

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Heather Lang for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on March 9, 2016.

Title: Perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers on the State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Abstract approved: _____
Earl P. Johnson

Institutions of higher education are increasingly being held accountable and experiencing pressure to demonstrate how well their students are achieving intended learning outcomes. External and internal influences fuel this pressure. After decades of rhetoric on student learning outcomes assessment there remains a question of whether the practice has been fully adopted by institutions and, if so, whether the practice has led to improved student learning and success. Student affairs units play an integral part of students' education and are not immune to the call for establishing a practice of assessment. First hand accounts by student affairs administrators on the state of learning outcomes assessment at their institutions are scarce in the scholarly literature.

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within their community college student affairs divisions. This study specifically sought to understand the participants' perceptions of (a) what internal and external forces influence adoption of assessment practice and use of data, (b) how assessment is prioritized within their action agenda, and (c) how equipped administrators are to lead assessment efforts. Guided by interpretive theory and the body of research on the culture of assessment in student affairs, this

instrumental multiple case study was bound by a deliberate sample of participants representing comparably sized institutions in Oregon. Verbatim transcript data from semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of evidence in this study. Associated documents provided by participants, as well the researcher's own analytic memos, provided a secondary source. Data for this study were interpreted through a process of thematic qualitative analysis. This systematic, iterative, and active analysis process resulted in a thematic framework from which thirteen categories of key dimensions were generated. These in turn fed into six major themes: (a) factors that inhibit assessment practice; (b) factors that facilitate assessment practice; (c) reality versus aspiration; (d) knowledge, skill, and attitude of leaders; (e) limited culture of institutional support; and (f) resource challenges.

The major findings of this study were evaluated within the guiding theoretical framework of the body of literature on the topic which led to the following key insights: (a) assessment practice is viewed as imperative by senior student affairs officers, (b) there is a lack of culture of assessment within student affairs divisions, (c) there are significant barriers to assessment practice within student affairs, (d) and there is hope for an expanded assessment practice in student affairs in the future. Study findings have implications for state and federal policy makers and accreditation associations, and key stakeholders interested in the integration of learning outcomes in student services. Expectations for assessment are not well defined and the integration of learning outcomes is not evident for services and programs that touch students outside the classroom. Existing research on outcomes primarily focuses on instruction. Ultimately, if a "culture of assessment" is to be integrated into student services there must be additional research

that documents the benefits of assessment practice in student services and whether the efforts are worth it.

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Perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers
on the State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

by
Heather Lang

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Education

Dean of the College of Education

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Heather Lang, Author

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DEDICATION

To my dad, who would have been very proud to have a doctor in the family.

Perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers on the State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Chapter I: Focus and Significance

A focus on learning, rather than instruction, is the emerging paradigm for higher education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2000; Barr & Tagg, 1995; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007).

Institutions of higher education are increasingly focused on establishing student learning outcomes that reflect the type of transformational learning and development required of our 21st century context. In its report, *Learning Reconsidered*, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association (2004) described how educators are “now accountable to students and society for identifying and achieving essential learning outcomes and for making transformative education possible and accessible for all students” (p. 1). Transformational education has its roots in liberal education and represents a holistic and integrative approach to learning centered around cognitive, affective, and multidimensional identity development (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007).

In large part, this movement has been driven by a call for accountability within higher education. Stakeholders in the form of accrediting bodies, government agencies, tuition-paying students, and internal education communities are increasingly demanding demonstration of institutional effectiveness and efficiency (Beno, 2004; Bers, 2008; Bresciani, 2002; Dugan, 2006; Suskie, 2006; Syed & Mojock, 2008). While community colleges have long been held accountable for accessibility and affordability, a focus on educational quality has taken center stage. Educational quality is increasingly being defined as the extent to which college students are learning (Bresciani, 2006; Dugan, 2006). Institutions must demonstrate to stakeholders, through effective assessment, that students are achieving intended outcomes and that they are using assessment for continual program improvement in order to respond to changing societal demands for a college educated citizenry.

The learning paradigm and its accompanying assessment movement extends beyond the formal academic program. Doyle (2004) pointed out that much of the

literature on this topic stresses the learning that happens outside the classroom. Student affairs units in higher education have historically been responsible for out-of-class learning experiences and have been in the process of embracing a philosophical shift from service to student learning for the past few decades (American College Personnel Association, 1996; Barham & Scott, 2006; Bresciani, 2009, 2002; Doyle, 2004; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). Likewise, student affairs units are not immune to the internal and external forces that are increasingly holding community college agents, programs, and institutions accountable for student learning (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Schuh & Associates, 2009; Schuh, 2013). As Barham and Scott (2006) asserted, “Future expectations of the student affairs profession is an operation that integrates comprehensively the philosophies of service, development, and learning within an accountability frame” (p. 211). Student affairs staff and administrators, alongside their instructional counterparts, must provide evidence that they are achieving the outcomes they are purporting to achieve.

Research Problem

The practice of assessment of student learning outcomes within student affairs is the general topic explored by this study. This study specifically sought to address the problem of establishing a practice of assessment of student learning outcomes within student affairs divisions at community colleges in the face of external and internal pressures to do so. Assessment in higher education, in general, has had its implementation challenges. Although the body of descriptive literature on assessment is vast and institutional efforts in the area date back many decades, experts continue to lament that the practice is not resulting in significant demonstrable impact (Banta, 2009a; Banta, 2009b; Banta and Blaich, 2011). Banta and Blaich (2011) reported on recent studies that found very little evidence of improvement of student learning or institutional change, as a result of assessment activities within a large number of best practice institutions. Barriers to effective assessment are also widely identified throughout the literature. Bresciani (2006) summarized the barriers into the following two categories:

1. Lack of understanding of the value and importance of outcomes-based assessment among those implementing it as well as among those top-level leadership who are being asked to support it.

2. Lack of resources to engage in meaningful and manageable assessment, which includes time to learn about and to engage in assessment, as well as having the institutional infrastructure to support it. (p. 120)

Although student affairs practitioners may be interested in incorporating learning and development outcomes, assessment within units frequently stops at a program output and utilization level, such as satisfaction surveys and identification of student populations being served (Barham & Scott, 2006; Bresciani, 2002; Dale, 2009; Haney & McClellan, 2009; Jones, 2009; Smith, Szelest, & Downey, 2004). Student affairs practitioners may lack the awareness of how their work impacts student learning and development. Even if they are aware, they frequently do not possess the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to integrate meaningful assessment into their practice (Bresciani, 2002; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Kisker, 2005; Schuh & Associates, 2009). The challenges to effectively integrating assessment practice, as identified above, are also likely greater for student affairs professionals since far less attention has been placed on assessing student learning outcomes within their field than within the academic realm.

For community college student affairs divisions, the absence or ineffectiveness of assessment of student learning outcomes may be problematic. Increasingly, all areas of institutions will be required to demonstrate their impact on student learning and development (Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Harris & Cullen, 2010; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008; Kuh, Gonyea, & Rodriguez, 2002; Suskie, 2004; Whitt, 2006). If out-of-class experiences are claimed to contribute to student learning and development, then it is imperative for student services practitioners and administrators to prove that claim. It is critical for community college leaders to prioritize student learning outcomes assessment and the use of assessment data for both continual improvement of programs, services, and interventions and demonstration to stakeholders of their contribution to student learning and institutional outcomes.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

An analysis of the literature on assessment of student learning outcomes revealed a deep body of descriptive and prescriptive work detailing the imperative for higher education institutions to integrate assessment practice and establish cultures of evidence,

as well as the experiences of those institutions attempting to do so. Studies employed a variety of research approaches including anecdotal observations, case studies, surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Studies predominantly focused on assessment of academic programs. Those that addressed assessment of student affairs programs and services predominantly focused on the university rather than the community college experience. While no theories specific to learning outcomes assessment in higher education exist, there are extensive accounts of (a) the importance of the practice to demonstrate accountability and positively impact student learning, (b) factors that influence the practice, and (c) the impact of the practice to date.

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. Leadership plays a key role in inspiring and managing assessment work and administrators possess a unique and broad perspective on how institutional practice is truly aligning with scholarship. This study was particularly informed by and sought to extend the findings of fairly recent focus group research conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) (Kinzie, 2010). The NILOA study sought to understand how campuses are actually prioritizing assessment work, how results of assessment have been used, and what key challenges to the work are present through first hand accounts of presidents, provosts, academic deans, and directors of institutional research. The voice of student affairs administrators was notably missing from the NILOA study. This study sought to illuminate what is actually occurring on the ground within community college student affairs divisions from a leadership perspective.

Research Questions

The following key questions informed and framed this study:

1. *What internal and external forces do senior student affairs officers believe are influencing the adoption of student learning outcomes assessment and use of learning outcomes data within student affairs at community colleges?*

Rationale: A critical step to addressing the problem of establishing student learning outcomes assessment practice is to understand the driving forces that promote or detract from its institutional adoption and impact. Response to

this question will help clarify why or why not assessment practice is taking hold in student affairs divisions and thus, inform leadership and policy makers seeking to influence practice.

2. *How do community college senior student affairs officers prioritize assessment of student learning outcomes within their student affairs action agenda?* Rationale: Institutions and individuals act on what they value. As Bresciani (2006) asserts, a barrier to assessment practice is the lack of importance placed on it by institutional leadership. Response to this question will shed light on how important assessment practice is to student affairs administrators and, subsequently, how they are prioritizing and accomplishing efforts in this area.
3. *How do community college senior student affairs officers perceive they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, institutional support, and resources to lead student learning outcomes assessment practice?* Rationale: Student affairs administrators play a critical role in leading, guiding, and motivating student affairs practitioners to engage in outcomes assessment. Little is known about how prepared or supported these administrators are to accomplish this task. Addressing this question will illuminate to what extent senior student affairs officers perceive they are prepared and what additional resources may be required.

