Exploring the Status of Learning Outcome Focused Initiatives in Four-Year Public Higher Education

Andrew Quentin Morse

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Andrew Quentin Morse entitled "Exploring the Status of Learning Outcome Focused Initiatives in Four-Year Public Higher Education." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Higher Education Administration.

E. Grady Bogue, Major Professor

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
Exploring the Status of Learning Outcome Focused Initiatives in Four-Year Public Higher Education

A Dissertation Presented for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Andrew Quentin Morse
December 2012
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my lovely wife, Amy Elizabeth, whose love, dedication, and commitment made my pursuit of graduate study possible. I love you.
Acknowledgements

Very special thanks are in order for Dr. E. Grady Bogue, a mentor and friend whose wisdom and care have changed my life. His guidance throughout this study has been and will continue to be cherished, and I am grateful for the investment he has made in me as a person and professional.

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My understanding of state higher education policy was also strengthened by two enriching summers of service at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, where I was introduced to and built lasting relationships with inspiring policy scholars such as David Wright, Dr. Thomas Sanford, and Jessica Gibson. These three individuals inspired me to pursue a career in the field of higher education policy, and their wisdom, talent, and dedication have set strong examples that will stay with me always.
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the bachelor’s degree granting institutions of the campuses in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study was also to understand what challenges and criticisms academic leaders report about the call to provide learning outcome evidence. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What efforts, if any, are institutions presently taking to assess and report student-learning outcomes and why?

- What types of learning outcomes, if any, are colleges and universities trying to measure?

- What challenges and criticisms, if any, currently impede institutions’ abilities to gather learning outcome data?

Data were collected from 12 in-depth interviews across three campus sites of current chancellors, provosts, deans, directors of institutional research, and vice provosts for undergraduate programs who were involved with the efforts to assess and report student learning outcomes. Strategic plans, accreditation documents, and state agency reports were also collected. Two findings related to steps institutions are undertaking to assess learning outcomes were observed. They were: Working toward Compliance and Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement. Two findings related to what institutions were assessing were exhibited across the sites. They were: General Education Testing (nationally standardized instrument) and Major-Field Testing (Nationally Standardized Instrument; Internally-Developed Instrument; Embedded Assessment). Finally, two themes related to the challenges institutional leaders have encountered were evidenced
through the case study. They were: Resistance Based on Established Practices and Concern over Assessment Decision Utility.

These themes and findings suggest that while student learning outcomes are a significant priority within institutions of higher education, leaders who hold responsibility over assessing and reporting student learning outcomes are faced with significant barriers to establishing institution-wide systems of learning outcomes assessment on campuses. Implications for practice as well as considerations for future research are discussed.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities are one of the United States’ greatest and most enduring accomplishments, and their missions exist at the core of democratic culture and heritage. Higher education’s American historical roots began during a time when the first institutions were created to enlighten future generations of religious and political colonial leaders (Thelin, 2004). The academy has prepared teachers, scientists, legal scholars and practitioners, military officers, and countless other entrepreneurs and public servants who themselves have utilized their knowledge and skills to advance democracy, spark dissent and public discourse, and influence American culture (Thelin, 2004). Parallel to the cultural changes that have shaped American society into its current and continuously evolving forms, higher education has also undergone deep adaptations to respond to social, economic, and political influences (Bogue, 2006; Thelin, 2004; Bogue & Hall, 2003). One major and intensifying response is the accountability movement within higher education (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Bogue, 2006).

Historical Context in the Accountability Movement

In the middle of the 20th century, lawmakers began to request that institutions provide evidence to indicate performance (Thelin, 2004). As a result, two federal information databases were developed in the 1960s to provide comparable and accessible data about institutional performance that are still used today. First, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems provides state-by-state comparisons using common data (Tierney, 1999; National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2012). Second, the Integrated Postsecondary Education System provides data
on student demographic characteristics, institutional enrollment, faculty and staff sizes, finances, and facilities (Tierney, 1999). The goal of accountability efforts has been to shift colleges and universities toward the production of data to indicate performance quality through such indicators as degree productivity and student learning quality (Mortimer, 1972; National Governor’s Association, 1986; Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012).

**The Growing Salience of Learning Outcomes in Accountability**

Institutional learning-outcomes assessment has become an increasingly emphasized form of accountability evidence among stakeholders. The calls by stakeholders can be observed within visible efforts to request that learning evidence be made available for public review and scrutiny (Morse, 2011; National Governor’s Association, 1986). Among these calls was a report released by the National Governor’s Association in 1986 that outlined a seven-vector plan to reform education. One of their major foci called for nationwide commitment on the part of college and university leaders to design instruments to produce evidence of student learning outcomes (National Governor’s Association, 1986). Additionally, the *Spellings Commission*, which was comprised of higher education experts and prominent legislative and business stakeholders and assembled in 2005 by United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, disseminated a nationwide report on its vision for higher education reform. In the report, the commission articulated that instruments were needed to assess learning as a premier form of evidence for institutional accountability (Spellings Commission, 2006).

Consonant with these calls, learning assessment instruments have been developed to assess skills in analytical reasoning, written communication, and critical
thought (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012; Educational Testing Service, 2012; National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012). These instruments have thus far yielded performance results that in some cases have intensified the concern among stakeholders to adopt accountability measures focused on learning outcomes (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Morse, 2011; Jankowski & Provezis, 2011). For instance, a recent book entitled Academically Adrift by Arum and Roksa (2011) challenged colleges and universities for not asking enough of students, and argued that insufficient rigor has led to student incompetence with basic skills such as written communication, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning. The authors reported the results of a 24-institution learning assessment on over 2,300 college students to support their position on the insufficient rigor associated with a college education. Over 35 percent of the students reported studying five hours or less per week over the course of their college experiences and, in the previous semester, over half did not have a single class that required at least 20 pages of writing (Arum & Roksa, 2011). The results of their study brought increased attention to the issue of assessing and reporting student learning outcomes (Association for Governing Boards, 2012; Arum & Roksa, 2011).

Stakeholders have requested a variety of forms of learning evidence to demonstrate accountability. For instance, evidence has been requested to indicate student competence with analytical reasoning, critical thinking, and written communication (Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012). In addition to these competencies, stakeholders also expect evidence that demonstrates student readiness to work in career fields upon graduation (Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012). In response to external stakeholder concern over educational quality and the push to produce learning outcome evidence,
nationally visible efforts such as the bi-annual *Measuring Up* report and the Voluntary System of Accountability have emerged to further encourage colleges and universities to develop or adopt instruments to assess learning (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008; Association for Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012). *Measuring Up*, which awards a letter grade (A-F or I for Incomplete) to indicate performance, recently graded each state with an “Incomplete” due to the lack of comparable data across institutions and states on learning (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). Further, the Voluntary System of Accountability, which is an organization that compares institutions according to common metrics such as graduation rate, cost, and student-to-faculty ratio, and requires that institutions publish the evidence on their webpages, has recently begun to promote standardized instruments to assess and report basic skills as part of their efforts. However, a research study conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcome Assessment revealed that only 26 percent of the 300 VSA participating institutions published results of a standardized learning instrument for public access while 55 percent reported results from their own instruments (Jankowski & Provezis, 2011). The lack of success in adapting to stakeholder expectations for learning evidence has raised concern over the efforts of colleges and universities to produce credible evidence of performance (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). However, significant consideration must be given to the challenges that colleges and universities have to assess and report student-learning outcomes.

**Challenges to the Adoption of Learning Outcomes**

Several significant challenges are currently impeding the adoption of learning evidence. These challenges are technological, political, and philosophic in nature. First
are uncertainties over the purpose, definition, and goals of gathering and reporting learning outcome evidence (Minor, 2011; Liu, 2011). A lack of clarity and consensus exists among institutional leaders on what should be measured, how, and for what purpose (Minor, 2011; Liu, 2011; Morse, 2011). Second, national efforts to establish learning outcome instruments conflict with the complexity and uniqueness of institutional missions in America’s diversity of colleges and universities (Thelin, 2004; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008; Association for Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012). Third, there is dissent over whether everything that colleges and universities do to influence the learning of students can be measured as a learning outcome (Shulman, 2004).

Concerns of technological impediments focus on the issues of tracking students who are highly mobile across institutions. For instance, a study conducted by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (2008) concluded that one-third of students entering a two- or four-year college or university in the United States will transfer to at least one other institution during their time in college. State systems of higher education have made great advances in developing databases to track students within states (Haertel, 2005). However, tracking student learners is met with the challenge of determining the extent to which an institution’s learning interventions can account for mobile students (Minor, 2011; Liu, 2011; National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2008). While one response to overcome tracking impediments might be to implement exit exams common to institutions, this adaptation would insufficiently address and identify issues of the educational process students’ experience while moving between institutions.
Further, a lack of clarity and consensus about what forms of learning evidence will adequately satisfy the variety of external stakeholder voices adds a facet of political complexity to accountability efforts (Morse, 2011). Morse (2011) interviewed legislators, business leaders, and academic chief executives to understand their accountability evidence expectations. While learning evidence was widely reported as an accountability expectation, consensus was lacking over whether instruments should assess basic skills competence, workforce readiness, or some other form of learning. Instruments developed to measure intellectual and communication skills respond to one form of stakeholder accountability calls, but also of concern are efforts to ensure quality within specific fields through examinations for licensure. Nothing up to this point has mentioned other outcomes sometimes attributed to a college education: civic learning, leadership skills, or moral character development (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). What remains uncertain at present is whether standardized instruments that assess intellectual and communication competence will adequately respond to the varied expectations.

Further, the calls for evidence to measure critical thinking, oral and written communication, and analytical reasoning skills highlight a major philosophic question: Can everything worth learning in college be measured? In a collection of essays on teaching and learning, Dr. Lee Shulman, President-emeritus of the Carnegie Institute for the Advancement of Teaching argued that learning is not always easily observed and can take place in a variety of forms (Shulman, 2004). Aside from this challenge are the varieties of learning and development that have been tasked upon higher education. Will evidence on student identity development in the form of citizenship, ethical decision-making, or leadership have a place in learning assessments, and how might these be
tested? Should they or shouldn’t they be, and why or why not? These questions get at the heart of higher education purpose. For what purposes do colleges and universities truly exist? Bogue (2009) contemplated this question in a speech he delivered entitled, “What’s a College For?,” which appeared in Vital Speeches of the Day. In his speech, Bogue reflected, “College is a place where we are invited to think about what brings meaning to our lives, what makes us glad to be alive. It is a place where the humanizing and elevating forces of curiosity and wonder are celebrated.” Purposes such as these fail to appear in the calls for evidence of student learning provided by stakeholders. Amidst these reflections on purpose, institutions struggle to adequately address stakeholder expectations for evidence of student learning.

Additionally, a lack of clarity and consensus presents a political challenge within efforts to assess learning outcomes. Research has suggested that external stakeholders do not trust evidence compiled and reported by academic leaders, and academic leaders do not enthusiastically consent to an independent review source (Roberson-Scott, 2005; Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012). Roberson-Scott (2005), for example, interviewed legislators about their satisfaction with institutional accountability efforts. The study revealed that institutionally developed reports of performance were not viewed as trustworthy among legislators (Roberson-Scott, 2005). However, while academic leaders understand the importance of independent review of institutional performance, these individuals remain cautious over the accuracy and comprehensiveness of external audits for accountability (Morse, 2011). If stakeholders expect learning outcome evidence, a principal challenge will be to identify procedures that outline what entities will hold
formal responsibility over the compilation and reporting of credible and trustworthy learning outcomes.

**Statement of the Problem**

Recent research on higher education accountability has identified that the need to provide evidence that both proves and improves performance is a commanding policy accent in college and university governance (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011; Morse, 2011; Roberson-Scott, 2005; Tipton-Rogers, 2004; Tanner, 2006). Literature also suggests that the expectation for institutions to assess and report student-learning outcomes as an expression of accountability is gaining as a priority (Association for Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012; National Institute for Learning Outcome Assessment, 2012; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008; Morse, 2011).

While the push for learning outcome evidence gains in emphasis as an expression of accountability, a lack of understanding is present on the philosophical, technical, and political challenges that academic administrators are facing to meet the expectations for learning outcomes within the accountability movement. For instance, stakeholders have not provided consistent insight about what forms of learning evidence would be considered credible (Morse, 2011). Further, the presence of tension over the trustworthiness of reports compiled by institutions to demonstrate accountability raises uncertainties over who should be responsible for gathering data (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). Additionally, philosophic tensions exist about whether everything worth learning can be measured (Shulman, 2004). Among these unresolved issues and policy
questions, though, is the intensifying presence of the expectations placed on institutions by stakeholders to measure and report learning outcomes.

Therefore, the problem is that while the call to produce learning outcome evidence is growing in accent among external stakeholders, there exists insufficient evidence to indicate what steps, if any, colleges and universities are taking to gather evidence of student learning. Further, there is a lack of understanding about what types of learning institutions are trying to measure, and little is known at present about the challenges faced in adapting to expectations for learning outcome evidence. Lastly, while the call to be held accountable has been made by stakeholders, there is a lack of consensus on what, specifically, the expectations and instruments of accountability should be. As a result, this study explored current efforts across institutions to assess and report learning outcomes and examined what impediments, if any, limit the ability to assess learning.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the bachelor’s degree granting institutions of the campuses in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study was also to understand what challenges and criticisms academic leaders report about the call to provide learning outcome evidence. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What efforts, if any, are institutions presently taking to assess and report student-learning outcomes and why?

- What types of learning outcomes, if any, are colleges and universities trying to measure?
-What challenges and criticisms, if any, currently impede institutions’ abilities to gather learning outcome data?

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because of the prominence of accountability expectations to focus on learning outcomes as an instrument of performance while technological, political, and philosophic issues exist that impede institutions from being able to measure learning on campuses in a meaningful manner. While literature has suggested that challenges exist that impede institutions to meet stakeholder expectations, scholarship up to this point has not investigated the extent to which institutional leaders and personnel face these challenges in their efforts to respond to stakeholder calls for learning evidence. The present study provided rich description of the status of efforts within one system of public higher education to assess and report student-learning outcomes and to explore what challenges exist in efforts to do so. This study addressed this gap in the literature by providing an in-depth analysis of initiatives to assess learning and the challenges that emerge from these efforts. The study provides information about an important aspect of the accountability movement as it is experienced in the day-to-day work of leaders who are responsible for responding to accountability expectations.

**Limitations**

Limitations are the aspects of a given approach to the conduct of research that place boundaries on the application or interpretation of the results of the study. The researcher chose a qualitative approach to the conduct of this study, which, as a method, has inherent limitations in how this study’s findings can be applied and interpreted. Qualitative research is an approach that seeks to add depth to a study by focusing on fewer participants. As a result, the findings are not meant to make inferences about a
population. Instead, the research is meant to describe the observations and interpretations made by studying an environment and the individuals within it. One limitation, then, is the limit and generalizability of the claims made by the researcher as a result of the study’s findings.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations focus on and define the boundaries of a study and constitute decisions made by the researcher to limit and bound the nature and extent of the study. A qualitative research design including interviews with four-year public university chancellors, provosts, and other well-informed university personnel was employed for this study, which allowed for rich, in-depth perspectives to be gained. Given that a qualitative approach was taken, this study was delimited to a purposefully selected sample of academic leaders in public institutions. Thus, the generalizability of the findings are limited despite the value the results bring to understanding the efforts colleges and universities are taking to assess and report student learning as well as the challenges experienced to respond to this accountability expectation. Further, the research is delimited to one three-campus public system within one state where the project was conducted. This delimitation was chosen by the researcher so that one system of public higher education could be studied in detail. However, given the bounded nature of examining the practices and challenges experienced by one system of public higher education, the results may not be applicable to other systems.

Another delimitation is that the researcher spoke with individuals who hold official responsibility over the assessment and reporting of student learning outcomes. While this provided rich perspective about the institutions’ efforts to respond to
stakeholder expectations, this delimitation excluded the investigation of others who might hold perspectives on the assessment of student learning outcomes. Faculty members, in particular, may hold perspectives about the challenges of assessing student learning that might be present from their experiences teaching undergraduate courses. The findings are limited, then, to those who hold formal responsibility over the assessment and reporting of student learning outcomes.

**Definition of Terms**

Several terms that are central to the conduct of this study have been defined to enhance understanding of the research. These terms are accountability, stakeholders, and learning outcomes. They are defined below:

*Accountability* - Mortimer (1972) characterized accountability as a report of the results that a college or university produces with its resources. Mortimer described that accountability can be understood through a managerial lens where stakeholders judge an institution’s performance according to its ability to meet mission and goals effectively. Next, Mortimer stated that institutions display accountability through program evaluation, which is a process where performance indicators are employed to examine inputs, process, and/or outcomes to ascertain quality. Lastly, Mortimer stated that institutions are accountable through the legal process as a means to demonstrate that laws and policies are upheld through operations and management.

Accountability has also been described as the extent to which colleges and universities make and demonstrate honest, efficient, and effective use of resources (Bogue, 2006). Also an expectation of accountability is that institutions demonstrate changes in student learning in terms of their skill, ability to be proficient citizens in a
democratic society and to be efficient and effective themselves (Bogue, 2006). Bogue and Hall (2003) defined accountability as the extent to which an institution achieves its goals. These perspectives as well as the emphasis on outcomes comprise the concept of accountability as a policy priority in colleges and university governance and leadership.

**Stakeholder** – Higher education, as an instrument of social, economic, and intellectual progress, has a variety of individuals and institutions it serves, particularly from the public sector due to the substantial amount of tax support that partially subsidizes the costs associated with higher education. These individuals and institutions that are impacted or served by the missions of colleges and universities to educate future generations of workers, leaders, and public servants through public dollars have a direct interest in making sure that money is spent wisely and that a quality outcome is reached. These are the stakeholders, and their identity is defined by their interest in seeing that a desired outcome is met and that quality is assured. As Bogue (2006) noted, within higher education, these stakeholders are legislators, business leaders, and academic leader peers alike who all hold that shared interest together and are all affected by the impact that colleges and universities have on students.

