoom into them because before it was a scheduled time that that group came in, that group did what they needed to do with administration.

That Group left and so not everyone was aware of what other areas were doing or what their needs were and all that.

So through probation and the and all of that and the pandemic helped with everything just becoming Zoomed.

But we did it where anybody can come and sit in the audience and then anybody can also Zoom. So, we record them all via Zoom.

That way, if somebody misses, they can go back and watch.

But we had a lot of really great feedback from that, but so I'd say I'm as involved as I think as a President, you have to be involved because you have to be knowledgeable because you otherwise you you're not.

You're not doing your job, in my opinion.

I mean, some presidents I know would say.

Umm, maybe some of us get too involved?

Maybe Seth gets too involved sometimes in different things, but I feel like it gives them.

We're working presidents.

We're Community College presidents.

Like, that's what we do.

We're not, president who.

Just sit in our office and wait for the VP to come and tell us what happened.

I wanna be informed, so I think it's my job to be informed.

So I tried to, umm, Support them and they're good at bringing things and bouncing ideas off me too.

And I go to faculty meeting, at least I go in the spring.

Umm to just I talk about hey, we have negotiations coming up here.

Some things that we may notice here, some this totally off topic.

Here's some things that you might think about noticing, but then we also just have conversations about whatever they want.

But I think just having that presence and then making sure that you stay involved and engaged.

And we're small enough to be able to do that.

Now I understand, you know, a bar and may not be able to do that, but I would say college wide here.

Nearly Everyone was involved in our accreditation visit and attended some sort of meeting on our last accreditation visit.

We made them.

A

We rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed.

Juenemann, Dana Marie 57:38

That's a theme.

It is well, we did and because we had, we had one mock visit and everything was good until assessment and people were so freaked out over the probation that they got in the room and we had a full mock team up there and they were great.

A

But they choked and they just got.

They froze.

And honestly, the vice president at the time, like she was in my office crying.

It was like she was so disappointed.

She just thought.

We've gotta tell people to one quit overthinking and just stop.

One thing we had too is you're always gonna have this everywhere.

We had a faculty or two.

That was like Ohh actually that's not what we do.

And it was a math person.

A

It's like bro.

And so after that she was like, we will never contradict each other in front of even if you know that person's completely wrong, you can say you can say, well, you know to add on to what, so and so is saying that we do this or I think what's so and so is trying to say is this you don't just say well no that's not right.

And so that was a lesson learned.

But you know, she was mortified by it, but we learned we had to have that experience or we would have choked on the actual visit.

So then we did a follow-up mock visit just for that area and then they, they slammed dunked it and they did a great job.

When they visit the visit, visiting team came so I'd say fairly involved, not as involved as maybe I was a year ago, but we have a good process and I think now we're just good point where we're trying to refine it.

Juenemann, Dana Marie   59:01

So to piggyback on that, how involved are you in the strategic planning process and the strategic plan?

A

So to check.

I'm trying to not take control of it. UM.

Ah, but I mean, it's in.

It's in, but I know that I can't control it, so it's kind of that, UM, in part of it, when you are

triaging and you're involved in everything, it it's hard to pull back and say, OK, what, what?

And when Kim came in, she said, you know, you've got a chain of command problem.
You.
There's some things you don't necessarily have to be involved in, umm.
And so I've worked with that, but this time.
Umm.
Really, part of that is in Cindy's job description is institutional effectiveness like in, in the planning.
And so I've really kind of let her and Brandon sort of start it and plus, you know, I can't control it or maybe people.
I think everyone's gonna be completely honest with me because that's just how I am, but it gives them maybe a more safe zone to just share.
And so I'm going to be really involved and ultimately.

████████ 1:00:25

It's supposed to intended for and so I'm like we've got a separate like.
What does SWOT analysis and what is like operational type stuff cause or strategic plan versus operational stuff because some of this stuff is like, well, there's a disconnect between such and such.
Well, we can fix that.
That's not necessarily a strategic initiative, maybe personnel and it's some subsets of that, but not, you know, financial aid was rude to, you know, the Geary County campus or whatever it might be.
I'm just making that up.
It wasn't in there, but you get down into that pettiest stuff in there sometimes, and so wading through that.

Appendix E

Journal Notes

- Leadership roles were siloed or non-extent.

- Roles in administration kept changing…makes it difficult to have consistency when writing an assurance argument.

- No set person to collect evidence, process was all over the place

- Assessment was being done prior to 2020, but the campus could not articulate how or what was actually happening during the visit.

- Lots of breakdown in communication.

- Turnover in leadership, frequently prior to 2020.

  o Presidents' turnover multiple times, current president was named by the board in May of 2020.

  o Vice Presidents were restructured frequently, at one point the current president was the only administrator.

- Turmoil in administration and across campus. No consistency in leadership means there was a feeling of unrest.

- Not what I was expecting.

- Instead of silos in assessment, planning, and IE it is more about how the campus is being led and those on campus are willing to collaborate and work together.

- This is an interesting find.

- Assessment, planning, and IE still are affected by leadership and the campus climate.