In seeking to address these research questions, this study aims to drill down into the lived experience of senior student affairs officers to determine what drives learning outcomes assessment work in their divisions, how they prioritize assessment work, and how equipped, both personally and institutionally, they feel to lead the work. Results will be informative to community college leaders and policy makers. Further rationale for this study is addressed in the following section.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for the following practical and scholarly reasons: (a) pressure for increased accountability for learning within higher education will continue, (b) community colleges have struggled with implementing assessment of learning outcomes, (c) the study will inform practice within student affairs, (d) the study will have

professional significance for the researcher, and (e) from a scholarly perspective, very little research exists on the assessment of student learning outcomes within student affairs, especially within the community college setting.

Pressure for Accountability in Higher Education

During the past couple of decades there has been an increased focus on holding higher education institutions accountable for student learning and overall improvement of educational quality (Banta 2010; Klein, Kuh, Chun, Hamilton, & Shavelson, 2005; Peterson & Augustine, 2000b; Ewell, 2009). This pressure comes from stakeholders in response to increasing demand for and cost of education, decreasing graduation and transfer rates, a desire to better serve an increasingly diverse student population, and stakeholder concern for return on investment. In 2006, the federal government's Spellings Commission Report on the Future of Higher Education drew attention to postsecondary institutions and called on them to increase transparency and accountability for student outcomes and institutional effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Accrediting agencies have also responded to public and political interests in higher education performance. These agencies are the primary means for assuring postsecondary education quality in the U.S. All of the national accreditation regions have recently revised their standards and processes in order to emphasize student learning as a key indicator of institutional quality (Beno, 2004; Peterson & Augustine, 2000b). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2003) has urged accrediting organizations to continue to exercise leadership in providing evidence of student learning outcomes. They say, "In an era of considerable skepticism about the value of many public and private enterprises, adopting this stance reaffirms accreditation's claim on the public trust" (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003, p. 4)

Given the size and importance of the higher education enterprise in U.S. society, it is unlikely that the demand for accountability will diminish (Hernon & Dugan, 2006; Suskie, 2006). In order for higher education institutions to meet stakeholders' increasing demand to demonstrate results, assessment of student outcomes must be effectively practiced and reported. This study seeks to illuminate the perception of this practice by those administrators who are ultimately responsible for communicating student achievement to stakeholders.

Outcomes Assessment Struggle

Based on the literature, many community colleges are struggling to conduct student learning outcomes assessment for a variety of reasons. Friedlander and Serban (2004) reported that “program-level assessment at community colleges is still in its infancy” (p. 102). They noted that, although accrediting agencies are increasingly mandating that community colleges measure student learning outcomes, they have not provided an adequate roadmap for institutions to follow towards this effort. They identified that “what is missing from the literature are specific models for developing, implementing and sustaining comprehensive assessment efforts that take into account the particular features of a community college setting” (Friedlander & Serban, 2004, p. 107).

Both student affairs and instructional practitioners often lack the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in assessment work (Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008; Kisker, 2005; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Additionally, institutions may lack the infrastructure to adequately support integration of assessment processes. Part of this lack of support translates to a lack of practical guidance and professional development opportunities for educators to gain requisite knowledge and skills. Through its framing questions, this study endeavors to enhance understanding of one critical group’s role in assessment practice – senior community college administrators.

Inform Practice Within Student Affairs

This study will make a contribution to higher education practice by exploring the role of the senior student affairs officer related to meaningful assessment of student outcomes. It seeks to address the lack of direction currently provided to student affairs professionals and administrators regarding developing an assessment mindset and integrating assessment practice into their work. Even if student affairs staff and administrators are aware of the impact of their services and programs on student learning, they may be unaware of how to assess the effectiveness of these interventions (Green et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Upcraft and Schuh (1996) explained that assessment, although claimed to be important, is largely misunderstood, underutilized, or misused within the field of student affairs.

Student development professionals, such as advisors, counselors, career and

employment specialists, and leadership coordinators, support and extend learning outcomes when they work with students outside of the classroom, and they must develop an assessment mindset to accompany this work. This study hopes to present findings that may be instructive to community college leaders in understanding and developing optimal practices of student learning outcomes assessment at their institutions.

Significance to Researcher

As the senior student affairs officer for a large urban community college campus, findings of this research study are extremely significant to the researcher's professional practice. Observations at her own institution and of her own leadership affirm many of the challenges to adopting a practice of assessment as presented in the literature. Through the process of this study, the researcher's expertise on the implementation of assessment practice within her own division will be enhanced. As a key member of the accreditation self-study team for the student service functions of her institution, as well as an accreditation evaluator for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the researcher will be better positioned to provide leadership on assessment within student affairs.

Scholarly Significance

There is limited research specific to the assessment of student learning outcomes within community college student affairs divisions. In their study on student affairs learning outcomes assessment practices within three research universities, Green, Jones, and Aloï (2008) identified that, at the time of their study in 2005, "there were no in-depth case studies of student affairs divisions' assessment practices" (p. 138). There is literature within the student affairs field as it relates to the populations being served and student satisfaction; however, integration of learning outcomes and their assessment is not well addressed (Bresciani, 2002; Doyle, 2004). In an initial review of the literature, very few research studies that focused on learning outcomes in student affairs included the community college experience (Bresciani, 2002; Erlich, 2011; Nesheim et al., 2007). This researcher was unable to find any study specifically addressing the perceptions of student affairs administrators related to assessment practice.

The literature in the entire field of higher education assessment remains highly conceptual and prescriptive despite decades of assessment practice (Banta, 2011;

Peterson & Einarson, 2001). This study proposes to chip away at this gap in the research by building on the existing student learning outcomes assessment body of knowledge but within the context of community college student affairs divisions.

Summary of Focus and Significance

Community colleges and other postsecondary institutions are increasingly being held accountable to demonstrate that they are producing the kind of student learning outcomes that they claim and that 21st century society needs. Public and political pressures are manifesting in the form of revised accreditation standards and government agency demands that place demonstrable student achievement at their core. The learning college movement represents internal pressure for change and is a testament to a high degree of effort by some community colleges to emphasize student learning. Student affairs units within community colleges are not immune to this pressure to assess student outcomes. Student affairs administrators and staff must assert the out-of-the-classroom role in student learning and development *and* establish effective assessment systems alongside their instructional colleagues.

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. This research is significant for the following practical reasons: (a) there is increasing pressure for accountability for student learning in higher education, (b) community colleges struggle with implementing assessment of learning outcomes, (c) it will inform practice in student affairs, and (d) it will inform the practice of the researcher. From a scholarly perspective, this study adds to a very small body of research that exists on the assessment of learning outcomes within student affairs and specifically within the community college setting.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This study focused on the assessment of student learning outcomes within student affairs in community colleges. In gathering, evaluating, and critiquing the current research and professional literature related to this topic, this review established a context for this study and laid the foundation for the proposed research design. The following central question framed the review of the literature: What does the current professional literature reveal about the experience of higher education student affairs divisions related to establishing a student learning outcomes assessment practice?

This section first describes the approach to reviewing the relevant literature. It then defines key terms and concepts used in this study. It proceeds to elaborate on four themes that emerged from reviewing the literature on this topic and that helped to frame this study: (a) the importance of assessing student outcomes in higher education, (b) assessment of learning outcomes within student affairs, (c) factors influencing outcomes assessment, and (d) the role of leadership in assessment practice. The section concludes with a summary of implications for further research tied to this study.

Approach to Review

In approaching the initial review of the literature on this topic of interest, searches were conducted and relevant articles found primarily within the Education Research Complete, Academic Search Premier, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and Dissertation Abstracts databases. Initial searches using all of the keywords “community college,” “student affairs,” and “outcomes assessment” were not fruitful. Searches using just two of the keywords at a time yielded slightly better results. Alternate keywords used in various combinations of searches that proved useful were: “learning assessment,” “student development,” “student services,” and “learning college.” Upon finding a particularly relevant article, the bibliography was scanned for specific articles or books cited in it and then located in one of the journal databases or directly from the OSU library book and journal holdings. Significant contributions to the understanding of the field of assessment are in the form of books rather than scholarly articles in academic journals. Also, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes website (www.learningoutcomesassessment.org) was a critical resource.

In general, articles and books were identified as relevant for this review if they supported knowledge and/or research findings within one of the emergent four thematic areas identified in this section. Although an emphasis was placed on discovering literature published recently within the United States in order to establish relevancy within a current and national context, this proved difficult. Much of the literature reviewed was a decade or so old. Some older publications were referenced to establish the historical context of learning assessment in higher education or trends over time in student affairs. An effort was made to identify primary research studies, including both quantitative and qualitative design. This study was interested in assessment of learning at the program or institutional level and therefore does not include literature on specific classroom or point of service assessment techniques.

Because of its focus on student affairs, this study does not attempt to offer an exhaustive review of the literature on assessment of instructional programs. Having stated this, as discussed in the Significance section, original research specific to the assessment of student learning outcomes within student affairs is rare, so the studies analyzed in this review necessarily incorporate assessment of outcomes within instruction.

Major Authors

Numerous names began to repeat themselves throughout the review and both their research and popular articles and books became central to this review. Major contributors to the field of assessment practice in general include Trudy Banta, Marilee Bresciani, Peter Ewell, Linda Suskie, Peggy Maki, Andreea Serban, Ruth Stiehl, and Marvin Peterson. Authors that have greatly contributed to the literature focused on assessment practice in student affairs include Marilee Bresciani, George Kuh, John Schuh, Lee Upcraft, and Alexandar Astin.

Definition of Terms and Concepts

This section of the review seeks to define the manner in which the following key terms and concepts are used within this study: assessment, culture of assessment, student learning outcomes, program outcomes, senior student affairs officers, and student affairs.