**Learning Outcome** – Two prevalent questions emerge when considering how to define a student-learning outcome (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008; National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012). One question is, “What does a student gain as a result of a particular learning intervention?” This question derives from the push for value-added assessment concept of student learning outcomes assessment. For example, after completing a major course of study, students may be asked to take an instrument such as a professional licensure examination
that, upon passage, intends to indicate that the student has acquired an adequate level of competence as a result of a particular curriculum to practice in a specific field. Another question, which does not necessarily examine the gains specific to a set of learning interventions, asks, “Does a student meet a certain set of competencies, skills, or values expected of a particular program or learning intervention?” In these cases, learning is assessed according to a particular rubric, but such competencies are not necessarily attributed to the interventions associated with a specific curriculum. Taken collectively, a uniform definition of learning outcomes is the process of gathering measurable or observable results to indicate student learning.

**Theoretical Framework**

Bolman and Deal’s (2003) “organizational frames” model served as this study’s theoretical framework. The organizational frames model describes four contextual frames common to organizations that provide a systematic description of the factors that form and influence the nature of their mission attainment and the division of labor and authority within them.

First is the *Structural* frame, which describes that organizations are comprised of roles and tasks that are assigned to individuals based not only on knowledge or skill, but also on environmental factors such as time and the product to be delivered. The assignment of tasks is based on specialization and knowledge also as a means to increase efficiency through the realization of multiple outputs that come together to achieve mission and deliver a desired product. College and university environments are highly structural entities. Each mission component of higher education is fulfilled through a division of labor between highly educated faculty, administrators, and personnel who
have roles of teaching, program administration, budgeting, goal setting, and, within accountability, to produce the forms of evidence stakeholders have identified.

The next frame, known as *Human Relations*, describes organizations as reliant for survival and growth upon the performance, inclusion, nurturance, and satisfaction of individuals who work for the organization. Through this lens, the individual’s unique characteristics are significant in the outcomes and quality of the organization itself, and if the organization concerns itself with the welfare of its employees it will be successful. However, inadequately resolved or unresolved conflicts lead to withdrawn, apathetic, and disunited employees. Calls for accountability and higher education’s relationship with society and its external stakeholders are highly influential on the human relations frame of colleges and universities. Understanding this frame helps to guide inquiry on the impact that unresolved and intensifying conflict impacts the perceptions, attitudes, and performance of institutional personnel in their attempts to be accountable to external stakeholders. This frame also suggests that resolution of conflict is highly important toward successful organizational operations, and the growing tension between stakeholders and institutional leaders over the production of accountability evidence adds pressure to lead to resolution over accountability conflicts.

Further, the *Symbolic* frame is equally essential when viewing the structure of organizations. Within this frame, individuals need to understand the background values and heritage to succeed within an organization. Colleges and universities are highly symbolic organizations not only in terms of the visual cultural representations that mark the campus environment such as mascots, but also in the traditions and practices such as the presence of tenure and academic freedom that have shaped institutions into the
organizations they are today. The culture of academic autonomy, for instance, may be found at odds with an increasingly democratized American culture that continues to gain interest and influence in governance matters. Accountability as an expectation also itself comes with symbols and heritage that are rooted in the value society holds over having influence, particularly in matters where public finances are involved.

Lastly, the Political frame refers to the understanding of authority/power and dissent/conflict over organizational purpose and mission. The political frame also describes that mission and tasks are not accomplished just through the specialized work of knowledgeable employees, but also through the tactical strategies that are developed as a result of conflict and struggle over power when resources are scarce. The political frame also describes organizations as being made up of individuals who form coalitions between one another, and, at times, the organization itself can act as a coalition between external entities or influences. Accountability and the calls for learning outcomes as a form of evidence have not been without conflict, and different coalitions have been formed to achieve or resist the movement within the academy. However, institutions have also acted as a whole to challenge external stakeholders over authority within accountability.

These four organizational realities have influenced and been influenced by contemporary higher education policy and practice as well as the roles stakeholders assume within these organizations. Therefore, investigating accountability, which is influenced by and dependent upon institutional culture, is appropriate by focusing on the realities that affect operations, governance, and leadership of institutions.
This study was principally focused on the structural, human relations, and political frames. The structural frame was used to examine who at each institution has been given the responsibility to take on student-learning outcome assessment efforts and how this delegation of responsibility has affected the efforts, positively or negatively, to respond to stakeholder expectations. The human relations frame examined the responses participants have in terms of their attitude toward student-learning outcome assessment as an accountability expectation. Finally, the political frame was applied to explore the specific efforts and struggles that participants report about assessing and reporting student learning. Through this lens, the investigator explored the conflict that participants face over who should be responsible for compiling evidence given the concern of credibility over institutionally developed accountability reports. Also, inquiring about the resistances that participants report about assessing and reporting learning for accountability purposes revealed information into the conflicts these individuals experience over efforts to meet stakeholder expectations.

**Organization of the Study**

This study is comprised of five chapters. A general overview is provided in Chapter One that includes the following components: Introduction, Problem Statement, Purpose Statement, Significance, Research Questions, Theoretical Framework, Limitations, Delimitations, Definitions of Terms, and the Organization of the Study. Chapter Two contains a critical review of literature as it pertains to learning outcomes as a growing emphasis in stakeholder expectations for learning outcome evidence as an expression of accountability as well as an overview of the challenges leaders face to meet these expectations. Chapter Three describes the methods employed to conduct the study.
Chapter Four offers a presentation of the study’s findings. Chapter Five provides a review of the study’s purpose and research questions as well as the Summary of Findings, Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations for both leaders charged with the responsibility to govern colleges and universities and scholars who may be interested in further engagement with studying learning outcomes as an increasingly intensifying call for evidence of accountability.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education leaders face complex policy challenges to both fully understand accountability expectations and to compile credible evidence to address these expectations (Bogue, 2006; Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). Research has indicated the growing emphasis that legislative, business, and academic leaders are placing on institutions to produce outcome-based evidence of performance (Tipton-Rogers, 2004; Tanner, 2006; Roberson-Scott, 2005). Among the calls for outcome-based performance instruments is the intensifying stakeholder voice for institutions to produce evidence of student learning as a result of the college experience (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008). However, while calls for learning outcome evidence have gained in intensity, colleges and universities have achieved limited success in responding to stakeholder expectations (Immerwahr, 2009; Spellings Commission, 2006; Robst, 2001; Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012; Roberson-Scott, 2005; Tanner, 2006). Therefore, a tour of relevant literature will address accountability’s commanding presence on institutional policy priorities broadly, and the push for learning outcome evidence specifically. To more fully understand the presence of accountability and stakeholder emphases on learning-outcome focused initiatives, a historical context will first be considered.

Accountability: A Historical Context

Accountability is a rising and intensifying policy and governance issue that has emerged from significant social, cultural, and political influences (Thelin, 2004; Tierney, 1999). Thelin (2004) noted that in the middle of the 20th century, the relationship between
higher education and the public shifted away from a trusting reverence held toward colleges and universities toward an emerging skepticism over institutional performance in the United States. In the 1960s, for instance, the federal government produced two national databases, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (http://www.nchems.org/) and the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/) to provide an early form of transparency over institutions of higher education (Tierney, 1999). The Integrated Postsecondary Education System was developed to collect institutional information with common sets of definitions and instruments on finances, enrollment and graduation figures, and personnel sizes and demographics to allow for comparisons and to promote transparency (Tierney, 1999). The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems assists policymakers and state governing agencies with the collection of institutional data on performance indicators (Tierney, 1999). The longstanding presence of these data sources, which still exist today, indicates a persistent effort among stakeholders to hold institutions accountable for performance.

Further, policy and advocacy efforts during the 1960s and 70s placed emphasis on accessibility to higher education for more students with aspirations to earn degrees and gain employment in careers that required higher learning (Higher Education Act, 1965). These efforts illustrated that the public expects higher education to be responsive to public goals and aspirations. For instance, the Higher Education Act of 1965, signed into law by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, brought increased financial support for college students (Higher Education Act, 1965). During that time, funding for public higher education also grew to support rising institutional operational expenses, but with these
increases in support came expectations for evidence of quality and productivity (Bogue, Creech, & Folger, 1993). Institutional oversight was heightened and state governing and coordinating boards were formed to perform program review, budgetary auditing, and strategic planning duties.

Former president of Western Washington University and the University of Hawaii System of Higher Education Kenneth Mortimer (1972) wrote an early treatise entitled *Accountability in Higher Education*, which provided an account of context and influence over thought on institutional oversight. In his work, Mortimer identified that outcomes were among the most significant accountability themes facing higher education governance priorities and offered a definition that encompassed the focus on outcomes from several different lenses. First, accountability can be understood through a managerial lens where stakeholders judge an institution’s success by its ability to effectively achieve its goals. Next, the program evaluation perspective characterizes the extent to which performance indicators determine quality. Lastly, accountability is determined through a legal lens where data gathered highlights that personnel are upholding legal obligations (Mortimer, 1972). The focus on assessing the outputs colleges and universities produce may have begun decades ago, but its present place in the accountability dialogue has only grown in relevance and intensity.

In the 1980s and 90s, the emergence of internal assessment and evaluation supported the growing legitimacy of the outcome-based accountability efforts that were gaining in prominence across the United States. Among these emerging priorities were initial calls for institutions to produce student-learning evidence, an expectation that aligns with Mortimer’s characterization of the program evaluation and managerial lenses
of accountability (Richardson & Martinez, 2009; Bogue, Creech, & Folger, 1993; Banta, 2007; Burke, 2005). Institutional leaders and stakeholders alike viewed assessment as a systematic process to guide quality improvement and to determine the effectiveness and utility of higher education institutions. During this time, the call to assess and report student learning made its way into nationally visible calls for accountability (National Governor’s Association, 1986). The National Governor’s Association released a report in 1986 entitled *Time for Results* that called for comprehensive educational reform at all levels. As one of the seven priority vectors articulated by the organization, colleges and universities were tasked with developing nationally standardized assessments that measure student learning (National Governor’s Association, 1986).

The emergence and evolution of accountability as a commanding, stable, and intensifying reality in higher education governance has shifted from focusing on inputs to centering on outputs as the basis for evaluation, funding, and public confidence (Mortimer, 1972). Exploring and understanding the status of institutional efforts to assess and report learning outcomes as a form of accountability evidence is central to building stakeholder and public confidence now and in the future. Still, efforts to assess student learning, consistent with broader concerns over accountability, have indicated that learning evidence is insufficient (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011; Roberson-Scott, 2005).

**The Accountability Context of the Site under Study**

In the institutional sites involved in the present study, student learning outcomes assessment was a requirement to meet accountability expectations from external agencies. In particular, student learning outcomes assessments are required as a major
component to earn or retain regional accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) as well as the state’s coordinating agency, which requires the data as a major component of its accountability system. The results will later illustrate the centrality of these two underlying factors to each institution’s student learning outcome assessment efforts, and a description of each external agency’s student learning outcome requirements will be further illustrated below.

The state agency’s accountability system operates on a five-year basis, and the results of its student learning outcomes assessments that are collected for general education and major field knowledge are required as a major part of the funding formula. According to the agency’s most recent revision of its accountability guidelines, general education assessments must assess and report critical thinking as well as oral and written communication on a standardized scale. The state agency must authorize the instrument to be utilized by each institution in the assessment process. Each student applying for graduation from the campus must complete the assessment unless the institution graduates more than 400 students per academic year, in which case a representative sample can be assessed instead. Students are not affected for their performance on the examination. Assessments are scored according to each institution’s performance average compared to the national average for the year in which the institution reports the results. Institutions can earn up to 15 percent of the 100 total possible points awarded through the accountability system based on their scores. To earn the maximum amount of points for general education testing, each institution’s average must equal to or greater than the national average. To be awarded any points for this part of the funding formula, institutions must score at or above 70 percent of the national average. Each institution’s
score is calculated by dividing their overall institutional average by the national average for that year. As a result, no value can be greater than 100. For context on the architecture of this policy, review Bogue and Brown’s (1982) paper entitled *Performance Incentives for State Colleges* as well as Bogue and Johnson’s (2010) paper entitled *Performance Incentives and Public College Accountability in the United States: A Quarter Century Policy Audit.*

The second component of the state agency’s student learning outcomes assessment requirement includes major field-testing. The assessment must demonstrate the extent to which students retain knowledge within a particular field of study. Institutions may utilize a nationally standardized assessment instrument, or an assessment may be created by the department offering the program. Depending upon which type of instrument is selected and approved by the state agency, nationally standardized or institutionally developed, the exam results are either compared to a national average or to the scores of students from a prior year at the institution. Major-field tests are administered to each student who has applied for graduation and is enrolled in a particular major. Scores for nationally standardized tests are reported as percentiles, and those of internally developed exams are averaged within each program and divided by the average score from the most recent year’s results. As a result, no scoring’s methods can earn a score above 100 percent of the national or program’s prior year average. Major-field testing accounts for 10 percent of the total score for each campus, and an institution must, on average, be at or above the national or institution’s prior-year average to be awarded the full 10 points. Institutions reporting an average score of below 70 percent receive no points for this component of the accountability system. An academic program
may apply for exemption from review if the program is low in enrollment and the reason is justified. State agency documents state that exemption can apply for programs that are new or slated for termination, inter- or multidisciplinary, or theatrical, artistic, or musical performance-oriented. In total, the accountability system accounts for approximately 5 percent of each institution’s total funding recommendation to the legislature per year and student learning outcomes assessments from general education and major field testing account for 25 percent of the accountability system.

In addition to requirements from the state agency, the regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, requires as part of its accreditation process a report on each institution’s performance on student learning outcomes assessment. For instance, in a document entitled *SACS Principles of Accreditation*, the accrediting body has articulated standards for institutional effectiveness that include defining and assessing student learning outcomes. In particular, the following lists the standards set forth by SACS in their *Principles of Accreditation document*:

3.3 Institutional Effectiveness

3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes, assess the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas:

3.3.1.1 educational programs, to include student learning outcomes.

These two external agencies hold authority and influence over the finance and governance of institutions of higher education, and, as public institutions, the campuses in this study are required to comply with regulations and standards of these bodies. The documents from which these standards are derived also illustrate that the purpose of student learning outcomes assessment is to provide further evidence of quality in
educational delivery and the performance of students. In addition, these documents also illustrate the expectation for a plan to improve the quality of educational performance and delivery.

**The Present Accountability Perspectives among Stakeholders**

In 2011, the Association for Governing Boards for Universities and Colleges published their Statement of Board Responsibility for Oversight of Educational Quality, which outlines seven principles to which trustees should commit as a means to uphold institutional accountability. The statement reads as follows:

The governing board should commit to developing its capacity for ensuring educational quality; The board should ensure that policies and practices are in place and effectively implemented to promote educational quality; The board should charge the President and chief academic officer with ensuring that student learning is assessed, data about outcomes are gathered, results are shared with the board and all involved constituents, and deficiencies and improvements are tracked; The board is responsible for approving and monitoring the financial resources committed to support a high-quality educational experience; The board should develop an understanding of the institution's academic programs--undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs; The board should ensure that the institution's programs and resources are focused on the total educational experience, not just traditional classroom activity; and The board should develop a working knowledge of accreditation--what it is, what process it employs, and what role the board plays in that process.

These principles indicate a clear delegation of responsibility and authority among board members as stakeholders to uphold quality and to expect evidence as part of that duty. This statement also reinforces the notion that trustees hold formal authority over accountability, and have clear forums in which to articulate expectations and concerns. However, external stakeholders such as business leaders and legislators hold perspectives that create complex leadership challenges to which academic leaders must adapt in demonstrating accountability.
The literature on stakeholder policy perspectives currently suggests a lack of consensus and satisfaction over accountability policy guidelines and priorities (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). Understanding and adapting to multiple stakeholder perspectives, and engaging in dialogue are thus necessary components to achieve consensus-based approaches to accountability.

Three qualitative studies on state legislators, institutional leaders on college campuses, and business stakeholders within Tennessee probed their views on accountability (Roberson-Scott, 2005; Tanner, 2006; Tipton-Rogers, 2004). For instance, Roberson-Scott (2005) interviewed 15 legislative leaders and found that these stakeholders perceived that colleges and universities were insufficiently demonstrating accountability. Legislators reported that institutional policies designed to produce and report evidence were not credible and trustworthy. Further, legislators preferred that an external body be involved in gathering accountability evidence to heighten the trustworthiness of evidence (Roberson-Scott, 2005).

Tanner’s (2006) qualitative study on 15 chief executive officers and faculty leaders of public campuses also highlighted the concern these stakeholders have over accountability. While academic leaders reported that accountability is a necessary and worthwhile policy goal within higher education institutions, many concurred that its use within the state’s performance funding model was a significant challenge to the leadership of their campuses (Tanner, 2006). The policy challenge that institutional leaders at publically-supported institutions face is that while stakeholder support in the form of tax dollars continues to decline, expectations for evidence that indicates quality increase. Although this support is declining, state allocations are still needed to operate.
As a result, academic leaders are challenged with the task of meeting stakeholder expectations while revenue declines.

Business leaders have also shared their perspectives on higher education accountability and performance expectations (Tipton-Rogers, 2004). Tipton-Rogers (2004) interviewed 12 business leaders and found that these stakeholders perceived the principal mission of higher education is to educate the future workforce. This study also illustrated that business leaders are concerned over the quality of graduates that institutions are producing in terms of workforce readiness (Tipton-Rogers, 2004). If business leaders are concerned over the quality of graduates, colleges and universities are pressured by the priority to produce individuals that will be successful in their careers as a means to build stakeholder confidence.

These studies on academic, business, and political leaders highlighted concerns over the efforts of public institutions in the state to be accountable (Tipton-Rogers, 2004; Tanner, 2006; Roberson-Scott, 2005). However, these studies did not examine what efforts colleges and universities currently had underway to demonstrate accountability or attempt to understand what challenges leaders face in compiling accountability evidence. Further research to address these issues can provide insight about why colleges and university leaders and personnel may have difficulty satisfying stakeholder expectations. For instance, one inherent accountability challenge faced by institutional leaders is to adapt to numerous accountability expectations from a variety of stakeholders. Recent research has explored this issue.

While the research on major stakeholder perspectives on accountability policy investigated the priorities and perspectives of the stakeholder groups themselves,
important insight was obtained about the extent to which consensus is shared on a variety of accountability components. Bogue and Hall (2012) and Morse (2011) conducted surveys among 530 corporate, legislative, and collegiate leaders across six states to understand stakeholder views on accountability purpose and evidence preferences. The researchers surveyed state legislators, business leaders, and college presidents, provosts, and faculty senate leaders to investigate their views on higher education accountability definition as well as to understand their preference for a variety of accountability indicators.