Assessment. For the purposes of this study, assessment is defined as the systematic determination of the impact of educational interventions on student outcomes

for the purposes of improving the quality of those interventions and reporting on program or institutional level outcomes.

Assessment data. Information gathered and recorded through quantitative or qualitative methods that provide evidence of impact of educational interventions on student outcomes.

Culture of assessment. This term indicates the significant integration and ongoing practice of assessment by educators and practitioners in their day-to-day work.

Student learning outcomes. For the purposes of this study, student learning outcomes refer to what students are able to do, know, or value as a result of educational experiences or interventions. The term may relate to the cognitive domain, such as critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis skills, and the affective domain, which includes learners' development of values, attitude, and identity.

Program outcomes. Distinguished from student outcomes, program outcomes is used in this study to identify measures of how effective a program is at accomplishing its overall service goals; i.e., customer satisfaction, timeliness in services, numbers served, and demographics of students served.

Senior student affairs officers. This term defines those professionals that serve in the highest administrative level at their institutions in the specific area of student affairs or student services.

Student affairs. This term is used as a catch all for those programs and service areas within higher education that lie outside the instructional or curricular programs and the administrative or operational functions. Examples of units within student affairs divisions are academic advising, enrollment and records services, counseling, student leadership, multicultural centers, career centers, employment services, women's centers, tutoring centers, TRIO and other federal grant programs for special populations, financial aid, first year experience seminars, and orientation.

Importance of Assessing Student Outcomes

This section of the literature review will provide an overview of the importance of student learning outcomes assessment in higher education, with an emphasis on community colleges. A review of historical and descriptive literature highlights the dual purposes of assessment: accountability and improvement of learning. Additionally, this

section will address scholarly research and descriptive work describing what the impact of assessment of learning outcomes has been to date.

Assessment for Accountability

This section will explore the importance of assessing student outcomes in order to demonstrate institutional accountability to external bodies.

The assessment literature firmly anchors assessment practice within the demand for accountability in higher education. In simple terms, accountability can be defined as the public interest in the role, purpose, quality, and outcomes of educational institutions. This public interest is amplified for publically funded colleges and universities, and especially for community colleges, whose mission emphasizes access to education for all community members.

A higher education reform movement began in the United States in the 1980s and its evolution continues to drive institutional performance reporting of quantifiable measures of student outcomes to federal and state governments and regional accreditation agencies (Blimling, 2013; Burke & Minassians, 2004; Ewell, 2009). Within a current context of escalating costs of higher education, increasing student loan debt, lack of transferability of education to employer needs, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and increased global competitiveness, institutions are scrutinized for their results. Colleges and universities are being asked to demonstrate to tax-payers, students, and public or private investors how they are cost effective, how much students are learning, how student skills are transferring to the workplace, how many students are graduating, and how leadership is using performance-based data to improve quality and efficiency of education (Banta, 2010; Beno, 2004; Blimling, 2013; Ewell, 2009; Serban & Friedlander, 2004).

Multiple external entities have contributed to the assessment movement for accountability of higher education over the past thirty years with varying interests that have changed over time (Ewell, 2009). While the federal government plays only a limited active role in higher education accountability, there are a handful of significant relationships and events that have impacted postsecondary goals and practice. The Higher Education Act of 1965 and subsequent reauthorizations created a relationship of federal oversight of institutions that desire to award federal student financial aid. In 2006

the U.S. Department of Education released the Spellings Commission Report on the Future of Higher Education which called for increased accountability and transparency by postsecondary education institutions related to the quality of student outcomes and of institutional effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). It stressed the need to improve higher education outcomes related to affordability, access, and student success. In 2009, the Obama administration declared as a national goal to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, thereby increasing college completion rates by 50 percent (The White House, 2009). This inspired many other groups in the higher education enterprise to identify similar aspirations and evolved into what is commonly deemed the “Completion Agenda” in higher education today.

State governments have held a place at the accountability table for some time, particularly related to public institutions. States grant these institutions license to operate, as well as provide them direct funding support. States are particularly interested in institutional performance as it relates to degree completion and job placement within the local state economy. They are also interested in effective transitions from high school to post-secondary institutions and among institutions. Many states are moving to performance-based funding models that hold institutions accountable for and incentivize demonstrable student outcomes. States are increasingly requiring reporting of institutional assessment across a variety of metrics that serve as indicators of performance.

In recent years, the accountability mandate has expanded to include metrics that measure the value that institutions add to student learning and allow for comparisons across institutions (Banta, 2010). In the stated interest of consumers of higher education, legislators have enacted laws such as the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act of 1989, which mandate public reporting of various institutional statistics (Ewell, 2009). Third-party organizations such as media outlets and educational sector non-profit organizations increasingly report institutional performance information in the form of rankings and national student survey results. In an attempt at a proactive response to increased demands for accountability, community college leaders established a Voluntary Framework of Accountability (American Association of Community Colleges, February, 2012). While the framework encouraged assessment that is meaningful to community

colleges specifically, it also proposed that standardized tests of skills would yield evidence of value and allow for comparisons among institutions.

The process of institutional accreditation is perhaps the most tangible and significant driver of assessment practice. Over the past decade, all eight regional higher education accrediting agencies have responded to the demand for accountability by modifying standards and evaluation to emphasize demonstration of student learning as the central part of their quality review process (Beno, 2004; Ewell, 2009; Peterson & Augustine, 2000b; Seybert, 2002). Institutions are being required to demonstrate and document intended student learning outcomes, a process for assessing achievement of outcomes, and a process for incorporating assessment results into continual improvement of student learning, as well as strategic planning and funding decisions. Faculty and staff must assume responsibility for assessment at both the individual student and program or department level. In order to meet accreditation demands, institutions must develop or establish the capacity for staff to integrate outcomes assessment practice into their teaching and service delivery and to analyze, reflect on, and to ultimately use assessment results to improve student outcomes.

A compliance mentality by institutions, rather than a genuine interest in improving the student experience and outcomes, can often be the result of assessment for institutional accountability (Banta, 2010; Beno, 2004; Ewell, 2009; Wehlburg, 2013). Assessment work is often done in preparation for or in response to an accreditation visit or state performance report and ends up residing within the administrative arena of colleges rather than with those directly involved in teaching and learning. Additionally, there are often few rewards for staff to engage in meaningful assessment practice. Assessment that leads to revelations of the need for significant change or program improvement can attract a negative response from colleagues, administrators, and the public. Too often performance reports reveal just enough information to indicate that colleges are engaging in some level of assessment but do little to change the status quo of programs and operations (Wehlburg, 2013). Additionally, standardized tests are increasingly being used to demonstrate institutional value externally, but are rarely viewed internally as effective for improvement of student learning (Banta, 2010).

The practice of assessment of student outcomes within higher education is greatly influenced by the external pressures of accountability. These pressures drive institutions to build capacity for assessment practice and reporting in order to respond adequately to the demands of taxpayers, federal and local governments, accrediting agencies, and tuition-paying students. Given the importance of higher education in the United States within the context of global competitiveness, workforce needs, and consumer demand it is likely that the push for accountability will remain strong. In order for higher education institutions to meet stakeholders' increasing demand to demonstrate results, assessment of student outcomes must be effectively practiced and reported.

Assessment for Improvement of Learning

The section will explore the importance of assessing student outcomes in order to improve student learning. It will also identify the tension between assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement of learning.

Assessment literature overwhelmingly asserted that while accountability may have served as the impetus, the most important reason to conduct student outcomes assessment is to improve learning, teaching, and student support. While assessment for accountability may have launched the assessment movement in higher education, it is assessment for improvement that will sustain it. The premise is that in order to improve student outcomes, in and out of the class, practitioners must understand what practices and interventions are making a difference. Dugan and Hernon (2002) made the distinction between "student outcomes" and "student learning outcomes." Student outcomes are institutional-based and look at aggregate data on groups of students in a summative way. Student learning outcomes seek to understand how educational experiences impact what students know, do, or believe and assessment of them can lead to educational improvement.

In the early 1990s the higher education reform movement that led to increased pressure for accountability also sparked a paradigm shift within academia emphasizing learning rather than instruction and student learning outcomes rather than simply educational inputs and outputs. O'Banion (1997) led the charge of the "learning college" movement within community colleges by forwarding the concept that colleges must put student learning at the heart of everything they do. He encouraged a reflexive

practice to assure continuous improvement of teaching, learning, and services with this goal in mind. Inherent in the charge of placing learning first was overhauling the traditional architecture of education. An example was a call for a “culture of evidence” within higher education, emphasizing the identification and assessment of student learning outcomes rather than assuming learning has taken place by focusing on what is taught (O’Banion, 2007).

Blaich and Wise (2011) argued that there is a more altruistic view of assessment within higher education than simply an activity done to satisfy outside authorities. They suggested that faculty, staff, and administrators often carry a moral or professional commitment – a “pedagogical imperative” - to help students reach their full potential (p. 7). This democratic ideal was also espoused in the American Association of Community College’s (April, 2012) report, *Reclaiming the American Dream: A report from the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges*. The report served as a mandate to community colleges to fulfill their mission of assuring high quality education and offering the opportunity to improve the lives of their diverse and largely underserved student population. One strategy identified in the report in order to “reimagine” the community college and improve student outcomes was to move from a “culture of anecdote to a culture of evidence” (p. 14).