The purpose of these studies was to understand the extent to which consensus was shared among the stakeholder groups on accountability. Bogue and Hall (2012) and Morse (2011) demonstrated that while accountability is a significant policy goal among the stakeholder groups, leaders had differences of opinion over the value and validity of the forms of evidence, definitions, and goals of accountability. For instance, the stakeholder groups differed on the value of reports that indicate fiscal and educational performance as a definition of accountability and the appropriateness of ratings and rankings as a form of evidence (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). Further, these groups differed on their understanding of higher education purpose; academic leaders differed from both legislative and business leaders, for instance, on higher education as a place for discovery of student talents, skills, and interests (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). These studies revealed important perspective about the challenges that institutional leaders face to meet accountability expectations due to the variety of conflicting viewpoints among stakeholders. However, the survey design did not allow for stakeholders to offer open-ended perspective on what forms of evidence warrant highest
priority as well as what might be missing out of efforts to report indicators of performance to stakeholders.

Morse (2011) interviewed a sample of 19 institutional, legislative, and business leaders in Tennessee to further investigate what forms of outcome evidence these individuals report would help to build confidence in accountability. Further, the study asked respondents to indicate who ought to be responsible for compiling accountability evidence. Stakeholders reported that forms of evidence that indicate student-learning outcomes were needed and that these should be made publicly available. Legislative and business leaders, in particular, were dissatisfied with the quality of graduates institutions were producing and wanted to see initiatives undertaken that focused on the improvement of student learning through forms of evidence that could be easily understood (Morse, 2011). While stakeholders interviewed within this study indicated concern over the status of assessing and reporting student learning as an indication of performance, the study did not focus on what efforts were being undertaken among the colleges and universities in the state to assess learning outcomes. This information will provide important perspective to the issue of stakeholder concern over accountability because it will allow development of understanding on the present status of efforts to assess and report learning if these initiatives exist on campuses.

Of concern within this study, too, was that while stakeholders emphasized the importance of dialogue and building consensus to form and sustain reasonable accountability policy expectations, academic and political leaders collectively reported that dialogue had not sufficiently occurred (Morse, 2011). Further, each of these groups held different ideas over what forms of learning evidence were credible. Business leaders
reported that evidence of workforce readiness was needed while academic participants offered dissent over the value of such evidence and recommended the assessment of basic skills such as written communication and critical thinking. Legislative leaders affirmed the importance of both basic skills and workforce readiness as desired learning outcome evidences. However, the participants held different viewpoints over how these forms of evidence should be collected and expressed distrust over data compiled by institutional leaders (Morse, 2011). This study illustrated that the interest in designing and assessing learning outcomes is present among the major stakeholder groups, but these individuals are dissatisfied with quality of graduates. Understanding policy perspectives is important to examine what aspects of accountability are viewed as a priority, particularly while the movement to call for performance evidence continues to intensify. However, this study did not investigate the adaptations that institutions are making to demonstrate accountability, and to consider the challenges that impede the development of acceptable forms of evidence that align with stakeholder expectations.

But, more broadly, what does understanding stakeholder perspectives on accountability have to do with more specific efforts to assess and report student-learning outcomes? These perspectives set the foundation upon which efforts to gather and assess a variety of forms of accountability evidence are based, and these studies illustrated the forms that are of importance to the stakeholders (Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012). Further, these studies highlighted accountability’s commanding, persistent, and intensifying presence as a governance issue influencing colleges and universities (Tipton-Rogers, 2004; Roberson-Scott, 2005; Tanner, 2006). As Bolman and Deal (2003) articulated in their organizational frames model, the struggle over power and authority
are common conflicts within organizations. Perhaps one of the most salient conflicts within the contemporary higher education dialogue is over the forms of accountability evidence. The next section will illustrate that the push for the assessment and reporting of learning outcomes is a source of pressure being placed upon college and university leaders by a variety of stakeholders.

**The Push for Learning Outcome Evidence**

While the emphasis on performance outcomes has continued to strengthen as a preferred indication of institutional accountability, the call for student learning outcomes remains one desired form of such evidence. Recently, numerous requests have made the expectation to assess and report learning outcomes even more salient (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008).

One highly visible call for learning outcome evidence is illustrated in a bi-annual report compiled by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education entitled *Measuring Up*. The stated intent of *Measuring Up* is to raise the visibility of accountability expectations at a national level as a means to improve public institutional performance by providing comparative data on several indicators (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008). The report offers a comparative analysis on affordability, accessibility, educational quality, completion rates, and learning outcomes using benchmarks that are common to each public four-year college and university across all states (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008). Each state is assigned a letter grade (A through F, indicating excellent to poor performance and I, suggesting incomplete evidence) and the results are made publicly available. A recent edition of the report highlighted that most states within the United States fail to provide
an education that is affordable and accessible and that students are not graduating in a timely manner (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008).

The problem with the report’s attempt to measure learning outcomes in accordance with its effort to make such data common and comparable among the state institutions is that no benchmark data common to all state institutions exist (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008). As a result, each state was given the grade of “Incomplete” as an indication that more work across the states is needed to assess learning. The report acknowledged several isolated efforts among some states to measure learning outcomes such as South Dakota’s mandatory learning examination of rising juniors, the graduate record examination that assesses aspiring graduate students, and selected professional licensure examinations such as those in nursing (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008). However, these efforts do not offer a holistic set of nationally comparable and adopted instruments that would permit a comparison of institutional learning outcomes. Deeper than these considerations, though, are whether or not colleges and universities should assess and compare learning outcomes nationally.

Nationwide, many colleges and universities reported initiatives to provide evidence of quality by developing voluntary partnerships with other institutions to report institutional data to stakeholders. The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), for instance, developed the Voluntary System of Accountability Program in 2007. It allows for participating institutions to voluntarily provide basic, standardized data to major constituencies (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012). The program
provides a glimpse of each participating institution in comparison to other schools involved in the program. The Voluntary System of Accountability prompts colleges and universities to report information to the public such as the types of degrees offered and costs to attend. Also, responses from standardized instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement provide insight about the perceptions and attitudes of the student body about the institution that evidence quality and the effectiveness of campus resources (APLU, 2010). Recently, the Voluntary System of Accountability has sought to promote the inclusion of measures that assess learning outcomes among participating institutions.

In a policy memo written in 2008, the Voluntary System of Accountability program identified its intent to promote instruments that provide standardized evidence that assess critical thinking, written communication, and analytical reasoning skills. The organization recommended the use of three instruments developed by organizations external to the Voluntary System of Accountability: The Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (critical thinking and written communication), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written communication), and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (critical thinking and written communication) (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012).

The Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) all examine the longitudinal value-added gains of a general education curriculum by testing incoming students at the institution and then upon the completion
of either the sophomore, junior, or senior year (Association of Public and Land Grant
Universities, 2012). Questions within the CAAP and MAPP exams are administered in a
multiple-choice format, but a written essay is also required within the CAAP to examine
writing and analytical reasoning skills. The CLA examination is offered exclusively in
essay format (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012).

Jankowski and Provezis (2011) investigated the efforts of institutions that agreed
to participate in the Voluntary System of Accountability to collect and report student-
learning evidence. The objective of the efforts by the Voluntary System of Accountability
student learning outcome project was to encourage colleges and universities to place data
in an accessible location on their institutional web pages (Jankowski & Provezis, 2011).
The researchers found that out of the 300 VSA participating institutions nationwide, only
26 percent of institutions published their results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment
examination on their websites. Additionally 55 percent presented institutionally
developed assessment data on student learning and 16 percent reported the results of a
critical thinking examination offered by the Educational Testing Service on their web
pages. While these efforts suggest that some progress is underway to report learning
evidence, there is little progress at present in producing common reports across
institutions.

The United States Department of Education (DOE) has published goals to
increase productivity in higher education as a means of achieving President Obama’s goal
to improve graduation rates to 60 percent from their current national average below 40
percent by 2020. Among the steps to reach that goal is to assess learning among colleges
and universities to guide the improvement of quality instruction to undergraduates. The
college completion goal, and the step to improve the assessment of student learning as a component within it indicates concern at the federal level over how institutions are preparing students and making efficient use of taxpayer dollars. For instance, the DOE reported dissatisfaction with the increase in total amount of tax dollars expended per student by 70 percent over the past 30 years without improvement in reported outcomes. Concern was also expressed over the lackluster percentage of revenue (21 percent total institutional revenue) that is currently expended to support instructional costs (Department of Education, 2012). The DOE articulated these concerns and the concurrent goal as a call to action for institutional leaders to produce evidence of learning focused on performance improvement designed to meet goals set by the Obama administration.

Perhaps one of the most highly visible forms of evidence that called for enhancement of student learning evidence came from a panel of business, legislative, and academic leaders formed by former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in 2005. The group, called the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, was charged with developing a national strategy for reforming higher education, particularly emphasizing workforce preparation. Further, the motivation for addressing a national strategy was driven by the global competition for higher education quality and degree production (Spellings Commission, 2006).

While the report that emerged, which was entitled *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education*, was a much broader call for reform in the areas of higher education access, cost and affordability, and transparency and accountability, one of the major areas identified for improvement was the production of evidence to indicate learning. The concern over the need to produce such evidence was based on reports of
employers that suggested graduates were not ready to work. The report also cited evidence of massive decline in adult literacy. Further, the report articulated that foreign countries were steadfastly catching up to the United States in terms of the quality and number of graduates (Spellings Commission, 2006). Despite its broad representation, national visibility, and its ambitious objectives, the report has not led to any overarching and success nationwide efforts to improve accountability and the assessment of learning outcomes (Zemsky, 2009).

In response to dissatisfaction over the effectiveness of the Spellings Commission to generate a useful plan for reform, professor Robert Zemsky, who served on the commission, published a book detailing his critique of the major failures of this reform effort (Zemsky, 2009). Key among Zemsky’s criticisms was that the outcomes of this initiative had already been determined by Secretary Spellings before members had a chance to engage in dialogue. Zemsky also criticized reform efforts that are quick to offer critique over higher education without providing adequate solutions to the problems facing higher education. Instead, Zemsky’s recommendations were to focus not on that which cannot be done, but, instead, to focus on that which can be done. Among these recommendations were to rejuvenate the focus on pedagogy and student learning (Zemsky, 2009).

The call for learning outcome assessment has appeared internationally in an ongoing attempt led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to adapt the Collegiate Learning Assessment on a global scale (OECD, 2007). For instance, a panel of experts was gathered by OECD to articulate the need and envisioned goals of learning assessment globally. The experts in attendance for the panel
were international higher education policy scholars, stakeholders from high-level government entities such as the World Bank, and government officials from around the world. The stated objectives that appeared in a report of the panel were 1) that the outcomes from such data would inform national policy development; 2) to compare learning outcomes across institutions; and 3) to inform consumer choice. While the OECD panelists agreed that core competencies such as critical thinking would be easier to measure, the experts cited problems of building consensus on what field-specific competencies would be acceptable (OECD, 2007). Presently, the OECD webpage articulates that the survey instrument is still under investigation and development (OECD, 2012).

Efforts to compel colleges and universities to prioritize learning outcomes as a form of accountability evidence are influenced by stakeholder skepticism over educational quality. Recent studies have investigated the value-added educational benefit of higher education (McMahon, 2005; Arum & Roksa, 2011). For instance, a recent nationwide assessment of critical thinking by college sophomores indicated that only three percent of 8,675 students across 51 two-year colleges who completed the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency by the Educational Testing Service could be considered proficient critical thinkers (McMahon, 2005).

_Academically Adrift_ chronicled students’ testimonies about their college experiences in a way that both puzzled and shook academic leaders and lay governing authorities (Arum and Roksa, 2011). In it were stories of students who reported having few expectations placed upon them in their coursework and of feeling educationally underprepared. Further, Arum and Roksa (2011) presented quantitative data indicating
that more than one-third of the students in their study showed no improvement in critical thinking over four years in college. The study, which utilized the Collegiate Learning Assessment with 2,300 students across 24 four-year institutions, also revealed that students reported studying less than five hours or less per week over the course of their college experiences and, in the previous semester, did not have a single class that required at least 20 pages of writing. On the basis of their findings, the authors raised the question, “Are we asking too little of our undergraduate students?” This book gained national visibility among state governing boards and raised concern once again over educational quality and student learning within colleges and universities (National Conference on Trusteeship, 2011).

Despite the book’s visibility among stakeholders across the United States, it was only a limited critique of higher education performance in terms of student learning and the challenges they encounter while studying. First of all, this book critiqued the process of higher education, or that present classroom expectations were the central problem underlying lacking educational quality. However, no case was made for the relationship between educational process and student learning outcomes. Secondly, the assumption that the authors made was that students need more work to gain proficiency. However, insufficient consideration was made about the method of instruction and its impact on student learning. Perhaps students do not necessarily need more work, but, instead, better instruction to improve learning. This work raised criticism over higher education performance, but provided an incomplete consideration of the problem facing colleges and universities to teach students and to ensure that they are learning effectively.
The many voices influencing policy and governance in higher education add challenges of politics, philosophy, and technology to design and implement learning outcome evidence to demonstrate accountability. Many organizations have presented their ideas on how institutions should measure learning as well as the instruments that ought to be used to gather evidence. With such certainty over the need to assess learning outcomes, though, it is worth further consideration and exploration about why, despite an established history of such evidence being produced, colleges and universities have yet to adopt such evidence in a holistic and meaningful manner.

**Learning Outcomes as Challenges of Philosophy, Politics, and Technology**

Given the heavy push on institutions to produce learning outcome evidence as an illustration of accountability, it is important to consider the challenges that currently impede the development and adoption of instruments that assess learning. Studies and commentary suggest that these are tensions of philosophy and challenges of politics and technology (Hutchinson & Young, 2011; Popham, 1997; Shulman, 2004).

One particular philosophical challenge impeding the adoption of learning outcome instruments is the unresolved issue over what ought to be measured. Research has articulated that stakeholders aspire to see evidence of basic skills competence on one hand and workforce readiness on the other (Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012; Tipton-Rogers, 2004). Additionally, tensions exist over whether or not everything worth learning can be measured. Higher education is viewed as a place where students develop an understanding of citizenship and leadership, for instance, but thus far these educational purposes of higher education have not been represented in research on accountability (Bogue & Aper, 2000; Colber, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003).
Further, a lack of clarity and consensus over what, specifically, is to be measured and how these evidences can effectively be used to demonstrate accountability present conflict over the utility of these accountability evidences. Again, stakeholders have identified desired evidence on basic skills competence and workforce readiness, but there is dissent over the value of each of these domain areas as worthwhile accountability evidence (Minor, 2011). For instance, James Minor, Director of Higher Education Programs at the Southern Education Foundation, authored a commentary piece in *Inside Higher Education* entitled *Tis the Season to Assess Learning in College* suggesting that stakeholders seem unable to agree on what, specifically, is to be measured. Minor cited conflict and a lack of clarity over whether instruments should seek to inform about students’ performance within specific domains, on broad skills such as critical thinking and communication, or both.

Efforts to assess learning suggest that instruments to examine written communication, analytical reasoning, and critical thinking skills are important, but research also indicates that stakeholders also expect discipline-specific evidence (Morse, 2011; Immerwahr, 1999; Tipton-Rogers, 2004; Association for Public and Lang Grant Universities, 2012). Even amidst these conversations is the question of how assessments will be able to discern between learning specific to general education, major, minor, and elective curricula. Further, the assessments advocated by the Voluntary System of Accountability illustrate a preference for value-added assessments, but little is discussed in the literature over the acceptability of this evidence. Another approach may, instead, be to define the competencies a college-educated individual ought to achieve before graduating college, and instruments could then assess students according to those domain
areas. However, insufficient evidence on the legitimacy of various instruments does not help promote understanding over what forms of evidence will meet data needs.

A major political challenge impeding the adoption of learning outcome instruments is to determine who, specifically, is responsible for compiling accountability evidence. It has been made clear that some external stakeholders distrust the credibility of internally developed reports on accountability, and academic leaders do not share consensus with stakeholders over the trustworthiness of independently-developed reports (Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012; Roberson-Scott, 2005). As a result, it is unclear what source will be responsible for compiling and reporting such evidence. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (2012) articulated that there are a variety of ways to gauge student learning at institutions – programmatically, institutionally, and course-wise, but the ability to make discernments over the learning outcomes of students specific to each lens is not as easily achieved. Whichever entity is deemed responsible will have to understand the complexity involved in delivering and assessing educational programs within and between colleges and universities and understand what points of evidence will accurately illustrate performance.

Further challenges impeding the adoption of learning outcomes exist due to the growing intensity of calls for learning evidence and unanswered procedural questions about how and when institutions should measure learning. While instruments to assess student learning competencies have been developed and implemented sparsely across colleges and universities in the United States over the recent past, these instruments often fail to accommodate a major technological and logistical issue – namely student mobility. A study conducted by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling
(2008) concluded that one-third of students entering a two- or four-year college or university in the United States will transfer to at least one other college or university during their time in college. Student mobility creates difficulty for institutions that seek to accurately track and measure students and their learning across and within institutions. Instruments that emphasize the value-added benefits of a college education would be negatively affected by student mobility since learning would not be attributed to specific interventions experienced by students at the variety of educational institutions. How do institutions track or discern the learning students gained while attending their college or university after these individuals have transferred to another institution out of or even across the state? Haertel (2005) explained that statewide student tracking systems had made advancements in the ability of institutions to track students across institutions and states. However, accurately tracking students will require responding to the challenge of determining the effect of educational interventions among mobile learners as well to address the persistent question of whether instruments should investigate value-added or benchmarked learning outcomes.

Expectations to produce learning outcome evidence are not without political, philosophical, and technological challenges. The variety of perspectives that exist over the types of learning that should be measured present challenges for institutional leaders to address before stakeholder expectations can be met (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Jankowski & Provezis, 2011). Further, college and university leaders are faced with the challenge of determining the learning that takes place at their institutions due to a highly mobile student population (National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2008). Efforts to assess and report student learning evidence will need to address these
challenges, but little is known up to this point about the extent to which leaders are addressing these issues within their campuses and to assess and report student learning outcomes.

Summary

The historical context of higher education accountability emerged out of a cultural shift in which the public began to demand evidence of performance from institutions in the middle of the 20th century (Thelin, 2004). Since its emergence as a policy issue influencing higher education governance in the United States, emphasis on accountability evidences has evolved to focus on the outcomes produced with allocated resources (Mortimer, 1972; National Governor’s Association, 1986).

Present accountability policy perspectives indicate that stakeholders are concerned over educational quality and view accountability as a means to both prove and improve performance (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Morse, 2011). Further, learning outcomes as a form of accountability evidence have grown in salience due to reports on lackluster student performance on student learning instruments (Arum & Roksa, 2011; United States Department of Education, 2011).

Nationally visible efforts such as the bi-annual Measuring Up report and the Voluntary System of Accountability have provided pressure to compel colleges and universities to develop or adopt instruments to assess learning (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008; Association for Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012). Government agencies, in collaboration with corporate, academic, and legislative stakeholders have been engaged by the federal government to re-envision accountability and performance priorities and articulated a concern over the lack of learning outcome
evidence produced by institutions (Spellings Commission, 2006). However, efforts to compel colleges and universities across the United States to develop instruments to gather learning evidence have largely been unsuccessful.

Acting as significant policy challenges impeding the adoption of desired learning evidence are unresolved technological, political, and philosophic issues. Uncertainties over the purpose, definition, and goals of learning evidence indicate a lack of clarity and consensus about what will be measured, how, and for what purpose (Hutchinson & Young, 2011; Popham, 1997). Also, a lack of vision exists to understand how students can effectively be tracked to determine the learning impact that institutions have on a highly mobile student population (Haertel, 2005). These questions and uncertainties may exist as a challenge to the adoption of learning evidence, but the presence and salience of learning evidence as an ever-growing policy priority among stakeholders shows no indication of declining in relevance and significance in the future.

However, research has inadequately addressed the status of institutional efforts to design or adopt learning outcome instruments, understand what educational components, if any, colleges and universities are examining, and to explore the philosophic, political, and technical challenges that do or do not exist in practice within efforts to provide learning evidence. While the emergence of stakeholder calls for learning is both evident and persistent, and the importance of dialogue is clear, such investigations will yield important perspectives to help build understanding of the current leadership contexts in which learning outcome-focused initiatives are taking place. As a result, the next chapter will outline the methodological procedures being undertaken to explore and understand learning outcome-focused initiatives on college and university campuses.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the bachelor’s degree granting institutions of the campuses in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study was also to understand what challenges and criticisms academic leaders report about the call to provide learning outcome evidence. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What efforts, if any, are institutions presently taking to assess and report student-learning outcomes and why?

- What types of learning outcomes, if any, are colleges and universities trying to measure?

- What challenges and criticisms, if any, currently impede institutions’ abilities to gather learning outcome data?

This study is significant because research on accountability policy perspectives among major stakeholder groups has indicated that data on student learning outcomes are needed and growing in salience as a form of accountability evidence (Morse, 2011; Jankowski & Provezis, 2011; Association for Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012; National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 2008). As a result, studying what efforts are underway to assess and report student learning outcomes and the challenges and criticisms that institutional leaders face with these efforts will enhance the understanding of this type of assessment in the accountability movement. The present chapter articulates the methods and procedures used in the conduct of the study.
Research Design

The study utilized a multi-site case study design using semi-structured interviews, field notes, and site documents to secure information about learning outcome focused initiatives on the baccalaureate degree granting campuses of one system of public higher education. Each site was investigated under the common theme of the experiences and perceptions of academic leaders to respond to accountability expectations for student learning outcome evidence.

Case study design was chosen because this qualitative approach allowed the investigator to conduct an in-depth exploration and to provide a rich description of each site to respond to the research questions in the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). Case study research is described as a process where an in-depth investigation of a single phenomenon is conducted to provide a sharpened understanding of why and how a particular phenomenon occurred (Yin, 2003; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Consonant with Yin’s (2003) and Baxter and Jack’s (2008) descriptions of case study research, this research responded to “how” and “why” student learning outcomes assessment efforts were underway on the campus sites. Further, the research described what challenges and criticisms are being faced to assess and report student learning outcomes. The particular phenomenon under study was the institutions’ student learning outcomes efforts, and the inquiry into each campus provided an in-depth exploration to develop a sharpened understanding of the efforts at each institution. To provide a rich description, the study was limited to three campus sites and a variety of sources of information were gathered to understand the efforts to assess and report student-learning
outcomes. Thus, the study focused on providing an in-depth description within a limited sample of institutions in accordance with each of the research questions.

**Research Site and Population**

The sites selected for the study included three university campuses within one system of public higher education. In total, five campus sites comprise the system. The three campus sites involved in this study were the campuses within the system that award baccalaureate degrees. In addition to the three campus sites under study, the system is also comprised of two campuses that focus on graduate and professional education in technological and healthcare fields. Given that the purpose of this study was to explore the status of efforts at each institution to assess and report student-learning outcomes at the baccalaureate level, only the three bachelor’s degree granting institutions within the system were chosen. These three campus sites are described below in more detail.

University A, located in the eastern part of the state, is a large, public research-intensive institution offering bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral, and professional degrees. Approximately 21,000 undergraduate students attend the institution. Over 300 undergraduate degree programs are offered to students at the institution. University B is a mid-size public institution also located in the eastern part of the state. It offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. Approximately 11,400 students attend the institution, and nearly 140 undergraduate majors are offered. University C is a small to mid-size public, undergraduate and graduate-degree granting campus in the western part of the state. University C enrolls around 7,500 undergraduate students, and offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees.
The sites were chosen because access to the participants needed to gain interview data through connections between a mutual contact as well as rich site document evidence to respond to the research questions were available and sufficient to conduct the study. Because of the difficulty in gaining access to campus presidents, provosts, and academic administrators for an extended period of time to gather data, access to interview participants was a major guiding focus in choosing the sites involved in the study. Further, the institutional characteristics of these campuses as public, baccalaureate-degree granting institutions suited the context needed to conduct the study in accordance with the purpose and research questions of the study.

The population from which the researcher sought participation included the academic leaders from each of the three campus sites; specifically, the presidents or chancellors and chief academic officers or provosts were eligible participants for the study. The principal investigator was able to interview four of the six eligible chancellors and provosts; two (the chancellor of University B and Provost of University C) declined to participate. While these individuals served as the initial interview participants, the researcher also used chaining from these participants to connect with other knowledgeable informants. On each campus setting, two to three additional individuals, depending upon the availability of the lead off participants and their recommendations for other participants, were interviewed. These additional personnel were the directors of institutional research, college deans, and vice provosts for undergraduate programs. In total, 12 participants (4 at each campus site) were interviewed for the study.

Academic leaders were the most appropriate people to interview for the study due to their role in campus leadership and participation in statewide accountability efforts.
These were the people with central responsibility on their respective campuses for responding to statewide accountability expectations and for setting institutional vision and priorities for their campuses. Because the assessment and reporting of student learning outcomes has emerged as a desired form of accountability evidence nationally and within the state, these individuals served as the primary sources of evidence on their campuses to understand what steps, if any, institutions were taking to assess and report student learning outcomes. However, because efforts to gather and report accountability measures require the expertise of professionals across the institutions that provide support to these chief officers, gathering the perspectives of these individuals as well was appropriate to fully understand the response to calls for learning outcome evidence.

Sources of Data

Three sources of data were used in the conduct of the study: interviews, site documents, and field notes. Site documents included institutional accreditation and accountability reports as well as strategic plans. Field notes were taken to provide documentation of observations that further illustrated the participants’ responses to the interview protocol through their body language, emotional emphases, or to record observations and interactions pertinent to the study that could not otherwise be recorded. Interviews served as the primary source of data. The principal investigator gathered academic leader perspectives through in-depth, one-on-one interviews conducted in the participants’ institutional offices. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol (Appendix C). The interview protocol was based on the research questions. The interview protocol was comprised of three major parts, each part comprising one leadoff question and two to three follow-up questions. The first part inquired about specific efforts
undertaken at each campus to assess and report student-learning outcomes. The second part focused on learning outcome types, which sought to gain information about what was being assessed and with what instruments. The third part of the interview focused on challenges and criticisms faced with assessing and reporting learning outcomes. When appropriate, the investigator asked follow-up questions within each part to gain depth and richness of information for analysis. The interview protocol was pilot tested with campus administrators and the state’s higher education coordinating agency personnel not involved in the research and who were knowledgeable with student learning outcomes assessment on the campus sites under study.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, the researcher also inquired with interview participants prior to visiting each campus about what site documents would provide information related to the research questions. The site documents collected and reviewed prior to the site visits were strategic planning documents and institutional accreditation reports, which articulated campus plans and current efforts to assess and report student-learning outcomes. Further, each institution’s most recent state accountability system reports, which included student learning outcomes assessment results that had been submitted to the state’s coordinating agency, were collected and reviewed prior to the interviews upon recommendation by the participants. The strategic planning documents, accreditation reports, and accountability system documents thus helped the researcher to target specific efforts to assess learning outcomes at each institution and to inquire about these efforts with each participant during the interviews. To obtain strategic planning and accreditation documents, the researcher visited the institutional websites to acquire and review the documents prior to the site visit. The researcher inquired with state agency
personnel to access the assessment reports for review. The documents informed the researcher’s interviews with the campus participants and served as findings related to the research questions in the study.

In addition to interviews and site documents, the researcher also recorded field notes during the interviews with the participants. The field notes recorded during the interviews provided additional insight into the meaning portrayed by participants while responding to the interview questions or to note observations that could not otherwise be recorded from the other sources of information. Together, the interviews, field notes, and site documents provided in-depth information on the status of learning-outcome focused efforts on the three public four-year universities.

Procedure

Because this research involved human subjects, the principal investigator submitted this study for review and approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, to ensure adequate protections were provided to the participants. The researcher took careful precautions to protect confidentiality throughout the study.

Given that the researcher contacted eligible participants by email, the messages were sent on a password-protected email account accessible only by the principal investigator. The correspondence that occurred between the participants and the principal investigator was deleted immediately after it was no longer needed. Such correspondence included the initial invitation to the eligible participants and their responses, as well as follow-up dialogue to establish a time and date for an in-person interview. Upon arrival at the interview site and before the interview began, the researcher informed each
participant of his or her rights and responsibilities within the study by reading the
informed consent form (Appendix B). The participants were guaranteed that participation
in this study was confidential and that all data would be aggregated in a confidential
manner for reporting purposes. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to each participant
and campus site involved. All data collected were stored in a locked, secure file cabinet
located in the principal investigator’s home office, and were accessible only to the
investigator.

Because participants were recruited through email communication, the researcher
gathered email contact information for the chief campus executive and academic officers
at the three selected campuses. After compiling the contact information for the study
participants, the researcher sent an email asking for their participation in the study. The
email invitation (Appendix A) described the purpose of the research and asked for their
participation in a one-on-one interview to gain an understanding of the efforts the
institution was undertaking to assess and report student learning outcomes and to explore
what criticisms or challenges, if any, emerge from efforts to do so. The invitation
informed the eligible participants that the interview would not exceed 60 minutes. The
invitation also asked eligible participants interested in taking part in an interview to email
the researcher to establish a time convenient for them at their office settings. The
invitation asked participants who were willing to be interviewed to respond to the email
invitation to set a time and date for an in-person interview. From these recruitment
efforts, four participants from each campus site emerged as interview participants for a
total of 12 interview participants. If an in-person interview was not possible, a phone
interview was arranged. One of the 12 participants required a phone interview.
Prior to interviewing each participant, steps were taken to ensure individuals were made aware of their rights and responsibilities as a participant as well as my responsibilities as an investigator. Thus, the interview began by having the investigator read the informed consent form (Appendix B) and answering any questions the participant might have prior to the start of the interview. With participant consent, the researcher conducted a recorded, semi-structured interview using the interview protocol (Appendix C). The interviews were stored on a digital recording device and the principal investigator also recorded field notes to gather information from the conversation and interview site surroundings that could not otherwise be collected. Upon completion of data collection, the sources of data were compiled and analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is described as a systematic process of searching through data to identify themes (Glesne, 2011; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The link between the data and the identification of themes is the use of codes as a means of systematically examining the ideas, perspectives, and experiences that are shared during an interview or observation (Glesne, 2011).

Because the study was conducted as a multi-site case study, the researcher employed two phases to analyze the interview, field note, and document data: a within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) recommended this approach when the researcher seeks to present findings within and between cases in a multi-site case study. Consistent with this approach, the researcher analyzed data within and between the case sites to generate findings that responded to the research questions. During the within-case analysis, the researcher examined data according to each research
question to provide a rich description of the findings associated with each site. Responses from the within-case analyses were reported not as themes, but as findings due to the inability to generate thematic conclusions through the limited number of interviews conducted on each individual campus site. The cross-case approach led to findings that were observed within each site, allowing for the researcher to report. In addition, findings unique to one or two of the three sites were noted. A more specific and detailed description of the analysis process has been provided below.

The researcher applied Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) framework for analyzing qualitative data. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) offered a systematic approach to code qualitative data, organize the data into patterns, and to generate findings and themes from the patterns. After transcribing interview data and field notes and compiling the collected site documents, the researcher carefully examined the interviews, field notes, and site documents several times to gain an understanding of the ideas that were conveyed within the documents and interview transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

During the initial within-site analysis process, the researcher reviewed the interview, field note, and document data and wrote a preliminary list of codes based on the words and text noted in each data source by each campus site (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). After reviewing the data sources several times and modifying the list of initial codes according to their similarity, the researcher read once more through the data to assign codes from the participant’s words in the transcripts, field notes, and site documents. Upon completion of coding the data for each campus site, the principal investigator generated patterns according to similarity across the codes for each institution involved in the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Then, the
researcher clustered the patterns according to the research questions guiding the study to generate an understanding of the findings associated with each of the campus sites individually (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Upon completion of the within-case analysis, the researcher conducted a cross-case analysis to analyze findings between the campus sites (Merriam, 2009). Consonant with Merriam’s (2009) stated purpose of conducting cross-case analyses of multi-site case studies, the researcher sought to generate an explanation across the sites that also suited the findings within each campus in the study. Cross-case analyses follow within-case analyses (Merriam, 2009).

To generate findings across cases, the researcher reviewed the interview, field note, and site document data from each campus site once again. The researcher did not generate a new list of codes, but, rather, clustered codes according to similarity and in relation to each research question guiding the study. Where reoccurring patterns were observed across the data sources of the campus sites, a list of themes were developed to provide a characterization of the findings across cases. Further, findings unique to one or two campus sites were also collected to provide a characterization of where the sites differed in relation to each research question.

Data Trustworthiness

Within qualitative research, trustworthy data are those that present an accurate picture of the phenomena under investigation (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004; Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 1998). The purpose of ensuring trustworthiness of data is to allow the reader to make connections between the themes under investigation and how it might or might not apply to contexts within which he or she is familiar (Shenton, 2004; Merriam,
The researcher employed several techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of the data presented. In particular, the researcher used member checking and triangulation as strategies to ensure trustworthiness (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004; Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 1998).

Merriam (2009) and Creswell (1998) described member checking as the process of taking interpretations of qualitative data back to the people from whom they came to verify that the interpretations are plausible. Consistent with this description, the researcher inquired with participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations of the interview data collected in the study. For example, the researcher followed through on verifying the interpreted role participants had in student learning outcomes assessment, statements on what efforts were underway at the institution, what types of instruments had been adopted to assess learning, and that their criticisms had been represented accurately. Through member checking, the researcher ensured that the findings were represented in a manner that accurately reflected the intent conveyed by the participants through the interview data.

In addition, the researcher employed triangulation as a strategy to ensure data trustworthiness. Shenton (2004) described the process of triangulation as the gathering of a variety of data sources, where possible, to confirm the accuracy of information gathered within qualitative research. Consistent with this strategy, the researcher gathered multiple sources of data, which included interviews with participants, field notes, and relevant site documents to confirm and support the findings. For instance, interview data and site documents that illustrated the performance of institutions on general education assessment instruments provided consonant evidences of what institutions were using to assess student-learning outcomes. Data sources such as these were reviewed for corroborating
evidence that confirmed emergent findings, thereby enhancing the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data collected for this study (Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2009).
CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

This in-depth, multi-site case study of the status of student learning outcome assessment initiatives was started in May of 2012, and data collection was completed in July of 2012. Three public baccalaureate degree-granting institutions in one system of higher education located in the South were investigated. Interview, field note, and site document data were collected to describe the efforts institutions are undertaking to assess and report student-learning outcomes on their campuses.

The following research questions guided the study:

- What efforts, if any, are institutions presently taking to assess and report student-learning outcomes and why?
- What types of learning outcomes, if any, are colleges and universities trying to measure?
- What challenges and criticisms, if any, currently impede institutions’ abilities to gather learning outcome data?

Findings

In the present Chapter, a rich description of the information obtained with respect to the research questions is provided for each campus site. The findings from each campus site are then presented according to the three research questions. Following this, a cross-case analysis is presented to share the findings across campus sites. The presentation of findings within the cross-case analysis is also ordered according to the three research questions.

Case Study 1 – University A

University A was in the process of preparing for its next accreditation visit from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), as well as preparing its major
field exam and general education outcomes assessment results to meet the stage agency’s accountability requirements.

Interviews with the chancellor and provost were scheduled to gain a perspective about the institution-wide vision and initiatives underway to assess and report student-learning outcomes. Whereas the provost and chancellor were able to provide perspective for their roles as campus-wide leaders, the investigator also sought to understand the status of student learning outcome assessment from those directly involved in the process at the site. As a result, chaining led to the identification of other institutional personnel closely involved with student learning outcomes assessment. The first connection was made to the institution’s Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs, whose list of major responsibilities includes gathering and collecting student learning assessment data for accreditation and stage agency requirements. From there, the investigator interviewed the Dean of the institution’s College of Education to gain perspective on the efforts within the college to assess and report student learning outcomes. A total of four participants at University A were interviewed.