Numerous authors asserted that assessment data can and should be used for satisfying both external reporting for accountability and for incorporation into the teaching and learning improvement process (Banta, 2007; Banta, 2010; Banta & Blaich, 2011; Bresciani, 2012; Ewell, 2009; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Schuh, 2013; Wehlburg, 2013). These same authors lamented the challenge for institutions to find that sweet spot between the two, which begs the question whether institutions have been able to successfully establish cultures of assessment. Banta (2007a) voiced concern that just as higher education faculty and student service practitioners are beginning to see the benefits of assessment to guide improvement of student learning, higher education policy makers are increasingly demanding assessment for accountability in the form of standardized tests and other institutional measures designed for the public to judge institutional performance. She implored faculty and staff to develop their own assessment tools for demonstrating student learning and core competency achievement,

which can serve double duty for accountability and improvement (Banta, 2010; Banta, 2007). Wehlburg (2013) promoted a “just-right paradigm” for assessment with the core purpose of assessment being improvement of learning and subsequent documentation of results satisfying demands of accreditation and accountability to the public. Done well, assessment should be a transformative process for practitioners and the institution, with the institution’s documented assessment “story” serving as proof of a continual improvement process for external constituencies.

Ewell (2009) defined the 25-year-old tension between assessment for accountability and assessment for internal improvement. He described assessment for accountability as holding institutions responsible for demonstrating conformity with established standards and looking as good as possible. Assessment for improvement, on the other hand, relies on identifying problems or deficiencies in order to fix them. He described significant shifts in the assessment movement since the mid-1980s that may help resolve or minimize this tension including (a) an increased acceptance and perceived legitimacy of assessment practice by academics; (b) a sense of urgency by legislators and the business community to adopt policy that improves U.S. educational attainment and therefore, global competitiveness; (c) a shift from state or government mandates as the key external push for assessment to regional accrediting bodies, which due to their peer review model and joint ownership by academics and the federal government are more able to buffer the relationship between accountability and improvement; and (d) a dramatic increase in assessment tools and technology that are more acceptable to academics due to their authentic, task-based, and embedded formats.

The improvement of student learning and achievement is at the heart of the importance of student learning outcomes assessment in higher education. The literature suggested an altruistic goal of improving the educational experience and outcomes for students, especially within community colleges. Ideally, assessment is a transformative process for those involved, especially if institutions establish a balance between assessment practice that satisfies those demanding accountability with those engaged in the work to support continual improvement of deeper student learning.

Impact of Assessment Practice

This section will explore the evidence, or lack thereof, of how assessment practice has resulted in improved student outcomes, service and activity design, administrative decisions, and institutional culture shifts.

Whether driven by external accountability forces or internal altruistic motives, it is reasonable to say that the goal of assessment is to create program or institutional changes that improve student learning. Peterson and Einarson (2001) asserted that while there is a “rich prescriptive literature” body that exists related to the practice of assessment of student outcomes in higher education, very little empirical evidence exists related to how institutions support and promote the use of assessment information in decision making and program or institutional changes. While researchers have noted strong institutional engagement with the process of assessment, the literature depicts little evidence of change as a result of a decades long assessment movement (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Blaich & Wise, 2011; Bresciani, 2012; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Peterson & Augustine, 2000a, 2000b; Peterson & Einarson, 2001).

Blaich and Wise (2011) reported on findings from the Wabash National Study, a longitudinal study of college and university students that began in 2006 and sought to understand what strategies supported liberal arts learning and to develop assessment methods in support of liberal arts outcomes. A primary finding from their study was that “it is incredibly difficult to translate assessment evidence into improvements in student learning” (p. 11). Out of the 19 original participating institutions they found that nearly 40% had not communicated the findings of the study and their own institutional data to their campus communities as of five years after the study began. They cited that only about a quarter of the institutions reported actively responding to the data. They speculated that their study, and institutions in general, focus too much energy on gathering, analyzing and reporting assessment evidence and not enough on helping institutions use the data. While this study focuses almost solely on four-year colleges and universities and does not specifically address assessment of outcomes in student affairs, it addresses the general shortcomings with assessment practice results in higher education.

Banta and colleagues (2009a) conducted an analysis of 146 profiles of good practice in assessment. In order to analyze and aggregate findings, the profiles were

completed in the same format and included a description of the assessment approach, the findings generated, the uses made of the findings, and the impact of using the findings. They found that just nine (9) out of the 149 profiles contained evidence of actual impact on student learning. The remaining ninety-four percent (94%) of profiles indicated improvement in processes rather than student outcomes, such as improved identification of learning outcomes, improved assessment practice, increased professional development, and modified courses or services. Banta speculated the minimal evidence of longer term impact may have been due to immature examples of assessment and the recognition that emphasis has been placed on identifying student outcomes and setting up systems to assess them, rather than what to do with the findings once assessed.

In their large-scale survey study of all postsecondary education institutions in the United States, Peterson and Augustine (2000a) sought to understand the impact of student assessment practice on academic decision-making. They used linear regression modeling to study institutional variables related to the impact of assessment data on decisions. The survey was conducted with chief academic officers across all institutional types. They concluded that, overall, student assessment data has had only a marginal influence on academic decision-making. They further reported that the extent to which assessment studies occurred, the use of assessment primarily for internal improvement, and involving student affairs personnel in assessment practice are all strong predictors of the influence of assessment practice on academic decision making. The finding that involving student affairs was a strong predictor of the use of assessment for decision-making is interesting and begs the question whether the opposite phenomenon would bear out. That is, would involvement of academic affairs personnel predict the influence of assessment practice on student affairs decision-making? Peterson and Augustine speculated about this finding that, “perhaps involving student affairs personnel is an indication that the institution is heavily committed to student assessment and has involved constituents outside of the academic affairs offices” (Peterson & Augustine, 2000a, p. 44). Although comprehensive and representing an adequate sample size at 55% (n=1,393), the Peterson and Augustine (2000b) study is over a decade old and may not represent a current understanding of the impact of assessment practice on institutional decisions.

Blaich and Wise (2011) asserted that it is not just a matter of possessing rich, quality data; rather, it is how that data sparks curiosity and questions by faculty and staff. They said that assessment that leads to improvement of learning is a public process, relying on dialogue and active engagement of many people with various types of experience and intellectual backgrounds. Few institutions have been able to foster environments that create space for such reflection and exchange. They claimed, “Assessment data has legs only if the evidence collected rises out of extended conversations across constituencies about (a) what people hunger to know about their teaching and learning environments and (b) how the assessment evidence speaks to those questions” (Banta and Wise, 2011, p. 12). Similarly, Banta and Blaich (2011) argued that the lack of demonstrable assessment impact may be a result of institutions’ defense of deeply held assumptions based on firmly rooted agreements, ways of practice, and priorities. They cited a lack of willingness to truly examine themselves and commented that, “double-loop learning is challenging for most organizations because they unwittingly work in a way that suppresses people’s abilities to deeply reflect on and improve how they operate” (p. 27).

Despite decades of assessment practice in higher education, little empirical evidence exists describing the specific impact that such practice has had on improving student learning outcomes, or even on faculty/staff or institutional decision-making. There is a tremendous amount of professional literature on the topic of assessment. The vast majority of articles and books prescribed how institutional leaders should develop and sustain a culture of evidence in support of the aim of accountability and improvement of student learning and institutional outcomes. They shared anecdotal evidence of how particular institutions have integrated assessment work, supported professional development for faculty and staff, and improved the process of assessment itself. They discussed what they are doing, but not what impact these activities have on students themselves. The relatively few research studies conducted on the impact of assessment practice are somewhat dated and conclude a limited demonstrable impact.

Summary of Importance of Assessing Student Outcomes

This section identified why institutions of higher education are compelled to assess student learning outcomes. External stakeholders view assessment of student

learning as critical to meet the demands for accountability in higher education. Likewise, assessment fuels the internal drive of faculty, staff, and administrators to understand if learning interventions are having an impact on students and supporting them to reach their full potential academically and as members of the workforce and community. In both cases, the assumption is that assessment will lead to continual improvement of the product of education. While there is some question as to the ultimate impact that assessment practice has had on student learning, there is no doubt that the demand for faculty, staff, and administrators to conduct assessment remains strong.

The section emphasized the significance of this study topic based on the current demands on higher education, and community colleges specifically, to deliver demonstrable student outcomes. Further, it invites the question of how student affairs administrators perceive the importance of assessment within their service and program areas. Do community college leaders in student affairs believe student learning outcomes assessment within their divisions will help address reporting for accountability to accrediting bodies, government agencies, students, and their own executive leadership? Do they believe assessment will lead to improvement of programs and services and, by extension, student learning and development? Do they see an impact on student outcomes as a result of assessment at their institutions? If not, does this create a lack of motivation among administrators for nurturing assessment practice? This study sought to explore how senior student affairs officers perceive the state of student learning outcomes, including what drives the practice and how it fits within their leadership priorities.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes in Student Affairs

This section describes the history and practice of identifying and assessing learning within students affairs divisions specifically. It first briefly traces the history of the emphasis on student learning and development outside of the classroom. It then presents a discussion of the development of student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs, as well as research studies on the integration of learning outcomes and learning outcomes assessment.

Concept of Learning Within Student Affairs

This section will briefly describe the importance of student learning and development within the field of student affairs and as a result of student services, co-curricular activities, and student retention programs.

The field of student affairs has long been concerned with development of the whole student in college. The Student Personnel Point of View, originally published in 1937 and then updated in 1949, was the first document in higher education encouraging more collaboration across instructional and student affairs in order to ensure the holistic development of students (American Council on Education, 1937). It was a call to move out of siloes and towards a collaborative approach to educating college students. It established a philosophical framework for practitioners of student affairs and introduced the term “student development” into the field’s vernacular (Roberts & Banta, 2011). The field reasserted its role in enhancing student learning two decades ago. In 1996 the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) published the Student Learning Imperative, which challenged the student affairs profession to embrace a learner-centered practice. In an effort to guide this practice, ACPA and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) presented the Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs (1997) which identified seven principles of daily practice for learning-oriented student affairs work. The guide was accompanied by an inventory aligned with each principle for institutions to examine their student affairs activities.