**Findings Related to Assessment Initiatives**

Analysis of the data revealed two findings (working toward compliance, trying to engage in continuous improvement) related to the efforts underway within the campus site to assess and report student-learning outcomes. Site documents illustrated that student learning outcomes assessment for both major-specific as well as general education learning is a major initiative across the institution. In 2010, the institution published a mid-term improvement progress report to its regional accreditation agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), which outlined institution-
wide plans for addressing the student learning outcome standards articulated by the regional accrediting agency. In the report, the campus addressed student-learning outcomes as a prominent focus area to address the organization’s standards for re-accreditation. For example, the institution outlined the following steps in its quality enhancement plan under its assessment priorities, listed below, in response to the most recent SACS reaccreditation visit:

1. If applicable to the unit, review the learner outcomes for each academic degree program.
   a. Provide multiple years of assessment data
      i. Each outcome does not have to be assessed each year.
      ii. Each outcome has to show assessment.
      iii. Each outcome should have a statement that assessment
          1. Indicates that the outcome is being achieved, or
          Indicates that a change is required, what the change/changes is/are being made and then follow-up and then follow-up assessment to show what has occurred (“closing the loop”).

Working toward Compliance

University A was reportedly not in compliance with accreditation standards. As a result, participants shared that working toward compliance with external organizations was a major effort underway at the institution. In particular, the perspectives shared by the interview participants revealed the need to improve compliance efforts with the regional accreditation agency SACS, and, in addition, the institution must also meet assessment requirements set forth by the state’s coordinating agency.

In terms of its accreditation review process, site documents and interviews indicated that the prior accreditation review articulated the need for the campus to place greater prioritization on student learning outcomes. Allison, Provost for the campus, stated:
Our effort to assess and report student learning outcomes is a very timely conversation for us, because we are ramping up for our next reaccreditation with SACS…Student learner outcomes are a very important part of SACS reaccreditation. Every unit has to report on its student learner outcomes as part of SACS reaccreditation.

However, the interviews with the campus leaders revealed that the institution was not in compliance with the SACS accreditation standard that all units identify, assess, and report student-learning outcomes. Whereas some departments had identified learning outcomes and produced the results of their assessments, many academic units had failed to produce the outcomes, instruments, and procedures to conduct learning outcomes assessments of program-specific learning. In part, and as evidenced by a document obtained from the state agency, a significant number of departments were exempted from program review, including outcomes assessment, for state accountability system requirements. However, the institution’s Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs was responsible for general education assessment, which involved assessing critical thinking skills.

Participants reported that ensuring compliance with regional accreditation standards of each academic unit on campus was an important priority to work toward compliance, and that steps were in place to help units identify, assess, and report the outcome evidence as well as to develop plans to improve programs based on the results. To the campus leaders involved with institution-wide assessment, as well as monitoring the unit-specific learning outcomes, this meant implementing a centralized system through the use of computer software to manage the SACS compliance process. The institution’s provost shared that, “the new software we’re looking at can allow for us to feed our results from the academic program review process, which includes student
learning outcomes, into a centralized database to have easier access to monitor each academic unit and to provide evidence to accrediting bodies.”

The need for the centralized database emerged from a lack of consistency in the presence and quality of student learning outcomes assessment across the academic units on the campus, despite the accreditation principle articulated in Standard 3.3.1.1 of the SACS Principles of Accreditation document. Participants reported that some academic units were much better than others at complying with accreditation standards through assessing and reporting program student learning outcomes and developing plans for improvement based on the results. Steven, Dean of the College of Education, stated, “the status of student learning outcomes assessment within my college depends on the major.” According to Steven, the college’s teacher education program was among the most heavily assessed in the college, where students had to develop a comprehensive portfolio that demonstrated competence, and pass licensure examinations. Steven reported that all departments make an effort to assess outcomes, but that some departments are more engaged in the process than others, particularly at utilizing the results for improvement.

One factor explaining the difference between the statuses of outcomes assessment across departments was the presence of a programmatic accreditation body. The reason for this distinction, as Judy pointed out, from her academic discipline was that “there’s a set of learner outcomes that our accrediting association says are the core learner outcomes in the communication discipline and we are expected to assess those outcomes to gain programmatic accreditation.” Such an accrediting body as the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication serves as the programmatic accrediting body for the discipline, and identifies what students should
learn while enrolled the program. Then, the organization expects the unit seeking accreditation to assess the students to assure that those competencies are met. According to the participants involved in the case study, the absence of a programmatic accrediting agency and exemption from program review by the state agency inhibited the engagement of these departments with student learning outcomes assessment, thus challenging the efforts of the institution to achieve compliance with regional accreditation standards.

For the programs that were behind others in assessing student learning outcomes, the steps reported by participants focused on guiding programs not currently assessing student-learning outcomes toward complying with accreditation standards. As Provost, for instance, Allison stated what her work has involved:

I’ve been fine-tuning our academic program review process. We’re building student learning outcomes into the program reviews we conduct internally, which our institution requires every five years. Once we do that, our student learning outcomes assessment process will be built into the accreditation process.

This policy change was consonant with the participants’ stated need to integrate software programs that would allow for the Vice Provost and Provost to monitor academic units through the use of a centralized database, which was identified as a key step in working toward compliance. The participants shared that the new software programs under review would allow for process monitoring instead of the being overwhelmed by data coming all at once. These steps were prioritized by the participants as necessary to better comply with state agency regulations and to enhance the quality of data presented to SACS in upcoming accreditation visits. Although highly significant,
compliance was not the only factor influencing the institution’s efforts to assess student-learning outcomes.

**Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement**

A second finding emerged, which is that the campus has been trying to engage in continuous improvement of program quality through assessing student learning. However, participants in University A acknowledged the limitation of engaging in continuous improvement efforts without a system, guided by the integration of software that would allow for centralized oversight to assist them with their efforts. Expecting each unit to assess and report student learning outcomes, including those not required to submit data to the state agency and those already reporting to disciplinary accrediting bodies, was important to the interview participants with regard to the need to try and engage in continuous improvement. Participants stated that the goal of assessment is to lead toward constant improvement, but that key elements were needed to achieve that goal on the campus. Charles, the campus Chancellor, articulated that

> The curriculum always needs to be improved, so faculty just need to start off with the premise that it always needs to be better. The departmental faculty needs to get together and define what it is we’re going to get accomplished in certain courses and see how the courses relate together.

To corroborate Charles’ point, Judy, the Vice Provost whose responsibility included coordinating the student learning outcomes assessment process, stated, “the purpose [of student learning outcomes assessment] is to identify areas where students are or are not achieving learner outcomes and adjusting the curriculum in whatever way needs to be done to improve the learner outcomes.” The goal from these perspectives is for assessment instruments to produce evidence that will help educators make decisions about improvement areas or strengths within each program as well as within the general
education curriculum. To elaborate on her perspective, Judy shared an experience within her academic discipline:

In my discipline, we teach a capstone course which is intended to bring together all the learning that students have done throughout their studies. That happens in a final project where they have to present on a media campaign that they have developed. They have to demonstrate that they know the material through integrating their knowledge into the project. As a faculty, we look for student demonstrations of their learning in the presentations. One of the things that we do as a faculty after the presentations is to sit down together and go over our evaluations of the projects and discuss where the students did well, and where they did not do so well. When we identify a weak point, we ask ourselves where in the curriculum students are supposed to learn that area. Then, we make sure it gets integrated into the curriculum so that by the time the student graduates he or she has that skill.

This process, according to Judy, involved collaboration among faculty members within the department to determine what students ought to be learning, whether such learning is happening, and when it is not, to make sure that faculty members are emphasizing the intended outcomes in the curriculum. While this statement suggests that efforts are underway to try and engage in a process of continuous improvement, participants also shared that key elements to establishing continuous improvement across the campus are missing.

Central to the effort to try and engage in continuous improvement, participants reported that the need for more data to help guide decision-making with regard to student success in the curriculum was missing and imperative. Judy referred to the campus as a “data-challenged university.” Judy contrasted between the way things are and what the institution is doing to make progress toward trying to engage in continuous improvement on the campus:

We’re doing a better job of becoming a data-informed decision-making institution, but I think we have trouble with confidence in some of the
assessment because we do not have the data to answer many of the questions we are asking. For example, if I wanted to run an analysis to understand what factors predict retention or graduation rates, I would not have the data to find that out.

Strengthening the continuous improvement efforts on campus meant improving the data gathered at the institution and, in addition, using that data to inform decision-making. Despite steps to make progress toward engaging in continuous improvement, participants noted some issues facing the campus’ efforts.

An example of where the institution was making an effort to engage in continuous improvement efforts was noted with regard to the general education curriculum. According to the participants, this process has involved gathering several faculty members who teach within the general education curriculum together in a committee to define the competencies students should gain through the curriculum. That committee is led by Judy, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs, and she shared that, “we are right in the middle of the process of making some changes to our general education program for undergraduate students. One of the charges to the committee was to be very intentional about what our learner outcomes are for general education, how we can assess those, and how we can use the assessments to go through an improvement process.” Being able to identify what should be learned was reportedly related to the ability to identify areas of improvement within the general education curriculum based on data. While the committee was communicated as a positive step, participants still articulated that more efforts were needed to engage in continuous improvement. This was, in large part, due to the need for a method to track progress.

Because the institution’s regional accrediting agency articulated to the campus site in its last visit the need to improve its student learning outcomes assessment
practices, the participants and site documents conveyed the heavy priority being placed not only on documenting student learning, but also on building a continuous improvement plan based on the results. The participants reported that improving the institution’s utilization of technological resources and devoting personnel to more closely monitor the student learning outcomes assessment efforts across the campus were two guiding goals underlying the effort to improve the status of student learning outcomes assessment on the campus.

**Findings Related to Assessment Types**

The case study included an inquiry into what learning, specifically, is being assessed at the institution. Also, the inquiry focused on what instruments are being used to produce the assessment results. Two findings related to what is being assessed and by what instrument were exhibited. The two findings are general education and major-field testing. The state agency’s requirements for program-specific as well as general education learning outcomes influenced not only what learning was assessed, but also by what type of instrument was chosen by the institution. Specifically, the institution elected to assess its general education outcomes through the use of the California Critical Thinking Skills Test, and each department developed their own assessment instruments to assess major-field learning by students enrolled in each program. Documents providing further information on the instruments and the outcomes they assessed were gathered.
General Education Testing

University A selected the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) to examine its general education outcomes to comply with state agency requirements. The CCTST is a nationally and internationally standardized instrument and is widely used as a measure of critical thinking skills, which are delineated in sub-scores so institutional personnel can utilize the results to address these skills where needed in the program curriculum.

At the campus, and according to state agency regulations, only a sample of students at the institution is selected to participate in the critical thinking skills assessment. The campus site administers the test voluntarily to students, and students receive no benefits or incentives for participation. A student’s performance on the test does not affect their standing at the institution. Once every five years, the institution is required to report its student learning outcomes data on the CCTST to the state agency to satisfy its general education assessment requirements for the state accountability system. According to interviews with the participants and site documents, no other forms of general education assessment are conducted at the campus site.

Major-Field Testing

To assess the major field competencies, institutions developed major field examinations, which are designed internally by the department offering the curriculum. To comply with state agency standards, the instruments must be approved by the agency before they can be administered to students. These assessment instruments must produce data that can be compared either to a national average or program mean from the most recent test administration. The investigator collected and reviewed the Department of
History’s state agency-approved major field assessment to understand one instrument by which students are assessed. The history format is a multi-question, true-false examination about specific events and individuals that students should have learned in the curriculum. While these examinations were offered to fulfill requirements, other departments developed additional methods to make judgments about their curriculum’s impact on student learning.

As Judy mentioned in her discipline, for example, the assessment was conducted through an embedded method, where a portfolio for a class project on a media campaign was developed by students for faculty review. Faculty reviewers knowledgeable about the content then examined the presentations and portfolios for specific learning outcomes, identified the strengths and weaknesses, and used the results of the assessment to guide discussion on the curriculum.

Lastly, standardized major field tests, such as those administered for programmatic accreditation, are given to students within departments that seek such accreditation. These examinations are often tied to licensure. One example cited in the study was accounting, which at the campus site is accredited by the business-accrediting agency, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). To gain AACSB accreditation in accounting, the institution must report its CPA licensure pass rates as part of the accreditation process.

**Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Challenges**

Three findings were evidenced related to assessment challenges. These findings were a lack of technology, resistance based on established practices, and concern over assessment decision utility. The participants framed these concerns not as barriers, but
rather as challenges to overcome while making progress working toward complying with standards and regulations as well as trying to engage in continuous improvement on the campus. Institutional leaders were compelled to make progress with student learning outcomes assessment not only because of compliance with accreditation standards or state agency regulations, but also to reach goals of strengthening its focus of continuous improvement of student learning.

A Lack of Technology

Site documents from the past SACS review and interviews with the participants revealed that the campus’ compliance with SACS standard 3.3.1.1, which requires each academic unit to assess student learning outcomes and draft a plan to improve performance based on those results, was a major improvement area for the campus. Steven, the Dean of the College of Education, stated “there is no centralized system in place for assessing and reporting student learning outcomes on this campus.” Judy, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs whose responsibility includes coordinating the learning outcomes assessment process on campus, stated “there’s the need to create a centralized system for managing the student learning outcomes assessment process.”

Campus participants shared that a variety of software programs are being considered that would help implement the student learning outcomes management process on the campus. Whereas these perspectives have been shared earlier and with regard to issues related to compliance, Judy and Steven’s points also help to evidence a key challenge facing leaders in the effort to assess learning outcomes. The challenge is that the lack of software technology placed a critical impediment in efforts of those knowledgeable of assessment to monitor the quality of assessment efforts across
departments and, thus, the capability for assessment personnel to provide guidance as needed. Participants expressed that a lack of software made the monitoring process inefficient, which impeded the effort to continuously improve and comply with accreditation standards and state agency requirements.

Judy cited the work of a recent faculty-led task force report as evidence for the need to improve the way administrators and academic units collaborate on student learning outcomes initiatives on campus:

There’s a report that has been written by a task force that suggests how we can get to assessing student learning outcomes meaningfully. The report has some very specific activities that need to happen – among those are to train faculty to understand what student learning outcomes are; how to write them, how to build them into the curricula, how to assess them. But then they also stated the need for a centralized system to help monitor that process.

As a result, participants reported that software technology would allow for personnel in charge of student learning outcomes assessment to monitor progress prior to the submission deadlines for state agency requirements or during the reaccreditation process. In addition to strengthening assessment efforts within departments, participants shared that a centralized database would allow for administrators to identify which units need assistance and in what ways. Additionally, appropriate training to the personnel in those units could be provided in a manner that responded to compliance expectations and goals for continuous improvement. However, without the software technology, participants felt that their efforts to assess and report student-learning outcomes faced a significant challenge.
Resistance Based on Established Practices

Participants shared that initiatives to assess student-learning outcomes are often met with resistance based on the attachment of faculty and other institutional personnel to conventional and accepted practices for student evaluation in the program area. Judy and Allison reported that faculty members often ask why the grades that students are assigned in each course are not enough. For Allison, University A’s Provost, the explanation revealed the underlying compliance purpose of student learning outcomes assessment. She stated, “It makes sense to say, “Look, a Classics graduate from the institution should be able to do these 10 things, and, doggone it, they can,” instead of, “Well, this person got a 3.5 gpa in x number of classes.”” Allison’s point is that assessment provides a descriptive means to demonstrate what students can do as a result of a particular set of educational interventions. On the other hand, Charles, the Chancellor of the campus, expressed that he struggles with the necessity of student learning outcomes assessment, and stated a preference for grades as a reliable form of student learning evidence:

Well, I think assessing student learning outcomes is really the purpose for the courses that students take, the tests they take, and the grades they get. That’s the most intensive kind of student learning outcomes assessment there is…to think there is a test that you can take that measures a lot differently than what you’ve already been tested on doesn’t make a lot of sense.

Charles’ perspective and Allison’s explanation illustrated conflict between student learning outcomes assessment and the established practice of student evaluation within academic disciplines. In part, that conflict is rooted in the expectation set by interested stakeholders to be informed about what, specifically, students have demonstrated they can do as evidenced through an instrument. Also, the conflict is rooted in the lack of trust that critics of student learning outcomes assessment have over the ability of instruments
to characterize the competencies that students develop as a result of curriculum in the way that grades do.

Criticism over student learning outcomes assessment is based on the idea that the process provides little, if any, value that faculty evaluation and grading do not already provide. Despite this conflict, however, all of the participants in the study recognized that student learning outcomes assessment was necessary to comply with state agency requirements and regional accreditation standards. Despite the dissenting opinion from the Chancellor, other participants expressed that student learning outcomes assessment could play a role in helping the institution identify areas of improvement in student learning quality. The goal to build confidence in the student learning outcomes assessment process, as articulated by the Provost, is to “do your best to demonstrate the value to the department.” However, while participants acknowledged the value in accreditation and state compliance, they also indicated that concern over the utility and reliability of the instruments to achieve its continuous improvement goals existed.

**Concern over Assessment Decision Utility**

While recognizing the potential value that the student learning outcomes assessment process can bring to strengthening the institution’s continuous improvement efforts, participants also perceived and encountered limitations in the instruments in use. The major concern they expressed was lacking confidence in the decision utility of some instruments in providing evidence that can help academic units improve their curriculum. As an example, Allison, the campus Provost, shared, “How do you convince physics, which is a department with eight majors, who all have great GPAs, great GREs, and all get into graduate school, that student learning outcomes will help them improve their
curriculum? It’s a challenge to bring these types of departments into an intelligent conversation about how student learning outcomes can be of value to them.” From her experience, the concern over the utility of assessment stems from the idea that some departments may not receive the same benefit as others based on contextual factors that are inconsistent with the assumptions of a quantitative instrument such as departmental size.

Concern over the utility of the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), which is the institution-wide critical thinking skills assessment used to comply with state agency requirements, was based on the lack of useful evidence the instrument can provide on where to improve general education curriculum. Judy reported, for instance, “We report the data [from the CCTST] and show comparisons across colleges, but that’s not assessment. That’s testing.” The distinction is that data should indicate where, specifically, the learning is or is not taking place and should provide useful evidence. The CCTST provides means that indicate performance relative to other colleges within the institution or other institutions across the country, but such evidence does not yield data that help academic units understand where to improve the curriculum.

Another challenge related to student motivation to take assessment seriously, particularly with examinations where students are not affected by their performance. Currently, students are not affected, positively or negatively, by their performances on the student learning outcomes assessments performed for state compliance or regional accreditation requirements. Participants perceived that this factor played an influential role in how seriously the instruments are taken in assessing the curriculum. Allison, the campus Provost stated that, “The hardest part [of assessing student learning] is getting
students to show up. Well, what’s the carrot, what’s the stick? And you’re having to get the same population to show up twice.” As a result, the practice of embedded assessment, where students’ graded work within a course is re-evaluated for evidence of particular learning outcomes, was offered as one potential response to address the issue of student motivation. However, no such effort to implement embedded assessment institution-wide was identified by participants. These concerns affected the steps institutions are taking to assess and report student-learning outcomes on the campus.

Case Study 2 – University B

An interview with the Provost was scheduled as the lead off conversation. The Chancellor declined to participate in the study, but agreed to provide the names of individuals who could act as informants for the case study. The Chancellor and Provost each provided the names of the same two participants who were highly involved in the institution’s student learning outcomes assessment efforts: the campus’ Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs and the Director of Institutional Research. The Provost also recommended the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to give his perspective on the efforts within a college to assess and report student-learning outcomes.

Findings Related to Student Learning Outcomes Initiatives

Analysis of the data revealed two findings (working toward compliance, trying to engage in continuous improvement) related to the efforts underway to assess and report student-learning outcomes. According to University B’s 2011 SACS Quality Enhancement Plan, a document developed in response to the institution’s prior reaccreditation visit, a call for greater focus on assessment was made at the institution to
comply with accreditation standards. The following excerpt was taken directly from the institution’s Quality Enhancement Plan:

We have developed this [ThinkAchieve: Creating Connections] to meet the standards as outlined in *The Principles of Accreditation* (2008).

**ThinkAchieve: Creating Connections**

- Includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment,
- Focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution,  
- Demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP.  
- Identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement.

**Working toward Compliance**

The document referenced in University B’s quality enhancement plan evidenced that working toward compliance with standards was a driving force behind the campus’ efforts to assess and report student learning outcomes, and its ThinkAchieve program was designed to respond to recommendations from the most recent SACS visitation that prompted the need to make improvements in achieving compliance with the agency’s student learning outcomes assessment standards. As a result, the campus was working toward compliance in accordance with accreditation standards to get all programs to identify, assess, and report learning outcomes. John, University B’s Director of Institutional Research, stated:

Most of what we do is in response to the SACS mandate for assessment. I think any institution that attempts to comply with SACS standards is going to do a fairly good job assessing outcomes. I don’t think any institution has reached the ideal that SACS has envisioned over the years. It’s a matter of moving closer to it, and I think in this last round of reaccreditation people realized that is not going to go away.

For University B, moving “closer to the ideal” as John put it, involved getting colleges and the departments within them to identify, assess, and report student-learning outcomes. As Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Gerald oversees the major-
specific assessment process in his college and he articulated that adaptations to the SACS requirements are being made. For Gerald, the main adaptation is to more closely monitor the learning outcomes identified in each department, how the department plans to assess the learning, and what plans the unit has to improve based on the assessment results. He elaborated by sharing the steps the college has undertaken to adapt to institutional goals to provide a centralized system of monitoring student-learning outcomes in the college:

We have been entering the plans of the different departments in the college on a database called TaskStream. Each department has a set of decisions it must make each year about what it wants to measure and how they are going to measure it. They also have to identify a plan for improvement based on those results.

TaskStream, identified by Gerald, emerged as a central step taken by the institution to work toward compliance with SACS accreditation standards for institution-wide documentation of student learning outcomes assessment at the university. Site documents described TaskStream as a computer database that allows departments to upload assessment information in a systematic format. The database, purchased by the institution four years ago, allows the university to monitor the status of each academic unit’s assessment progress at any point during the year, and, as a result, provide feedback as needed to help improve the quality of assessment efforts across the departments.

Lynn, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs, who is charged with the task of monitoring the learning outcomes assessment status across the institution, shared “now we have a common structure in which to plug the data. Now it’s easy to track departments and say, “Well, you don’t have anything in there you need.” This was a critical step for Lynn with efforts to ensure that the institution was on track to meet SACS standard 3.3.1.1, which articulates that documentation and assessment of learning
outcomes is a necessary procedure to gain reaccreditation. Participants emphasized that TaskStream was the instrumental resource in helping the institution reach the ideal prescribed by SACS.

However, this system was only noted as part of the solution to working toward compliance. Participants also indicated departmental differences in the engagement of student learning outcomes as a factor influencing compliance efforts. Participants’ experiences led them to believe that while all programs were expected to develop and assess learning outcomes, those that were more engaged in the process were those that had an external accrediting agency. In the case of teacher preparation programs, with which University B’s Provost had direct experience as an educator, Susan cited programmatic accreditation as a guiding difference among programs:

The professional programs in my college like teacher preparation, as former Dean of the College of Education, had a bit of an edge when it came to identifying what a student must know and be able to do in order to be able to qualify for licensure examinations and to practice.

Further, Gerald shared his experience with programs as Dean within his college:

Everyone is doing it [assessing student learning outcomes] to a certain extent. Some programs have benefitted from doing it; others are just trying to do it. For some of the programs, they have disciplinary accreditation that already have various types of student learning outcomes measures as part of their process.

The reason for this distinction, as Susan and Gerald pointed out, was that programmatic accrediting agencies have a prescribed set of learner outcomes and an identified set of instruments programs must utilize to gain the accreditation. As a result, the participants shared that the presence of a centralized system was one important piece in working toward compliance, but the different levels of engagement with the process across departments was another factor influencing the work performed at the campus site toward
compliance. In particular, this distinction created the need to work with departments less engaged with the process than others. It was clear from the evidence presented by the participants that the centralized system provided through the software offered some help in their efforts toward compliance, but the gains from the system were hampered by the lack of engagement across the programs.

**Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement**

The second finding related to the efforts underway to assess and report student learning outcomes at University B was the ongoing effort to try and engage in continuous improvement across the institution. Participants articulated that engaging in continuous improvement was necessary not only for compliance purposes with accreditation, but also to enhance quality. John, University B’s Director of Institutional Research, shared that “it’s good to be able to identify a measure that you haven’t met, because it gives you an opportunity to improve the program, to improve student learning.” Each of the participants emphasized that the institution has been focusing on utilizing assessment data to improve both program delivery and student learning.

As one example, the participants shared that the use of embedded assessment, which as John described, “is a method where faculty essentially re-grade the work of students for particular competencies such as through essays or projects already submitted previously for homework credit” was a major response to engage in continuous improvement. The participants felt that embedded assessment provided a means for faculty to identify strengths and weaknesses specific to courses, and as a result, specific adaptations that could be made to the program curriculum across all units and on a continuous basis.
In addition, another major component to support engagement in continuous improvement across campus involved not only pushing for embedded assessment, but also gathering faculty feedback in the process of developing the embedded assessment rubrics based on learning outcomes within their academic programs. For instance, John, the Director of Institutional Research whose responsibility has been to consult with academic units across the campus in adopting embedded assessment, stated that:

We get faculty who look at the questionnaires we administer [for compliance] and say, “Well, this doesn’t represent what I teach.” So we ask them to do it…They devise three to five learning outcomes, design the embedded instrument, and generate data they can use to improve the program.

As a precursor to the above statement, it is important to note that the push for embedded assessment at University B emanated out of faculty dissatisfaction with the instruments utilized for the state’s accountability requirements. John’s perspective not only illustrates a desire to engage in continuous improvement, but it also evidences that the quantitative instruments used for compliance purposes inadequately inform areas of improvement among academic units based on the generated results. The response to this criticism reported by John was to push toward integrating embedded assessment as the method of assessing student learning outcomes within each discipline across campus as a means viewed as legitimate among faculty to further try and engage in continuous improvement.

One illustration of how embedded assessment was cited as a useful resource for strengthening efforts to continuously improve program delivery was in the Department of Music. Lynn, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs, reported that:

Embedded assessment allows us to go beyond measuring how high a note a student can play. That’s meaningless in terms of being a well-prepared musician. Instead, we look at whether the interpretation of the piece is appropriate for the time period, for example. It’s subjective, but the faculty
have been able to develop a way examine student performance because they are qualified in their areas so they can judge. We want to make sure that we’re not getting something like, “Our students perform music from a particular time period, and here’s a video of them performing that piece.” That only assumes they have met the learning outcomes. Instead, we want a qualified individual to assess that video and make sure that all of the objectives have been met.

From the participants’ perspectives, examples such as the one provided within the Music department illustrate how the campus plans’ to build embedded assessment into programs as a means to engage the campus in continuous improvement were present. However, the participants also shared that the establishment of embedded assessment, itself a piece of a larger aspiration to bring about continuous improvement in student learning on the campus, was still a work in progress. As Susan, University B’s Provost shared, strengthening the university’s efforts to continuously improve with regard to student learning is like “peeling away layers of an onion.”

**Findings Related to Assessment Types**

Two findings (general education testing, major-field testing) related to what is being assessed and by what instrument were evidenced. The state agency’s requirements for program-specific as well as general education learning outcomes influenced not only what learning was assessed, but also the instruments chosen to assess the learning outcomes. Specifically, the institution elected to assess its general education outcomes through the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and each department developed their own instruments to assess major-field learning among the students enrolled in their program. In progress at the institution was the development of a campus-wide adoption of embedded assessment as well. Programs such as accounting or
nursing whose degrees culminated in the passage of a licensure examination used these examinations as their assessment instrument.

**General Education Testing**

At University B, the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) is used to examine the longitudinal value-added gains of a general education curriculum by testing incoming students at the institution and then retesting them prior to the completion of the senior year. The Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency is offered in a standardized multiple-choice format, and a written essay is also required to examine writing and analytical reasoning skills (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012). Six domains, including the written essay, comprise the examination. Questions assess students’ aptitudes for reading, writing skills, mathematics reasoning ability, science-reasoning skills, and critical thinking ability. The essay is scored in a 1 to 6 format in half-point increments. Two independent raters’ assessments of the essay are averaged to determine the final composite score (APLU, 2012).

At University B, and in accordance with state agency regulations, a sample representative of the student body as a whole is selected to participate in the CAAP examination. The campus site administers the test voluntarily to students, and students do not receive benefits or incentives for participation. A student’s performance on the test does not affect his or her standing at the institution. Once every five years, the institution is required to report its student learning outcomes data from the CAAP examination to the state agency to satisfy its general education assessment requirements for the state’s accountability system. According to interviews with the participants and site documents, no other forms of general education assessment are conducted at the campus site.
**Major-Field Testing**

To assess the major field competencies, academic units at the institution either developed discipline-specific examinations that are designed internally by each academic department or adopted a nationally standardized examination. To comply with state compliance standards, the instruments were approved by the agency prior to being administered to students. These assessment instruments were designed to produce data that could be compared either to a national average or program mean from the most recent test administration. University B’s most up-to-date reports of its major-field testing to the state agency indicated that the institution had earned full points for its state accountability system evaluation during the most recent five-year (2005-2010) cycle.

Standardized major field tests, such as those administered for programmatic accreditation, are given to students within departments that seek such accreditation. The campus study revealed that these examinations are often tied to the licensure of a student within the program. One example was University B’s Teacher Education program, which at the campus site is accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). To gain and retain such accreditation, the institution must report its licensure pass rates as part of the accreditation process. Not only must institutions report the pass rates for the teacher licensure examination, but, according to the NCATE webpage, at least 80 percent of students must pass the examination for the program to retain accreditation.

In addition, site documents suggested there were some programs that adopted nationally standardized examinations at University B that did not stand for programmatic accreditation. Biology, for instance, administers a nationally standardized exam, known
as the Major Field Assessment Test (MFAT) that assesses students’ knowledge in the areas of Cell Biology, Molecular Biology and Genetics, Organismal Biology and Population Biology/Ecology/Evolution. The examination is given to graduating seniors in the biology program. The stated goal, according to the department’s measurement benchmark, is to not have a statistically significant difference in its scores from the national average. The most recent assessment results show that the department met its performance goal on the assessment – students were within one standard deviation of the national average on the MFAT.

Programs also developed instruments that were not nationally standardized, but produced results that could be compared to performance on the prior year’s tests. In anthropology, for instance, its most recent program review highlighted the challenge of adopting a standardized instrument. A site document stated that low program numbers precluded the ability for a reliable comparison through a standardized approach to assessment to be conducted since the small enrollment numbers would not allow for an adequate sample from which to generate findings. Instead, the review stated that its internally-developed instrument produced some evidence of student learning specific to the curriculum and that could be benchmarked against performance from years past. However, a drawback of this approach also noted in the document was that findings were limited based on low numbers. As a result, the document, which was the most recent evaluation of the academic program, cited as a worthwhile step to assess learning outcomes the adoption of a capstone course with embedded assessment questions built into assignments to more reliably generate assessment data.
Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Challenges

Two findings related to the challenges administrators face in assessing and reporting student learning outcomes were evidenced at University B. These findings were resistance based on established practices and concern over assessment decision utility.

Resistance Based on Established Practices

Participants reported that they experienced resistance from faculty on campus based on preferences for grades as the primary form of student evaluation. This established method of assessment created resistance to student learning outcomes assessment. The participants viewed the resistance to come from its’ poor reflection of what faculty teach students. As stated earlier, John offered that he encounters resistance from the faculty over the questionnaires University B administers to meet its state agency and accreditation requirements. A common criticism he hears from faculty is, “Well, this doesn’t represent what I teach.”

However, the participants defended the necessity of student learning outcomes assessment. They viewed grades as an insufficient means of conveying performance evidence to stakeholders. “In a scholarly environment, it doesn’t make sense to assume,” referencing grades as offering only a limited picture based on too many assumptions about the performance ability of students. They expressed that student learning outcomes assessment was the means to provide evidence about what competencies, in particular, a student can demonstrate, and felt that the campus adoption of embedded assessment was the means through which they could overcome faculty criticism about the value of assessment in demonstrating student learning. However, participants shared that their
efforts to achieve a campus-wide commitment to embedded assessment were still a work in progress.

**Concern over Assessment Decision Utility**

Related to the resistance participants encountered over assessment and its perceived threat to established practices in student evaluations, participants also experienced criticism from academic units over the utility of outcomes assessment data. The major concern they encountered was a lack of confidence among faculty in the utility of some instruments to provide evidence that could help academic units improve the curriculum and demonstrate student learning, Gerald, Dean of University B’s College of Arts and Sciences, reflected on his experience as a former department head. He asked, “If you have a small program that doesn’t have lots of graduates, how do you get anything of value from standardized measures in the field? Where do you go from there?” From his perspective, the call for standardized measures did not always provide useful data based on the limited number of students eligible for testing in smaller departments.

Another criticism he reported was the expectation that standardized assessments change relatively little over time, which limits the ability of a department to utilize the results for continuous improvement, particularly when needs or context change. Gerald stated, “If you keep studying the same thing for 10 years, that’s not terribly fruitful. There are major issues with utility. Assessment has helped some departments, but I can’t say that it’s helped everybody.” Again, participants cited the university’s focus on embedded assessment as the means to help academic departments generate data that can help them understand strengths and improvement areas in delivering academic programs.
Another related challenge was that of student motivation to take the assessment seriously, particularly where examinations did not affect student performance. John, University B’s Director of Institutional Research, shared having received completed tests where students filled out the bubbles in the shape of a Christmas tree, raising questions about how seriously the instruments can be taken in making judgments about student performance. As a result, the practice of embedded assessment was being implemented across the campus as a way to overcome the issue of a lack of student motivation.

**Case Study 3 – University C**

An interview with the Chancellor was scheduled as the lead off conversation. The Provost declined to participate in the study, but agreed to provide the names of individuals who could act as informants for the case study.

**Findings Related to Student Learning Assessment Initiatives**

Analysis of the data revealed two findings (working toward compliance, trying to engage in continuous improvement) related to the efforts underway within the campus site to assess and report student-learning outcomes.
According to University C’s most recent strategic plan (2008), measuring program outcomes for accreditation and state accountability system requirements was a primary goal for the institution. Figure 1 provides an outline of University C’s strategic plans associated with student learning outcomes assessment at the institution.

**Working toward Compliance**

The document referenced in Figure 1 illustrated that student learning outcomes assessment was a major priority for the campus. The prioritization of student learning was focused on working toward compliance with state agency regulations and accreditation standards. For instance, Sharon, University C’s Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness, addressed the role of student learning in complying with external organizations that hold authority over finance and accreditation of the campus:

> We collect data on our students’ learning performance for [state accountability system requirements] and accreditation, and I am responsible for collecting that information annually…I make sure our information gets compiled for accreditation. I also oversee major-field testing for [the state accountability system].

Participants stated that to meet compliance expectations, data on student performance in the major field and general education needs to be produced within every
academic unit and for the general education curriculum. However, despite sharing that the institution has assessed student-learning outcomes for general education and major-field competencies, participants reported limitations to the institution’s ability to comply with accreditation guidelines. The challenge was caused by the limited use of data collected across the institution to assess student-learning outcomes, particularly within the general education curriculum. Sharon explained:

Right now, we’re coming up on SACS and we’re going to get dinged on our assessment. We do a lot of data gathering; we just don’t do a lot with it. We do a lot in terms of student major-field testing, and also our general education testing. But, I at least know now where we’re going to be moving and where we need to be going.

Participants reported that the amount of data on campus was, in the words of Richard, Chancellor of University C, “more than we know what to do with.” However, the accreditation agency expects the campus to put the data to use. Participants shared that utilization of the data was a major limitation to compliance. Further, efforts to strengthen data decision utility were highly important. The participants shared that until recently, when a new software package named SideTracks was purchased, university personnel in charge of student learning outcomes assessment lacked an efficient and systematic means to monitor assessment activities across campus, to provide constructive feedback to units, and to guide efforts to develop quality enhancement plans based on the results.

Participants reported that they and the academic units were just now getting accustomed to the technology, and only recently began implementing it across campus. They believe the technology’s benefits will help them achieve the efficient and systematic process needed to comply with standards by providing regular monitoring of and assistance to academic units to ensure quality assessment and timely reporting. In addition, the
participants shared their perception that the software will provide an efficient and organized means through which to utilize data. The achievement of these perceived benefits had not yet been realized, which further catalyzed the need to work toward compliance.