A decade later, *Learning Reconsidered* (2004) was published by NASPA and ACPA and further established that student learning is not just the business of academic faculty. The document proclaimed that the work of student affairs professionals is part of an integrated system of education in which students are making meaning of their experiences in various contexts within and outside of classrooms, and even outside of institutions. The report claimed that student affairs “is integral to the learning process because of the opportunities it provides students to learn through action, contemplation, reflection and emotional engagement as well as information acquisition” (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004, p. 11). Literature that is focused on a shared responsibility for student learning continues through today, with emphasis on student affairs professionals

identifying how their work supports the institutional mission and goals, articulating how student affairs programming and services relate to student learning, and fully sharing in the responsibility for student learning within an accountability framework (Barham & Scott, 2006; Blimling 2013; Culp, 2005; Kisker, 2005; Kuh, 2005; Maki, 2004; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010).

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in Student Affairs

This section will address the importance of identification and assessment of student learning outcomes within student affairs areas, including the call in the professional literature to establish a culture of assessment.

In order to address the external and internal demands for improving student learning and development, there has been a growing call for the establishment of “cultures of evidence” or “cultures of assessment” within student affairs over the past decade (Blimling, 2013; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Haney & McClellan, 2009; Helfgot, 2005; Livingston & Zerulik, 2013; Oburn, 2005; Schuh, 2013). Dating back to 1999, then Executive Director of NASPA, (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators), Gwendolyn Dungy, called for an increase in “research” on students in community college student affairs units, including the resources to support it. This call for assessment to meet the demands for accountability and improvement of learning of a shifting student demographic has been continuously repeated in student affairs literature. Dungy was prescient when she stated that in the absence of funds for institutional research in student affairs, the work may need to be decentralized with individual units and practitioners conducting their own research studies. A culture of assessment implies this decentralization, with staff integrating outcomes assessment in their daily work.

Inherent in a culture of assessment is a focus on how services and programs impact student learning. Increasingly, student affairs units have had to shift from simply collecting student satisfaction and service utilization data – or program outcomes – and sharing anecdotal data about the impact of services on students’ lives, to assessment of clearly identified student learning outcomes tied to educational interventions and experiences (Blemling, 2013; Helfgot, 2005; Oburn, 2005; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). As Oburn (2005) stated, “Gradually, student affairs leaders realized that if they were to remain a central component of their institutions, they had to build strong *cultures*

of evidence to demonstrate their effectiveness, and use data to shape key institutional decisions regarding student support services and student affairs programs and activities” (p. 20). In this manner, student affairs divisions assert their institutional influence on student learning and development and defend their place next to instruction at the funding and organizational table. Blemling (2013) commented that, “Student affairs programs have not been at the center of criticism about higher education, but they have not escaped the demand for greater accountability for their contribution to the educational experience of students” (p.7). He went on to implore student affairs administrators and practitioners to make assessment practice a routine part of what they do in order to answer how they contribute to the student experience and learning with empirical data.

Breciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2009) summarized the importance of outcomes-assessment of student learning in student affairs with the following four categories: (a) accountability for student learning and development throughout the institution, which includes student affairs; (b) demonstration of the necessity and value of programs and services in light of decreasing resources; (c) enrichment of planning, policy-making, and programming that reflects the student body and their unique needs; and (d) establishment of a culture that encourages continuous improvement for increased student success.

Schuh (2013) viewed assessment as a fundamental student affairs professional activity and, based on his study of assessment and colleges that exhibit high impact practices over the past 25 years, identified twelve critical and practical elements that contribute to a culture of assessment: (a) recognition that assessment is both a commitment of accountability to stakeholders and a commitment to continuous improvement; (b) commitment to positive restlessness and continuous innovation; (c) institutions with a culture of assessment are self-critical; (d) existence of a data-driven decision making process; (e) assessment is conducted across the institution; (f) multiple forms of assessment are used; (g) learning outcomes are identified and measured; (h) all student affairs staff participate in assessment, while someone in particular is in charge; (i) results are communicated and acted upon; (j) discretionary resources are used to support assessment projects; (k) assessment findings are rewarded with resources; and (l) formal events are used to celebrate and discuss assessment results.

In review of the research literature, very few studies were discovered that identified how learning outcomes were being incorporated within student affairs. In a survey-based study, Doyle (2004) sought to determine the extent to which student affairs divisions were integrating the Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs. Study findings indicated that student affairs divisions were most successful at engaging students in active learning, helping students develop coherent values, and forming supportive and inclusive communities. The study indicated that student affairs divisions were least effective at integrating principles related to management practices, including effective use of resources, use of systematic inquiry, and creating educational partnerships that advance student learning. Relevant to this proposed research study, these findings may support the assertion that while student affairs practitioners focus on student learning within the context of their work, assessment of that learning for continuous improvement is a less developed practice.

There were numerous limitations to Doyle's study for the purposes of generalizing the findings to a broader higher education population. Although the survey response rate was reasonable at 58% (n=126), the population was quite small and specific, focusing on chief student affairs officers within small (500-3,000 student) four-year colleges and universities only. Additionally, this study's use of descriptive statistical analysis resulted in a ranked order of how student affairs divisions were incorporating the seven Principles; however, the "extent" to which they were applying each of the principles was not clearly articulated. The inventories associated with the Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs may provide a useful framework for further research if expanded to include community colleges, as well as mid-level managers and front-line staff.

In another study, Bresciani (2002) looked at the extent to which institutions were conducting assessment in student affairs. She analyzed an online survey of 398 randomly selected senior student affairs officers. Although the response rate was less than the desirable 50% at 40.8% (Pyrzack, 2008), the sample represented a broad spectrum of higher education institutions, including 10% from two-year colleges. An overall finding from the study was that 85% of respondents reported they conduct student outcomes assessment. While this may indicate that a high level of assessment practice was

occurring within student affairs, the significant finding for this proposed research study was that only 56% of those practicing assessment were assessing student *learning* outcomes. Compared to 93% of institutions that were assessing *program* outcomes and 73% that were assessing student *development* outcomes, these findings supported the assertion that student affairs practitioners often stop short of identifying and assessing their programs' impact on learning. Further exploration of why student affairs units are not assessing learning at the same rate as they assess program outcomes is warranted. Finally, Bresciani's study was limited by surveying NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) members only, which may have resulted in a higher than average assessment practice rate since NASPA members are likely more knowledgeable about best practices and approaches to assessment given their membership in this professional organization.

There was some indication in the anecdotal literature (Dale, 2009; Haney & McClellan, 2009; Jones, 2009) that the learning college movement in community colleges has had a positive effect on student affairs divisions' integration of student learning outcomes and assessment of those outcomes. In a 2009 issue of *New Directions for Student Services*, a series of self-reported, brief case studies was published focusing on community college student affairs divisions' and their intentional focus on learning outcomes as a result of their institutions' transformation as "learning-centered colleges" (Dale, 2009; Haney & McClellan, 2009; Jones, 2009). Overall, these institutions reported moving beyond simply establishing student satisfaction, service delivery and other program-level goals to more clearly identifying, and assessing, student learning and development. All colleges reported an institution-wide focus on learning and an emphasis on academic and student services partnerships as major catalysts for this change. There were also countless references in the assessment literature to individual institutions that are integrating learning outcomes and assessment practices within student affairs divisions (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Culp & Dungy, 2012).

Summary of Importance of Learning Outcomes in Student Affairs

This section described the history and practice of identifying and assessing learning within student affairs in higher education. It briefly identified the origins of the

discussion and professional acceptance that student services and student affairs programming have an impact on cognitive and affective human development outside of the classroom. It asserted that there exists a shared responsibility, and related accountability, for student learning within higher education institutions. It went on to define the imperative for student affairs units to establish cultures of assessment, with a central focus on identification and assessment of student learning outcomes. Prescriptive literature was cited related to critical elements of a student learning outcomes assessment. It concluded with analysis of research studies that provided some evidence of the extent of integration of learning outcomes and outcomes assessment in student affairs.

This section further supported the significance of this study, which sought to explore how senior student affairs officers perceive the demand for establishing learning outcomes assessment practice within their institutions. As community college leaders, do they reflect the literature in the level of importance they place on assessment of student learning at their institutions? Do they perceive nurturing learning outcomes assessment as critical to their work? Do they make a distinction between their work and that of their instructional colleagues related to assessment? Are the essential elements of assessment practice in place within their divisions and institutions? Findings from this study will contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge related to whether student affairs leaders in community colleges are responding to the call for accountability and actualizing recommendations from their field.

Factors Influencing Assessment Practice

An initial review of the literature revealed various factors believed to influence assessment practice in higher education. This section describes key findings in this area from scholarly articles, as well as popular literature, and provides analysis within the context of this research proposal. The section is divided into (a) research studies related to assessment in instruction, (b) research studies related to assessment in student affairs, and (c) prescriptive and conceptual literature.

Research Related to Assessment in Instruction

This section will identify and analyze research studies that describe factors that either support or detract from effective student outcomes assessment within instructional programs.

Grunwald and Peterson (2003) presented findings from their study examining factors that promote faculty satisfaction and involvement with student assessment. Their survey study of faculty at seven institutions of varying types was based on a conceptual model that considered variables from external influences, institutional context, faculty characteristics, and institutional characteristics as possible predictors of satisfaction and involvement. Interestingly, they found that different variables predicted faculty satisfaction with and involvement in student assessment. Based on predictive variables related to involvement, the authors recommended that administrators engage faculty by communicating the need for assessment due to externally driven efforts, such as accreditation, providing them with professional development to gain assessment skills, and reporting on the benefits and impact of assessment practice to the institution. Predictors of satisfaction with assessment included an emphasis on assessment for institutional improvement, the establishment of plans and policies to support and promote the practice, institution-wide activities focused on assessment, and use of data for educational decisions.

Although respondents in the Grunwald and Peterson (2003) research were representative of the population studied, the overall response rate was just 30% (n=182), far lower than the 50% generally desired in a quantitative research study (Pyrchak, 2008). The small sample size, combined with the fact that the institutions were selected based on their high involvement in assessment activities, challenged the generalizability of their findings across institutions. The small sample size within each institution also meant that institutional characteristics could not be analyzed for their predictive role. The low faculty response rate within the context of institutions that prioritize assessment practice represented an interesting finding in itself. Why did so few faculty respond to the survey? What might the non-respondent attitude towards assessment practice have been? For the purposes of this study, how would student affairs staff or administrators respond to the survey questions?

In their large-scale survey study of all postsecondary education institutions in the United States, Peterson and Augustine (2000b) sought to determine the influence of external and internal factors on institutional approach to student assessment. Overall findings from this study concluded that internal institutional dynamics are a greater

influence on the approach and level of assessment practice at institutions than external state or regional accrediting body influences. Internal improvement purposes and an institutional mission that emphasized assessment significantly influenced assessment practice. Comparing institution types, associate of arts institutions, or community colleges, were found to emphasize student assessment for internal reasons, but they were less active in collecting data on student cognitive and affective outcomes of current students than on collecting placement and transfer data on former students. This finding represented a possible disconnect between the intended use of assessment data, which appeared to focus on improvement of learning, and the actual assessment methods utilized, which appeared to focus on accountability.

Although comprehensive and representing an adequate sample size at 55% (n=1,393), the Peterson and Augustine (2000b) study is well over a decade old. Additionally, the surveys were directed to chief academic officers so it is difficult to determine the extent to which student affairs assessment practice was considered in the results. Presenting a similar survey to student affairs leaders may result in a different interpretation of the external and internal influences on assessment. While results from this study generated an understanding of possible factors impacting assessment, the proposed study seeks to explore whether these factors bear out in regards to student affairs assessment.

Ebersole (2007) conducted qualitative case study research with a focus on how model student learning outcomes assessment programs are established in community colleges. She obtained data from four Vanguard Learning Colleges through assessment reports and other documents, interviews with chief academic officers, interviews with key staff, and interviews with external stakeholders. Ebersole found that although initially driven by external demands, the quality of assessment programs was primarily determined by internal influences. The institutions with exemplary assessment practice that were studied all shared the following support characteristics: (a) commitment to assessment in the mission, along with aligned strategic plan objectives; (b) a framework for assessment work and representative committees; (c) leadership; (d) collaboration with institutional research departments; and (e) multiple communication approaches. The researcher discovered little evidence of the use of assessment for improving learning.

There was also great variability among the institutions in how general education outcomes were being assessed. For these two reasons, the researcher recommended external mandates for inter-institutional assessment should be delayed until further research into the impact of assessment and cost benefit analysis can be conducted.

Although this study focused on assessment of instructional programs, similar factors impacting assessment emerged as from those studies focused on student affairs, addressed in the next section. A limitation to this small, qualitative research study included the inability to statistically generalize to other community colleges' experiences. Additionally, bias from the case study institutions could have been present due to self-authoring of documents and self-selection of the interviewees. The validity of this study was increased; however, through the collective case study design which sought convergence of themes from multiple sources and multiple institutions. Further research to corroborate or reject these findings within student affairs assessment is warranted.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA; Kinzie, 2010) conducted a qualitative study of first hand accounts by college presidents, provosts, academic deans, and directors of institutional research of their perspectives on the state of student learning outcomes assessment on their campuses. A focus group approach was used and data was collected from 45 academic leaders via roundtable discussions at national professional association meetings. Their findings were then compared with the 2009 NILOA survey report, *More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education* (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), a survey study administered to chief academic officers from all regionally accredited undergraduate institutions in the United States (n=2,809) with a 53% response rate. Both studies sought to learn about what assessment activities were underway at colleges, how assessment data was being used, what factors prompted assessment, and what challenges to assessment practice existed. The focus group study confirmed many findings of the 2009 survey study, with four prominent themes emerging including: (a) assessment has taken root and is thriving on many campuses, (b) accreditation is the major catalyst for student learning outcomes assessment, (c) faculty involvement is central to meaningful assessment, and (d) assessment is furthered when woven into established structures and processes.

Although community colleges were represented in this research, a significant limitation of this study is that it only conveys an academic perspective. The experience of student affairs administrators and their observations of what is happening on the ground in their divisions is missing. Additionally, study participants were identified through registrants for professional conferences and purposefully sampled for institutional representation and for their involvement with assessment activities. Since these administrators likely had a strong interest in student learning outcomes assessment, their views may not have represented common practice occurring nationally. In order to address this gap, this proposed study seeks to loosely model off of and extend the findings from the NILOA study to incorporate the perspectives of student affairs administrators on what student learning outcomes assessment is actually occurring on the ground within community college student affairs divisions. Additionally, the study will seek perspectives from administrators from all comparably sized community colleges in one state, thereby better representing the average institutional experience.

Research Related to Assessment in Student Affairs

This section will identify and analyze scholarly studies that describe factors that either promote or create barriers to effective student outcomes assessment within student affairs programs and service areas.

Bresciani (2002) sought to explore how student affairs divisions were conducting and using outcomes assessment in her 2001 online survey of 398 randomly selected senior student affairs officers. Although the response rate was less than the desirable 50% at 40.8% (Pyrzczak, 2008), the sample represented a broad spectrum of higher education institutions, including 10% from two-year colleges. Using stepwise and forward regression analysis, her study found that institutions were most likely to conduct outcomes assessment in student affairs in order to make decisions for program improvements, satisfy accreditation bodies, and inform funding requests and budget decisions. On the other end of the spectrum, institutions were not assessing student outcomes due to lack of staff time, resources, and staff expertise.

The research additionally identified an attitudinal barrier that the benefits of assessment in student affairs are not substantial enough to justify the efforts. This finding is of particular interest to this study, which seeks to explore leadership related factors

impacting effective assessment of student learning within student affairs. Administrator and staff attitudes toward assessment practice are crucial for the development of a culture of assessment within student affairs. This study proposes to explore the attitudes of senior student affairs officers at community colleges towards assessment, which may lead to an understanding of whether attitude created a barrier or not for them, or their staff, related to assessment activities.

Seagraves and Dean (2010) explored the conditions that promote assessment activities in student affairs divisions at small college and universities, as well as the role of accreditation on their practices. They used a focused case study approach within three purposefully selected small (500 to 1,500 students) liberal arts colleges. Data were analyzed using the “constant comparative method” (p. 313) which sought to identify emergent themes based on individual and group interviews. Interview data were collected from both student affairs administrators and frontline staff.

The following four themes emerged as conditions that promoted assessment: (a) support from senior student affairs officers in the form of significant involvement in assessment activity and provision of training for staff; (b) an informal, but pervasive culture of assessment, which was not tied to specific employee performance expectations; (c) belief that assessment was used as a means to improving program practice and student experience; and (d) a collegial and supportive environment, which manifested in cooperative, non-competitive interactions and efforts. The study also found that, while external accreditation demands caused assessment practices to be refined, they did not drive practices. Their data suggested that internal motivations, such as a desire for program improvement and student satisfaction, were the primary influences on assessment practice.

Although focused on student affairs assessment, a significant limitation of this research as related to this proposed study was the inability to generalize findings to community colleges. It remains to be seen whether the same promoting factors would hold true in the community college setting. Their data collection was purposeful and limited to individual interviews and focus groups in small private colleges within one region of the country. A more comprehensive case study method, e.g., including document analysis, would have contributed valuable information regarding the context of

the interviews, namely to validate the extent of their assessment practice. Although the findings were not statistically generalizable, the attempt to explore the actual perceptions, values, and impressions of staff was informative. This study sought to give voice to practitioners of assessment activities within student affairs, contributing to scant literature in this area. Replicating a similar qualitative study within public community colleges would illuminate the conditions supporting assessment within student affairs in a very different higher education context.

Similar to the Seagraves and Dean (2010) study, Green, Jones, and Aloï (2008) conducted qualitative research utilizing a case study design to examine high-quality assessment practice within student affairs at research institutions. Institutions and participants were selected through a multi-step, purposeful sampling process, including expert advice and application of site selection criteria to determine institutions with the “highest level of quality assessment practices” (Green et al., 2008, p. 140). Data were collected from interviews and document analysis within student affairs divisions at three large research institutions (19,000 to 30,000 students). Twenty-five individuals were interviewed including senior administrators, assessment directors or coordinators, assessment council members, and professional staff members.

Based on the major findings from their study, Green, Jones, and Aloï (2008) made the following recommendations concerning assessment practice: (a) student affairs divisions must have an adequate level of support from leadership, including provision of resources and training; (b) student affairs divisions should provide learning goals tied to institutional missions in order to guide the development of unit level outcomes and encourage institutional collaboration; (c) student affairs educators should design intended learning outcomes based on both cognitive and affective domains, as well as assessment design to measure these outcomes; (d) continuous professional development opportunities should be provided to establish an internal cadre of knowledgeable and skilled staff; and (e) learning opportunities for student affairs professionals focused on design and use of multiple assessment tools should be enhanced in student affairs education programs, as well as through professional organizations.

Like other small studies utilizing purposeful sampling techniques, this research was not statistically generalizable beyond the selected institutions. Despite this

limitation, the study did shed light on potential factors that impact assessment practice within student affairs. Many of the findings supported the existing literature on assessment. The study's contributions included giving voice to the experience of student affairs educators and suggesting areas for further study. Efforts were made to address the validity and reliability of the research by conducting a pilot study to check the site-selection and participant-selection criteria, the interview and document analysis protocols, and the data collection and management process. Again, replication of a similar study within the community college setting would add to the qualitative body of knowledge on assessment of learning within student affairs.

Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2009) used grounded theory analysis of case studies from thirteen colleges representing best practices in outcomes-based assessment in student affairs to explore barriers to assessment practice experienced by practitioners. Through open, axial, and selective coding the following categories of barriers emerged: (a) time, (b) resources, (c) knowledge and skills, (d) coordination of process, (e) conceptual framework for assessment, (f) collaboration with faculty, (g) trust, and (h) managing expectations. While most of the findings align with findings from other studies, the concepts of trust and managing expectations were interesting and relevant to this study. Trust dealt with practitioner concerns about the varying expectations of leadership and about leaders' variable understanding of the process of assessment and intended use of the results. The theme of managing expectations related to the disconnect between what practitioners believe goals and outcomes of their programs are and their actual capacity to deliver the outcomes and assess them. Both of these barriers connect to the critical role of leadership in building trust through clarity of process, expectations, and support for staff skill and knowledge development. A challenge with interpreting the results of this study was in not knowing the frame of reference from which the writer of the case study was situated within each institution.

Prescriptive and Conceptual Literature Related to Assessment

This section will briefly address the factors that serve to promote student outcomes assessment work or serve as barriers to practice, as conveyed through the prescriptive literature in the field.

Empirical studies are rather scarce related to factors that influence assessment, however, prescriptive literature in this area is plentiful. Banta (2011) explained that no specific theory has emerged from the field of outcomes assessment, rather the work draws on multiple theories across disciplines such as student development, learning, organizational development, program evaluation and measurement, and others. The research findings cited above provided evidence that factors related to leadership, resources, external and internal pressures for accountability, and desire for continuous improvement influence learning assessment practice within higher education. These broad factor categories were repeated through the extensive prescriptive literature base focused on recommendations for practice.

While the external push for accountability was identified as a catalyst for many assessment efforts, the literature focused on internal factors being crucial to effective practice (Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Hadden & Davies, 2002; Miles & Wilson, 2004; Serban, 2004). Above all else, faculty and staff engagement was seen as critical to successful assessment efforts. Efforts to identify motivation for involvement, addressing the existing institutional culture and values, and tapping into leadership from faculty and staff ranks were encouraged as internal institutional strategies. Most of the literature also identified the imperative to allocate sufficient permanent resources to assessment practice in support of assessment tools, staff training, assessment coordination, and sustained practice (Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Hadden & Davies, 2002; Miles & Wilson, 2004; Serban, 2004).

Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2009) succinctly summarized the overarching barriers to assessment practice that are well documented in the literature stating, “The reason faculty and administrators do not pervasively and systematically engage in outcomes-based assessment are often (a) a lack of time, (b) a lack of resources, and (c) a lack of understanding of assessment” (pp. 135-136). They went on to explain that for student affairs professionals there are “a few additional primary barriers: (a) a lack of understanding the student learning and development theory that undergirds their practice; (b) a lack of collaboration within and across their divisions to extend to faculty members; and (c) a disconnect between what the student affairs professionals expect students to be

able to know and do, and the manner in which student affairs professionals are actually able to provide the opportunity for the outcome to be realized” (p. 136).

Summary of Factors Influencing Assessment Practice

In summary, the research studies, articles, and books reviewed described multiple factors that influence student learning outcomes assessment practice in higher education. Some studies identified correlational or predictive factors explaining why, or why not, and to what extent institutions and staff practice outcomes assessment (Bresciani, 2002; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Peterson & Augustine, 2000a, 2000b). Other research studies sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of staff and administrators involved in assessment practice (Ebersole, 2007; Green et al., 2008; Kinzie, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Sommerville, 2007; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009). Finally, anecdotal and descriptive literature offered further discussion on influencing factors (Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Hadden & Davies, 2002; Miles & Wilson, 2004; Serban, 2004).

Although asking different research questions and surveying different populations, common threads existed throughout these studies and narratives. A major theme was that while external forces may prompt activity, internal institutional dynamics appeared to have the greatest influence on whether assessment occurs, how satisfied and involved staff were in assessment, and how assessment data were used. Additionally, strong leadership in the form of invested interest, communication of relevance to institutional mission and goals, and use of assessment data for continual improvement, was viewed as critical to effective assessment. Finally, adequate resources in support of coordination, staff time, and professional development were generally found to be essential to institutional assessment efforts.

It remains to be seen whether the influential institutional and personal factors affecting assessment practice identified in these studies hold true for student learning assessment efforts within community college student affairs divisions. The current research body does not adequately address this specific context. This is a serious limitation in regards to providing empirical evidence on assessment practice for leadership in student affairs in community colleges. This study intended to help address this gap by exploring the internal and external influences on assessment practice

specifically within community college student affairs and from the perspective of administrators that carry responsibility for management of assessment activities.

Role of Leadership in Assessment Practice

This section of the literature review will provide a brief overview of the role of leadership in student learning outcomes assessment practice in higher education, with an emphasis on leadership in community colleges and student affairs. The section discusses the impact of leadership on institutional assessment practice, as well as the type of leadership characteristics and skills needed in order to support a culture of evidence and a focus on student learning.

Impact of Leadership on Assessment

This section will briefly identify and describe the literature on the impact that leadership specifically has on assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education institutions.

Much of the literature cites leadership as a critical factor that influences student learning outcomes assessment in higher education. Many studies looked at institutions with exemplary assessment practice and found that leadership is a necessary condition or supporting factor of assessment practice (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Ebersole, 2007; Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Descriptions of the leadership needed ranged from simply existing or having an adequate level of involvement to being significantly involved and highly visible in assessment activities. Most studies cited the importance of leadership in providing resources and training to faculty and staff, as well as making expectations of the use of assessment data clear and connecting assessment to organizational priorities. Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2009) stressed the importance of trust by staff in student affairs administrators to demonstrate commitment to the process, transparency, and values as they relate to the use of assessment data for strategic planning, budgeting, and decision-making. Alternatively, Nunley, Bers, and Manning (2011) view leaders in a background support role. They cautioned community colleges to not let administration (or any nonfaculty entities) drive assessment, as frontline staff members are the only ones that work with and understand students.

Blimling (2013) identified leadership as a potential challenge in implementing assessment practice in student affairs. He asserted that leaders might be reluctant to invest time and energy in the effort, which they may believe has little influence on their daily management tasks. He said, “Not only do most student affairs administrators not have the time to devote to assessment, but many do not have an interest in doing assessment or the skills necessary to conduct the research, or know how to use assessment results once they have them” (p. 8). He identified that accreditation is a typical driver for leadership to assess programs and services. He added that an expedient response by administrators, especially in larger institutions, is to hire someone to be responsible for assessment. This may not lead to the intention of a culture of assessment in which staff meaningfully uses results to improve programs, services, and student learning and development. Another challenge for leaders that Blimling identified is that results from many assessment tools and measures in student affairs are not necessarily actionable, as it may be difficult to attribute student learning to specific experiences or interventions, and sample sizes may be too small. An argument to this author’s assertion is that learning outcomes assessment is not intended to result in generalizable results, but rather to influence some aspect of the teaching and learning process to improve outcomes within the context of a particular program or institution.

Although many discussions cited the importance of leadership to the development and sustenance of learning outcomes assessment practice for the reasons cited previously, few sources focused solely on the role of leaders or attributed much central significance to their role in the process. Hadden and Davies (2002) asserted that the role of administrators has been marginalized in the assessment process, as evidenced by a lack of coverage on the topic in the assessment literature. Their review of assessment literature confirmed that faculty was consistently portrayed as owning the assessment process and critical to its implementation and success, while administrators received only passing mention with very little credit given for contributions. They stated,

With so much attention placed on the importance of the faculty in creating and implementing the process and so little attention placed on the administrative leadership role, one might have the impression that as long as the president and the chief academic officer verbally support the effort, select the right faculty leaders, provide adequate resources, and include assessment in the planning and budgeting process, assessment will succeed. (p. 248)

On the contrary, they identified a critical role of administrative leaders is in addressing the barriers to faculty involvement and establishing a climate that supports moving assessment practice from innovation to institutionalization.

Type of Leadership Needed

This section will briefly identify and describe the characteristics and skills necessary for leaders to have a significant impact on the development and maintenance of student learning outcomes assessment practice within the context of a new learner-centered paradigm in higher education.

Harris and Cullen (2008) described the necessity for higher education leadership to adapt to meet the needs of today's learner-centered paradigm. The shift from teaching to learning-focused institutions demands change in institutional practice and policy that impacts administrative as well as faculty responsibilities. They identified the need for both a technical, or skills, shift and a perception, or adaptive, shift by leaders to move away from the more traditional authoritarian leadership structure to the role of facilitator and transformational leader. In order to create a culture conducive to assessment, administrators must become knowledgeable about all aspects of the practice and the factors that influence its success. Administrators must be able to identify quality teaching and learning, as they are responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of their teachers and staff. Finally, leaders should adopt situational leadership techniques that support a collegial relationship with faculty and staff in order to become full partners in the assessment and improvement of teaching and learning.

Banta (2005, 2006) explored the perceptions of college administrators from institutions known for outstanding outcomes assessment work and published findings in a series of articles for *Assessment Update*. She interviewed eleven chief administrators, including one chief student affairs officer, from both community colleges and universities. A key finding from this very small, qualitative sample was that these leaders believed that fostering a culture of evidence at their institutions would lead to institutional transformation and improved teaching and learning. Banta (2005) asserted that the ability to create such a culture is the "hallmark of a transformational academic leader" (p. 16). The study identified the role of leadership to incentivize assessment

practice through various means and most importantly, to set an expectation that one of the greatest institutional decisions is how to improve student learning and that data will be the basis for making those decisions. Banta claimed that administrators might also be drawn to assessment practice because it can serve to attract and focus the attention of faculty and staff on what is important. Student learning outcomes assessment can provide evidence of progress both internally to motivate the college community, as well as externally to appease stakeholders.