Participants also viewed differences between academic programs in terms of their level of engagement with assessment, which also catalyzed the effort to work toward compliance. Programs that are required to seek accreditation from an independent professional organization were seen as more likely to have clear and established outcomes assessment processes that translated into compliance with SACS and state agency regulations. One example cited was University C’s nursing program, which is accredited by the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC, 2012). NLNAC requires passage rates on the nursing licensure examination to be reported for consideration of programmatic accreditation, and the organization articulates the expected outcomes to be attained by graduates. As a result, the program is provided not only with the expected outcomes, but also the instrument to be used to assess the outcomes. For participants, working toward compliance required establishing consistency in outcomes assessment across the programs in terms of ensuring that instruments are identified, assessment is carried out, and plans for program improvement are developed. Despite a lack of compliance with accreditation standards even with the presence of technology, the participants shared that as Sharon put it, “the software helps us to continue making progress toward meeting accreditation standards.”
Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement

In addition to working toward compliance, campus participants also shared that student learning outcomes assessment is helpful to guide continuous improvement efforts on a constant basis. For example, Robert, University C’s Dean of the College of Business, stated improvements can always be made in the curriculum and that knowing how your students are performing is a key aspect in understanding the quality of a particular program. He shared, “If you can’t prove your performance, how else would you know you’re being successful or not? You can report grades, but it doesn’t necessarily mean your students are learning anything or are doing good work. Assessment gives us that information.”

Michele, University C’s Director of Institutional Research, offered one example of where a department has recently implemented assessment results to improve the quality of an academic program. She stated:

Well, in [the Mathematics] department, we use assessment data to understand how we’re doing and to see what areas there are for us to improve. Usually, we look to see, on average, how our students are doing in all the different areas of our mathematics curriculum. The most recent change I can recall is that four or five years ago we added to our curricular requirements that every math major take an elementary statistics course, because it was obvious through our tests that students were not comprehending statistics very well.

Participants viewed assessment as an essential bridge between continuously improving both program delivery and student learning. However, the participants perceived and experienced a difference between departments in the extent to which student learning outcomes assessment was embraced as an initiative to understand student learning and academic program delivery. For the participants, trying to engage the campus with continuous improvement through assessment has more recently involved
articulating the value of student learning outcomes and getting campus personnel directly involved in the process.

However, this was reportedly a process that was still underway on the campus. In Robert’s case as Dean, he had been working directly with faculty for the past several years to not only motivate faculty across disciplines to understand the value of assessment, but he had also directly involved them in the process of deciding what will be assessed and by what instrument. Robert articulated that, “it was a challenge to get faculty to understand why we did this in addition to grades. But after we got them involved they bought into the process.” Robert shared that his college has a regular and systematic process for assessing learning outcomes where a faculty committee helps him to coordinate the process of major-field testing within the college, and then these individuals engage in a dialogue about how to make improvements to program curricula based on assessment results. While Robert stated that technology was important, he also shared that engagement with continuous improvement among faculty was essential in successfully assessing and utilizing learning outcome data.

**Findings Related to What Institutions are Assessing**

Two findings (general education testing, major-field testing) related to what is being assessed and by what instrument were evidenced at the site. The state agency’s requirements for program-specific as well as general education learning outcomes influenced not only what learning was assessed, but also the type of instrument chosen by the institution to assess it. Specifically, the institution elected to assess its general education outcomes through the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress.
(MAPP), and each department developed their own assessment instrument to assess major-field learning among the students enrolled in the program.

**General Education Testing**

According to the Educational Testing Service (2012), which administers the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), the MAPP assesses the longitudinal value-added gains of a general education curriculum by testing students upon entering the institution, and then after reaching sophomore, junior, or senior status (Educational Testing Service, 2012). At University C, the test was administered to students during their freshman and senior years. All students at the institution had a registration hold placed on their accounts until they took the test. The test is administered over a several week period and students register to take the exam at their convenience. Students are not rewarded or punished for their performance on the examination.

According to the Educational Testing Service (2012), the instrument is designed to assess four critical areas associated with the expected outcomes of a general education curriculum: critical thinking, reading comprehension, writing ability, and mathematics reasoning skills. Each of the four assessment domains is spread across three topics: humanities, social science, and natural science.

**Major-Field Testing**

One example of a major-field examination developed internally at University C was in the Department of Sociology. Students were administered the examination during the Junior or Senior year. As its benchmark, the department required that half of the students must be at or above the average from the prior year. The instrument is offered in a multiple-choice format and measures specific domain knowledge taught within the
curriculum. In particular, the examination is stated to measure two outcomes: a) That the student will be able to apply sociological principles to real-life scenarios, and b) that the student will be able to demonstrate understanding of fundamental sociological concepts. The scores from the examination are averaged and then compared to the scores from the most recent test examination.

Whereas many departments develop their own major-specific assessment instruments, other academic departments administer standardized major field tests. The campus study evidenced that many of these examinations are often tied to the licensure of a student within the program, as with the nursing program, described above. The nursing licensure examination, entitled the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses, is a nationally standardized instrument. The instrument requires test takers to respond to problem-solving inquiries regarding patient care, asking for recollection and application of content that is expected out of a program.

Some programs not seeking accreditation also chose standardized examinations. As one example, assessment results from the Criminal Justice program were gathered from a site document at University C. As a benchmark, the academic program has identified as its goal that Criminal Justice majors will score in at least the 75th percentile on the major field examination, known as the *Theories of Criminal Behavior* examination, which is a nationally standardized instrument that assesses students’ aptitude in program content. According to site documents, the Criminal Justice program exceeded its goal by 10 percentile points during the assessment period.
Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Challenges

Three findings related to the challenges administrators face to assessing and reporting student-learning outcomes were obtained in the case study of University C. These findings were resistance based on established practices, concern over assessment utility, and cost. The participants described that while they were able to make progress toward achieving student learning outcome goals, these challenges were encountered in their efforts to do so.

Resistance Based on Established Practices

Participants stated that their efforts to assess and report student learning outcomes were faced with resistance from academic units, where, in many cases, faculty viewed student learning outcomes as unnecessary or redundant to their established method of assigning grades. Sharon reported experiencing resistance from faculty, “who view assessment as an infraction (sic) on academic freedom.” Participants reported that program faculty members often challenged the value that assessment information brings that grades and in-class student evaluation do not already do. Further, as Sharon, the Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness pointed out, faculty members view their role on campus to be, among other things, the assessment of student learning through coursework. As a result, the participants related this perspective to the resistance they experience when attempting to implement assessment across disciplines.

The resistance to assessment translated into challenges to gaining faculty engagement with student learning outcomes assessment within programs. In addition to getting faculty engaged, Richard shared that faculty are often distrustful of how the assessment data will be used. “It is difficult sometimes convincing faculty members that
the data will not be used against any particular faculty member, and, of course, we’re not gathering the data in order to get rid of faculty member X, and the convincing process takes a while.” As a result, participants reported spending significant effort building trust and confidence among faculty in the assessment process.

**Concern over Assessment Decision Utility**

The second finding reported by the participants was that they encountered concern over the utility of assessment to produce information that could lead to improvement or that could measure student competence in a meaningful way. Robert, shared a limitation he has experienced with the standardized instrument utilized in business, the ETS Test of Business Knowledge.

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Well, in order for data to be useful it also has to yield some sort of detail; detail that we do not get out of that test. If our students aren’t doing well in finance, you know, in business the test breaks down into six categories. When you get into sub-scores it might tell us how we are doing relative to other programs, but it doesn’t tell us what about our curriculum we need to change – so we guess.
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Robert acknowledged disconnect between the curriculum taught in the business program and what was assessed on the instrument. Robert’s statement illustrates an important challenge noted by the participants – that of the utility of standardized assessment instruments. While program curriculum may overlap across institutions, Robert implied that the assessment results from the standardized instrument did not always clearly indicate improvement areas in the curriculum. Further, the results might not clearly indicate what the students do or do not know. As he put it, they have to guess about areas of the curriculum to improve.
The reported concern over decision utility extended beyond the classroom.

Richard, University C’s Chancellor, was concerned that the college experience was larger than “a litany of assessment instruments” could gauge.

I’m asked to tell stakeholders all the time about what transpired within our students during college, and I don’t know. They started years ago and a lot has happened to them and not just during college. Those who make laws or policy think we produce a product or service – that it can be measured and if we can’t show we’re doing it then we have to get rid of what we’re doing or change it.

Richard shared that what instruments measure is not always simply what the student does or does not know, provides only limited insight about the impact of a college education.

Further, the participants shared that assessment has limitations with regard to its scope of measurement and breadth of evidence produced to allow for clear solutions to improving in the curriculum.

Cost

The third finding was that of cost. Participants reported that student learning outcomes assessment required a substantial investment of institutional resources, both through the expense associated with administering instruments and the time and effort of paid administrators and faculty. Sharon, University C’s Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness, explained, “The costs to administer the tests keep going up. Our numbers of students keep going up.”

Robert, Dean of the College of Business, shared that the financial obligation was not his biggest concern associated with the cost of assessment. Instead, he felt that the major cost was associated with personnel resources:

The faculty and I donate our time to coordinate assessment efforts in the college. We’re not paid extra for doing what we do on that, and so I could see a situation where a dean could need more personnel to handle this
work. I do not have all the help I need at the administrative level. I coordinate the learning assessment process within the college.

Cost was framed as an issue of money and personnel resources. Participants shared that the cost of the test has been increasing and that student learning outcomes assessment work occurs above their full-time service as educators and administrators on campus. Sharon, who holds responsibility for institution-wide assessment, shared that outcomes did not represent her most central functions on campus, but that she also held formal responsibility over learning assessment efforts. She stated, “While I’m one of the people coordinating assessment on campus, I also oversee the entire curriculum and all curricular changes. I also oversee all [state accountability system] matters for the university. I’m spread very thin.”

Cross-Case Analysis

In addition to individual analyses of the case studies on each campus site, data were analyzed across the three cases. Summary tables corresponding to the frequency with which the findings were observed on each campus site have been provided below and will be presented with summaries of the findings of each research question.

Themes Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Initiatives

To answer research question 1, which inquired about what efforts are currently underway to assess and report student learning outcomes, a presentation of the themes and the frequency with which they were observed across the three campus sites is provided in Table 1. Two themes were observed across the campus sites.
### Table 1

*Summary of Observed Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Initiatives across Campus Sites*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>University A</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working toward Compliance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: X indicates that the theme was exhibited in the case.*

**Working toward Compliance**

Institutions were making an effort to work toward compliance with standards and regulations placed upon them by external organizations. Campuses reported assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for regional and programmatic accreditation as well as state agency requirements. One example included an institution’s efforts to strengthen utilization of assessment across campuses to meet regional accreditation requirements due to a critical re-accreditation site visit. This theme was observed across all three campuses.

**Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement**

In an effort to strengthen program quality through student learning outcomes assessment, each institution also exhibited an effort to try and engage in continuous improvement across the campus. Examples included reports from participants about additional courses added to program curriculum as a result of poor student performance on assessment instruments and strengthened communication between administrators and departments as a result of the integration of new technology. Despite efforts, each campus also reported that the effort to engage in this process was met with differing
levels of engagement across departments. This theme was observed on all three campuses.

**Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Types**

In response to research question 2, interviews and site documents produced evidence about what instruments have been adopted at each institution to assess learning and what learning those assessments measure, in particular. The campus sites were highly similar in terms of what elements of the curriculum were assessed (major-field and general education). Also, for general education, each campus had chosen a different instrument to measure outcomes. Two findings were observed across the three campuses. Table 2 provides an overview of the findings.
Table 2

*Summary of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Types and Instruments Across Campus Sites*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>University A</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Education Testing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California Critical Thinking Skills Test</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major-Field Testing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internally Developed Instrument</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized Instrument</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded Assessment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: X indicates that the theme was exhibited in the case.*

**General Education Testing**

Each university adopted a different instrument to assess learning outcomes. University A’s focused primarily on critical thinking and was purely quantitative in nature. The instruments adopted by University B and C primarily offered quantitative assessment of skill development commonly associated with general education curriculum.
(critical thinking, oral and written communication, analytical reasoning), but a written portion was also provided. Further, the instruments adopted by University B and C offered a value-added assessment to determine the gains made by students throughout the time enrolled at the institution. University A’s instrument was not a value-added instrument, meaning that the assessment was not administered to the same group of students at different time periods.

**Major–Field Testing**

Each university offered a diverse array of major-field instruments. Some programs adopted nationally standardized instruments regardless of affiliation with a programmatic accreditation agency such as University C’s criminal justice program. Other departments used internally developed instruments such as University A’s history program, which administered a multi-question exam over content delivered through the curriculum. Finally, embedded assessment had been integrated across some departments as a means to demonstrate competencies through work already submitted within the courses offered in academic programs. University A served as an example with students enrolling in journalism courses, where a capstone project was assigned to demonstrate competence with program content.

**Themes or Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Challenges**

In response to research question 3, challenges and resistances were reported on each campus with respect to efforts to assess and report student-learning outcomes. Table 3 provides an overview of the themes or findings only exhibited at one institution.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>University A</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resistance Based on Established Practices</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern over Assessment Decision Utility</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Technology</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: X indicates that the theme was exhibited in the case.*

**Resistance Based on Established Practices**

The first theme related to challenges associated with assessing and reporting student learning outcomes was that of resistance based on established practices. Campus participants reported that their leadership on initiatives to assess and report student-learning outcomes was met with resistance across many academic units due to skepticism over its value compared to student grades and in-class evaluation. This theme was observed across all three campuses.

**Concern over Assessment Decision Utility**

Campus participants expressed concerns of their own as well as shared experiences with colleagues that challenged the decision utility of some assessment instruments, particularly quantitative examinations, at providing meaningful and trustworthy results. In particular, concern over utility focused on the limited ability of some instruments to produce results that provide a clear indication of where
improvements can be made in the curriculum. This theme was observed across all three campuses.

**Cost**

A finding exhibited at one campus, University C, was focused on cost. Participants at University C reported that student learning outcomes assessment placed both a financial and personnel resource burden upon them, particularly because budgets continue to tighten while the expense of the tests continues to increase. Further, participants at University C reported that personnel are asked to take on greater workloads in general, and assessment efforts are often on top of their regular full-time responsibilities.

**Lack of Technology**

Another finding exhibited at only one campus, University A, was that of a lack of technology. Participants at University A reported that complying with accreditation standards, which called for every academic unit to identify, assess, and report learning outcomes, was a challenge because of limited capability to oversee and assist with these efforts due to a lack of software to help them create a centralized system to monitor and assist departments with their efforts.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION,
IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Accountability is a major governance theme in higher education (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Thelin, 2004). Consistent with the calls for accountability evidence has been the push by stakeholders for institutions to provide student learning outcomes assessment data as a means to demonstrate performance (National Governor’s Association, 1986; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008; National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012; Morse, 2011). However, literature has suggested that institutions are challenged by philosophical, technological, and political impediments that preclude the ability for such evidence to be gathered and utilized in a meaningful manner (Minor, 2011; Haertel, 2005). Further, research has insufficiently characterized the present efforts taken by colleges and universities to assess and report student-learning outcomes (Liu, 2011; Minor, 2011; Arum & Roksa, 2011; Jankowski & Provezis, 2011). As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the bachelor’s degree granting institutions of the campuses in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study was also to understand what challenges and criticisms academic leaders report about the call to provide learning outcome evidence.

Utilizing Bolman and Deal’s (2004) Organizational Frames Model as the theoretical framework for the study, 12 in-depth interviews as well as relevant site documents were gathered to provide an in-depth analysis of the assessment steps,
instruments, and challenges on each of the three campus sites under study. The study was
guided by the following research questions:

- What efforts, if any, are institutions presently taking to assess and report
  student-learning outcomes and why?

- What types of learning outcomes, if any, are colleges and universities trying
to measure?

- What challenges and criticisms, if any, currently impede institutions’ abilities
to gather learning outcome data?

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings in
relation to the theoretical framework as described in Chapter 1, implications for practice,
and recommendations for future research.

**Summary of the Findings**

To answer the each research question, the data were coded and analyzed by
institution, and then a cross-case analysis was conducted. Themes and findings associated
with each research question and the frequency at which they were observed across the
campus sites are presented below.

**Themes Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Initiatives**

To answer research question 1, which inquired about what efforts are currently
underway to assess and report student-learning outcomes. Two themes (Working toward
Compliance, Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement) were exhibited.

**Working toward Compliance**

Institutions were making an effort to work toward compliance with standards and
regulations placed upon them by external organizations. Campuses reported assessing
and reporting student learning outcomes for regional and programmatic accreditation as
well as state agency accountability requirements. One example included an institution’s
efforts to strengthen utilization of assessment across campuses to meet regional accreditation requirements due to a critical re-accreditation site visit. This theme was observed across all three campuses.

**Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement**

In an effort to strengthen program quality through student learning outcomes assessment, each institution also exhibited an effort to try and engage in continuous improvement across the campus. Examples included reports from participants about additional courses added to program curriculum as a result of poor student performance on assessment instruments and strengthened communication between administrators and departments as a result of the integration of new technology. Despite efforts, each campus also reported that the effort to engage in this process was met with differing levels of engagement across departments. This theme was observed on all three campuses.

**Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Types**

In response to research question 2, interviews and site documents produced evidence about what instruments have been adopted at each institution to assess learning and what learning those assessments measure, in particular. The campus sites were highly similar in terms of what elements of the curriculum were assessed (major-field and general education). Also, for general education, each campus had chosen a different instrument to measure outcomes.

**General Education Testing**

Each university adopted a different instrument to assess learning outcomes. University A’s focused primarily on critical thinking and was purely quantitative in
nature. The instruments adopted by University B and C primarily offered quantitative assessment of skill development commonly associated with general education curriculum (critical thinking, oral and written communication, analytical reasoning), but a written portion was also provided. Further, the instruments adopted by University B and C offered a value-added assessment to determine the gains made by students throughout the time enrolled at the institution. University A’s instrument was not a value-added instrument, meaning that the assessment was not administered to the same group of students at different time periods. General education testing was evidenced on all three sites.

**Major–Field Testing**

Each university offered a diverse array of major-field instruments, and the instrument’s adoption or development was influenced in large part by whether or not they sought accreditation for a discipline-specific accrediting body. In those cases, the campuses reported that programs seeking specialized accreditation adopted the instrument needed to retain such accreditation, often a nationally standardized quantitative instrument such as the NCLEX examination administered by University C for its nursing program. However, some programs adopted nationally standardized instruments regardless of affiliation with a programmatic accreditation agency such as University C’s criminal justice program. Other departments used internally developed instruments such as University A’s history program, which administered a multi-question exam over content delivered through the curriculum. Finally, embedded assessment had been integrated across some departments as a means to demonstrate competencies through work already submitted within the courses offered in academic programs.
University A served as an example with students enrolling in journalism courses, where a capstone project was assigned to demonstrate competence with program content. Major-field testing was exhibited at all three campus sites.

**Themes or Findings Related to Learning Outcomes Assessment Challenges**

In response to research question three, challenges and resistances were reported on each campus with respect to efforts to assess and report student-learning outcomes.

**Resistance Based on Established Practices**

The first theme related to challenges associated with assessing and reporting student learning outcomes was that of resistance based on established practices. Campus participants reported that their leadership on initiatives to assess and report student-learning outcomes was met with resistance across many academic units due to skepticism over its value compared to student grades and in-class evaluation. This theme was observed across all three campuses.

**Concern over Assessment Decision Utility**

Campus participants expressed concerns of their own as well as shared experiences with colleagues that challenged the decision utility of some assessment instruments, particularly quantitative examinations, at providing meaningful and trustworthy results. In particular, concern over utility focused on the limited ability of some instruments to produce results that provide a clear indication of where improvements can be made in the curriculum. This theme was observed across all three campuses.
Cost

A finding exhibited at one campus, University C, was focused on cost. Participants at University C reported that student learning outcomes assessment placed both a financial and personnel resource burden upon them, particularly because budgets continue to tighten while the expense of the tests continues to increase. Further, participants at University C reported that personnel are asked to take on greater workloads in general, and assessment efforts are often on top of their regular full-time responsibilities.

Lack of Technology

Another finding exhibited at only one campus, University A, was that of a lack of technology. Participants at University A reported that complying with accreditation standards, which called for every academic unit to identify, assess, and report learning outcomes, was a challenge because of limited capability to oversee and assist with these efforts due to a lack of software to help them create a centralized system to monitor and assist departments with their efforts.

Discussion

The institutions involved in the study reported a heavy commitment to being engaged in changing and improving student learning outcomes assessment practices on their campuses, but the extant literature raises important considerations about the status of these efforts and reported challenges. The first consideration is that despite decades of nationally prominent calls from accrediting agencies, policymakers, and the business community, student learning outcomes assessment has changed relatively little and without satisfying expectations for such evidence. All of the campuses in the study shared
that campus’ learning outcomes assessment efforts failed to meet standards articulated through the regional accrediting body, SACS, which articulates that all departments shall define and assess student-learning outcomes and develop improvement plans based on the results. Further, institutions are also expected to assess objectives for the general education curriculum. But, as literature clearly illustrates, these expectations are not new (Minor, 2011; Liu, 2010; National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012; National Governor’s Association, 1986).

What, then, is stalling progress on outcomes assessment? With regard to SACS, participants in the present study did not express concern over failing to meet regional accreditation requirements for outcomes assessment. The implication of this finding is that without serious reprimand for compliance failure, institutional leaders have little motivation to take the practice of outcomes assessment seriously. A guiding mission for institutions is to educate students, and the slow progress at making little change suggests that this mission is not met equally with the priority to acquire knowledge on the extent to which the institution is achieving mission or to understand areas to improve. Will it take establishing the prospect of penal action for institutions to more heavily prioritize learning outcomes assessment? Up to this point, encouragement has not yielded satisfactory results at prompting institutions to prioritize learning outcomes assessment.

The second consideration is that despite the widely established litany of assessment instruments as well as the ability for academic departments to take leadership in designing methods of assessment internally, the issue of decision utility persists as a challenge to establishing outcomes assessment systems. Participants from each campus site in the case study reported the presence of concern over the ability of assessment
instruments, particularly quantitative measures, to yield results that are useful at guiding curricular improvement or at reflecting performance to stakeholders accurately. As was mentioned earlier, the presence of student learning outcomes assessment is not a new phenomenon penetrating the walls of academia. Why do instruments not viewed as capable of producing useful results persist? It is clear that institutional leaders were committed to assessment for compliance, and that stakeholders had articulated the expectation that instruments to assess learning had to be established. But is the purpose of outcomes assessment solely for compliance? Can an instrument not only comply with standards, but also provide usable evidence? It is important to note limitations in the extent to which all things worth learning in college can be measured, much like Shulman (2004) mentioned in a collection of his essays entitled *Teaching as Community Property* where he shares that the difficult task of teaching is that we cannot always see student learning. However, to recognize assessment as the ability to measure learning where appropriate and in a manner that can guide improvement is not beyond the reach of institutional leaders and faculty who are charged with achieving the educational mission of colleges and universities.

**Themes and Findings as Related to the Theoretical Framework**

The themes and findings within this case study related in large part to Bolman and Deal’s Organizational Frames Model. Bolman and Deal articulated that four frames are common to organizations: political, structural, human relations, and symbolic. Within the case study, in particular, three of the four frames (political, structural, and human relations) were directly exhibited given the research questions. The study illustrated that the practice of student learning outcomes assessment on each campus required a
delineation of authority and tasks; presented conflict over power among constituency groups; and affected the daily experiences of personnel. These findings also tied directly into the extant literature and policy documents surrounding the calls for learning outcome evidence as a demonstration of accountability.

Bolman and Deal (2004) described the *Structural frame* as the delineation of roles and tasks within an organization based not only on knowledge or skill, but also on environmental factors such as time and the product to be delivered. The case study illustrated that student learning outcomes assessment is a task that is shared across units and personnel on the campuses. While each campus had central personnel dedicated to reporting data, the interviews and site documents revealed that the practice of administering field exams and general education outcomes was shared across units. The shared responsibility was undergirded by their work toward complying with standards placed upon them by external coordinating and accrediting organizations as well as an interest in engaging within continuous improvement efforts. The shared structure created the need for a centralized system for those holding official responsibility to monitor and provide assistance.

However, even across the two institutions that had adopted software technology, in place at the institution for several years, had not yet reached their perceived effect of engaging all units in quality outcomes assessment to comply with standards and to continuously improve. As an impediment, participants shared that varying levels of engagement with the practice of assessment challenged the benefit of systematic assessment processes provided through the technology – a challenge that was cited as a problem existing exclusive of the software. Minor (2011) stated that one pre-eminent
challenge affecting student learning outcomes assessment is “technology lag,” where the resources such as software programs are not on pace with the pressures institutions are facing to centralize their dispersed, campus-wide processes of assessment. The reports of varying levels of engagement across campuses despite adopting software technology suggest the need to have campus personnel involved as a deeper issue than the lack of technology. The findings of this case study instead suggest “engagement lag” as a guiding impediment. But when participants report institution-wide concern over the decision utility of instruments, particularly when students do not take them seriously as many of the participants reported, little motivation exists to improve engagement with the process.

Reports by participants in the campus sites who stated that assessment was utilized in a meaningful manner when faculty were engaged in the process help evidence the strength of getting personnel involved in the process in addition to the technology. Related to this finding is Bolman and Deal’s (2004) *Human Relations* frame, which is characterized as the components of an organization that contribute to the satisfaction, nurturance, and inclusion of individuals that are necessary for organizational survival and growth.

However, the success in getting personnel involved was met with perceived concern over the value that assessment brings to administering academic programs. On one campus site, participants reported that outcomes assessment is a responsibility they and their colleagues must take on above and beyond their full-time responsibilities. On all campus sites, participants shared that they encountered resistance from campus personnel over the decision utility of the assessment instruments that, according to standards placed
upon them, not only regulated their administration but also their integration into the curriculum. The call to do more and to be increasingly responsible to external stakeholders and groups through accountability is only gaining emphasis as a policy priority in today’s higher education environment, and the criticisms offered by personnel affected by these calls has indicated an effect on the perceived work environment of campus personnel (Thelin, 2004; Bogue & Aper, 2000). As a result, the work conducted by institutional leaders and their colleagues will continue to be affected by accountability expectations and the calls for evidence being made by stakeholders.

Further, the case study brought focus to Bolman and Deal’s (2004) *Political frame*. The *Political frame* describes that common to organizations is the presence of authority/power and dissent/conflict over organizational purpose and mission. A unique characteristic to higher education, as evidenced through this case study, is that in addition to internal dissent/conflict and power/authority over organizational purpose and mission, such struggle can exist toward institutions from external stakeholders as well. Viewing student learning outcomes assessment through the political frame revealed an important and notable contention between stakeholders and institutional personnel: that more evidence is needed to satisfy stakeholder expectations for learning and, as an exercise of power, accreditation and governance groups have set standards to gather such evidence. However, despite a long history of calls for learning outcome evidence appearing in national policy documents and more recent efforts to prompt assessment, the campus sites under study are still encountering conflict and power struggle across departments over the practice of learning outcomes assessment (Tierney, 1999; National Governor’s Association, 1986; Spellings Commission, 2006; National Center for Public Policy and
Higher Education, 2008; Association for Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012).

Mentioned earlier was the presence of resistance from institutional personnel over the decision utility of assessment data as well as concern over the evidence such data would bring that grades, as an established process of student evaluation, already do not demonstrate.

The perceived resistance among the participants over the importance and legitimacy of student learning outcomes is consistent with Bogue and Hall’s (2012) five-state study on higher education accountability. Bogue and Hall found that academic leaders varied from business leaders and state legislators on the value and validity of a variety of forms of student learning outcomes assessment indicators. Still, external constituency groups have a strong interest in learning outcome evidence as an indication of performance. It is evident from the research that institutions will face persistent expectations to produce evidence despite their resistance to calls for accountability. How will institutions respond to these expectations in the face of resistance from key campus personnel?

The persistent and intensifying expectation for accountability and the resistance to these calls on campuses brings to the forefront an important consideration with regard to today’s governance of colleges and universities that will affect the future of higher education leadership. That is, as stakeholders and institutional leaders continue to engage accountability as a premier policy issue, the need for reasonable, credible, and legitimate instruments to gather data that can be used in a meaningful manner continues to be an unrealized goal. In addition, stakeholders and leaders will continue to struggle with satisfaction of accountability expectations unless these groups can build consensus on the
purpose, instruments, and definitions of accountability in general, and, as one expression reported through this study, student learning outcomes in particular.

Conclusions

The present study illustrated that institutions are heavily influenced to assess student-learning outcomes as a response to accreditation and state agency requirements. This finding is consistent with the literature that articulates the salient presence of student learning outcomes as a needed form of accountability evidence (Jankowski & Provezis, 2012; Morse, 2011; Bogue & Hall, 2012). Further, the research also supported literature on the resistances to learning outcomes assessment by showing the presence of technological, philosophic, and structural issues on campuses that are viewed as impediments to achieving the ideal of student learning outcomes assessment on their campus sites (Minor, 2011; Liu, 2011; Jankowski & Provezis, 2012).

By understanding what steps institutions are taking to assess student learning outcomes and what challenges are being encountered in the process, governing authorities and institutional leaders can be provided with in-depth information about the nature and complexity of the work personnel perform to meet outcomes expectations. The research also provides implications for practice.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this research offer findings that are useful for higher education professionals.

1. Boards of Trustees and State Governing Boards

Boards of trustees and state governing boards need to understand not only the complexity of the enterprise they govern and serve, but also the nature of the work that
personnel undertake and the challenges they experience in their roles to achieve mission expectations. Accountability, and, given the focus of this study, student learning outcomes assessment pose as no exception. Boards of trustees and state governing boards have the responsibility that the data collected to indicate performance is accurate, meaningful, and reflective of the nature of work performed. Also important, though, is that these governing authorities understand and respect the boundaries and limitations of accountability evidence and use the data only in a manner that is appropriate within its intended purpose. Perhaps student motivation does impede the accuracy in sound judgment of assessment results. Understanding potential issues with assessment is necessary for effective and meaningful leadership in higher education.

Further, it is important for higher education governing authorities to understand that reported progress on student learning outcomes assessment across campuses does not exist separate from the wide-ranging and longstanding call for learning outcomes assessment evidence. This study suggested key considerations for governing authorities: Is it time to consider sanctions for failure to design systems of student learning outcomes assessment across campuses and what penal action might appropriately motivate institutions to comply with learning outcomes assessment standards?

2. College Presidents, Provosts, and other Key Academic Officers

College presidents, provosts, and key academic officers on each campus should understand the complexity associated with not only coordinating student learning outcomes across the institution, but in envisioning initiatives that can be viewed as credible, trustworthy, and worthwhile by the individuals who will either carry out or be affected by the vision. Further, college leaders must also act as able-listeners in their
duties as executives, and, with that role, seek to understand the context behind efforts to assess learning, the challenges in doing so, and how the data can or cannot be utilized to strengthen performance or demonstrate accountability.

However, while recognizing limitations or opportunities inherent in the outcomes assessment process is only one piece to responding effectively to this accountability expectation. The other is to understand that student learning outcomes assessment will not be achieved as a campus-wide priority without a longstanding, consistent, and firm call made by educational leadership while recognizing that autonomy can still maintained at delivering educational programs. Setting the expectation does not mean dictating the process, and it is clear that public higher education institutions are in need of a consistent and institution-wide expectations reinforced through leaders that value learning outcomes assessment.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The present study should be replicated within other higher education environments. This research project was carried out within one state system of four-year public higher education. However, the call to assess and report student learning outcomes is being made across all types and sectors of institutions. An inquiry into other contexts would be helpful to build on the knowledge presented in this study as a means to enrich understanding of the efforts and challenges surrounding institutional student learning outcomes assessment initiatives.

Further, research on the perspectives and experiences of faculty and department heads on their efforts to assess and report student learning outcomes would also provide meaningful information on the status of student learning outcomes as an accountability
indicator. This study did not focus on this group within the university environments, but
given their work to assess program-specific the perspectives they could provide would be
helpful to further understand the efforts and challenges associated with collecting
assessment data.

Lastly, Bogue and Hall (2012) illustrated a key challenge to the complexity
associated with institutional accountability efforts. That challenge is amidst the calls for
accountability evidence, a lack of clarity and consensus over what, specifically, is to be
measured currently impedes institutional efforts to be held accountable. Further, Morse
(2011) found that business and political stakeholders were dissatisfied with the quality of
skills that graduates possess upon completing college. The present study illustrated what
institutions are producing in terms of learning outcomes data to demonstrate student
learning. However, research on stakeholder perception of the legitimacy of various forms
of student learning outcomes evidence (licensure pass rates, standardized general
education exams) among stakeholders would further illustrate the extent to which
accountability efforts are impeded by lacking stakeholder consensus.
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Appendices
Appendix A

Letter of Invitation

Dear (Academic Leader),

The expectation to produce credible forms of accountability evidence has presented a complex policy challenge that has shaped contemporary college and university governance issues. Among the calls for accountability evidence have been instruments that assess and report evidence of student learning as an indicator of performance. Research indicates that the pressure to produce learning evidence is growing in salience as a preference among stakeholders, but less clear is the status of institutional efforts to assess and report student learning on college and university campuses.

You are among a group of selected institutional leaders invited to participate in a study designed to continue ongoing exploration of accountability in higher education. Your participation in an interview not to exceed 60 minutes will not only be greatly appreciated, but it will also help further inform ongoing research and advocacy efforts to create reasonable accountability policy expectations.

I hope that you will participate in an interview. Please reply to this email indicating whether or not you would like to participate and, if you are interested, the principal investigator will be contacting you to set up a time and date to meet at your office.

Many thanks in advance.

Sincerely,

Andrew Morse
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Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
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Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Exploring the Status of Learning Outcome
Focused Initiatives in Four-Year Public Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

I am asking for your voluntary participation in my research project. The purpose of this study is to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the Bachelor’s degree granting institutions of the campuses in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study is also to understand what challenges and criticisms academic leaders report about the call to provide learning outcome evidence.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS’ INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Upon meeting with the participant for an interview, the principal investigator will first gain informed consent and, upon consent being given, a semi-structured interview anticipated to last no longer than 60 minutes will take place. The interviews will be recorded with a digital recording device. The digital records and transcriptions of the interview will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the principal investigator.

After the interviews take place, the principal investigator will transcribe the interviews into a word document so that analysis can occur upon completion of data collection. The information gathered from the interviews will be utilized during the analysis and reporting processes to generate themes.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks or harm for participation in this study.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits for participating in the study.

_____ Participant's initials
CONFIDENTIALITY

The information gathered in the study will be kept confidential. All interview data collected by the researcher as well as signed informed consent forms will be stored in a locked, secure file cabinet only accessible by the investigator. Any electronic files will be kept in a password-protected flash drive only accessible by the principal investigator. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link participants to the study, and pseudonyms will be assigned to participants to protect confidentiality as well.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact the researcher, Andrew Morse, at 1616 Melrose Avenue, Melrose Hall F101, Knoxville, TN 37996, and by phone at 865-660-2886. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature __________________________ Date __________

Investigator's signature __________________________ Date __________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

I will be interviewing college and university presidents and provosts as my lead off participants in a study that will examine the efforts taking place on their campus to assess and report student-learning outcomes. Further, I will be exploring the challenges these individuals face to assess and report student-learning outcomes. I will also be seeking to investigate other professionals on campus to gain deeper perspective on the same topics as well through “chaining” with the presidents and provosts to other eligible participants.

**Topic domain: Student-Learning Outcome Initiatives**

*Lead off question:* What efforts are currently underway to assess student-learning outcomes on your campus?

*[Covert categories: leadership; accountability; student-learning outcomes]*

*Possible follow-up questions*
1. How is assessment data being used after it is collected?
2. Who or what is prompting your institution to assess student-learning outcomes?

**Topic domain: Learning Outcome Types**

*Lead off question:* What types of learning are being assessed at your institution?

*[Covert categories: Learning outcomes; assessment]*

*Possible follow-up questions*
1. How are assessments administered?
2. What instruments is your institution using to assess learning?
3. How is the institution reporting the assessment results?
4. How are these data being used?

**Topic domain: Learning Outcome Assessment Challenges**

*Lead off question:* What, if anything, makes assessing student learning-outcomes difficult?

*[Covert categories: Accountability Conflict; Leadership Challenges]*

*Possible follow-up questions*
1. What types of learning are difficult to measure?
2. What struggles, if any, have you encountered while working with academic units across the campus on student learning outcomes initiatives?
Vita

Andrew was born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1985. He graduated from Akron-Westfield High School in 2004. After graduating from the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, IA, he attended graduate school at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he earned a Master of Science Degree in College Student Personnel.

Upon graduating with a Master of Science Degree in College Student Personnel, he entered the Doctor of Philosophy program in Higher Education Administration at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Currently, he works as an Educational Policy Analyst with the Board of Governors, State University System of Florida.