Boggs (2012) identified the emerging leadership characteristics and skills in demand at community colleges today. Among these are organizational strategy, collaboration, communication and resource management. Competencies in these areas are critical for leaders to create cultures of evidence leading to improvement of student learning, success, and completion. Leaders will need to courageously defend the need for change and an environment conducive to experimentation and full acceptance of responsibility to student learning and improved institutional outcomes. They need to thrive in an age of accountability that demands increased transparency and improved completion rates by institutions of higher education.

Some literature cited that student affairs staff and administrators lack knowledge and skills related to the assessment of student learning outcomes (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2002; Cooper and Saunders, 2000; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Kisker, 2005; Schuh & Associates, 2009). Cooper and Saunders (2000) identified that student affairs practitioners often lack training and education in assessment and evaluation methodology. They stated that many mid-level practitioners that are responsible for assessment have not taken courses in research and measurement for years, if at all, and those that did develop skills in the qualitative and quantitative methods needed for assessment in graduate programs rarely practice or reinforce them on the job. Leaders, then, need to create an environment that supports training, professional development, mentoring, and technical assistance related to assessment practice. No studies were located that specifically addressed senior student affairs or academic affairs officers' level of knowledge and skills in assessment processes, models, and tools. This is a critical gap in the research given the instrumental role that administrators play in

prioritizing, providing resources for, and supporting faculty and staff to conduct student learning outcomes assessment at their institutions.

Summary of Role of Leadership in Assessment Practice

This section provided a brief overview of the role of leadership in student learning outcomes assessment practice. The literature identified effective leadership as a critical condition for developing and sustaining an exemplary assessment practice. Although the role of leadership has been minimized in assessment literature in comparison to the role of faculty and staff, multiple studies described that leadership is crucial to nurture a culture of assessment, including clarifying expectations, communicating the relevance of assessment to institutional mission and goals, using assessment data for decision making and continual improvement, and providing adequate resources in support of coordination, staff time, and staff training. Alternatively, Blimling (2013) asserted that leadership in student affairs could be a detriment to assessment practice based on the belief that many administrators lack the time, interest, and skills to support assessment.

Transformational and situational leadership skills and characteristics were identified as necessary to support assessment practice within the emerged learner-centered paradigm in higher education. Inherent in this approach is a departure from the traditional authoritative leadership style to a more collaborative, facilitative style that encourages administrators and faculty and staff to partner in an effort to improve educational interventions and subsequent student learning outcomes. Some researchers identified trust by staff in administrators as a critical element to supporting effective assessment practice. No research studies were found that specifically addressed the preparedness of higher education administrators to lead student learning outcomes assessment efforts. Given the critical role that leaders play, understanding their knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to assessment of student learning outcomes would provide valuable information for higher education leadership and policy makers. This study sought to understand how one group of administrators - community college senior student affairs officers from comparably sized institutions within one state - perceives their level of preparedness to lead student learning outcomes assessment practice.

Summary of Literature Review

This literature review sought to reinforce the significance of this research study on assessment of student learning outcomes in community college student affairs divisions, as well as to establish a framework for the research design. The research literature on this specific topic is scant, so a broader review of general student learning outcomes assessment in higher education, as well as a review of learning as an outcome within student affairs, was covered. The review began by defining the approach, as well as key terms and concepts. It then provided an overview of the literature broken into four thematic areas: (a) the importance of assessing student outcomes in higher education, (b) assessment of learning outcomes within student affairs, (c) factors influencing outcomes assessment, and (d) the role of leadership in assessment practice.

The importance of assessing student learning for both accountability and continuous improvement was summarized. In many respects, community colleges have been leaders in the educational reform movement with their focus on learning colleges and college completion goals. The review asserted that accountability to demonstrate student learning for higher education institutions will only increase, as multiple stakeholders demand improved results from higher education institutions.

The concept of student affairs units' shared responsibility for student learning has been in place for decades, although the literature revealed a lack of empirical evidence that student learning outcomes were being defined within student affairs units in community colleges, let alone assessed in a systematic and reportable way. The review did reveal an anecdotal impact on community college student affairs divisions as a result of the learning college movement. The literature confirmed that student affairs will increasingly be held to the same standard as instructional affairs related to demonstration of student learning due to both external and internal forces.

A review of the scholarly and descriptive literature focused on factors influencing student learning outcomes assessment revealed multiple findings. Effective assessment of student learning within higher education requires adequate resources, highly involved leadership, and strong faculty and staff engagement. Both external and internal factors influence assessment practice, but it is the internal factors that appear to have a greater impact on institutional approach, staff involvement and satisfaction, and how assessment

data are used. Accreditation is widely considered the greatest driver of student learning outcomes assessment. Although the concept that learning and development occurs outside of the classroom is not new, the assessment of that learning has not been adequately addressed.

A key observation from the overall review of the literature was the lack of research demonstrating a positive impact of learning outcomes assessment on student learning. Based on studies conducted, there remains a lack of evidence that assessment efforts are impacting achievement of learning outcomes, instructional methods, co-curricular activities, or institutional programs and policies. This lack of empirical evidence presents a major challenge for community college leaders as they attempt to convince faculty and staff that assessment will drive internal practice and meet demands of external stakeholders.

The role of leadership in student learning outcomes assessment in higher education was found to be critical, although under analyzed in the scholarship on assessment. Leaders were identified as instrumental in nurturing a culture of evidence, demonstrating the use of assessment data in support of institutional mission and goals, and providing adequate resources for assessment practice. A new style of collaborative and transformational leadership was identified as essential to support assessment practice within the emerged learner-centered paradigm in higher education. A lack of interest, knowledge, and skills in assessment practice on the part of leaders was presented as a potential significant barrier to learning outcomes assessment practice.

In conclusion, the literature affirmed the significance of the topic and focus of this research study. The demand for higher education to conduct systemic and systematic student learning outcomes assessment will not be disappearing in the near future. All areas of institutions, including student affairs, will be held accountable to operate within a culture of evidence in order to demonstrate effectiveness, efficiency, value, and continual improvement to both external and internal stakeholders. Effective assessment practice within student affairs will require complete buy-in and engagement by administrators. But despite decades of scholarship on assessment in higher education, evidence of the impact of assessment on student learning and on institutional outcomes is minimal. Likewise, there is little evidence of what assessment practice is currently taking

place on the ground in community college student affairs divisions and how equipped chief administrators are to lead the effort.

This study used first hand accounts by senior student affairs officers to begin to address these gaps in the scholarly literature and sought to understand their perspectives on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. Findings from the study will contribute to the body of knowledge on assessment related to what external and internal forces are influencing adoption of assessment practice and the use of data, how assessment is prioritized, and how equipped administrators are to lead assessment efforts.

Chapter III: Design of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. This study was grounded in an interpretive social science approach and utilized the multiple case study method to explore the framing research questions. The overall aim of this study was to illuminate senior administrators' perceptions of what external and internal forces are influencing adoption of assessment practice and the use of assessment data, how assessment is prioritized, and how equipped administrators are to lead assessment efforts. In this way, readers may vicariously experience the practice of the identified cases (individual administrators within specific institutions) and build on previously developed assumptions about assessment practice through a process of analytical or naturalistic generalization. This qualitative study specifically addressed the following three research questions:

1. What internal and external forces do senior student affairs officers believe are influencing the adoption of student learning outcomes assessment and use of learning outcomes data within student affairs at community colleges?
2. How do community college senior student affairs officers prioritize assessment of student learning outcomes within their student affairs action agenda?
3. How do community college senior student affairs officers perceive they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, institutional support, and resources to lead student learning outcomes assessment practice?

This section describes the study design by addressing the following: (a) the philosophical lens through which the study was conceptualized, (b) the guiding theoretical framework, (c) the research method employed, (d) procedures used for data collection and analysis, and (e) a personal disclosure identifying biases of the researcher.

Philosophical Approach

The philosophical approach of interpretive social science grounded this study. Interpretive social science is a qualitative research approach that is well suited to frame this study which sought to explore the phenomenon of how community college student affairs staff and administrators develop an assessment mindset and integrate assessment

of student outcomes into their day-to-day practice. This section addresses: (a) the history, purpose, and key philosophers behind interpretive theory; (b) major assumptions and key concepts associated with interpretive social science; and (c) how this proposed study is supported by an interpretive approach.

History and Purpose of Interpretive Social Science

Interpretive theory, as applied to the social sciences, centers on human behavior as the outcome of the subjective interpretation of the environment. Neuman (2003) defined the interpretive research approach as, “the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (p. 76). A primary goal, then, of an interpretative social science approach to research is to allow study participants’ meaning to emerge. A key is to seek understanding from the participant rather than the researcher perspective. Like all qualitative research, this approach seeks to examine people’s behavior and actions within their natural settings. It is about process, meaning, and interpretation or understanding of experience. It seeks to describe and understand phenomena through an interpretive process.

Interpretive social science is rooted in and informed by the sociological and philosophical perspectives of hermeneutics, Verstehen, symbolic interactionism, labeling theory, phenomenology, and social constructivism. Hermeneutics dates back to ancient times when it focused on the theory and practice of interpretation of written texts, predominately the Bible. Modern hermeneutics expanded the application to encompass everything in the interpretive process with attention to the interaction between experience, expression, and comprehension. In the early 20th century, German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer used hermeneutics to describe existential understanding and the determination of truth only through individual experience (Brown, 1989; Neuman, 2003). In today’s sociological applications, the main principle of hermeneutics is that we can only understand the meaning of an action or statement in relation to the whole context or worldview from which it stems. This requires the researcher or reader to move beyond simple, surface interpretations to

considering the many embedded messages and connections among its parts (Neuman, 2003).

In addition to being related to hermeneutics, interpretive social science made its debut in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a reaction to the dominant positivist sociological perspective of the time. German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), and German sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920), posited that the scientific methods used to understand natural science were not applicable to the social sciences (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Neuman, 2003). They promoted the concept of “Verstehen” into philosophy and the human sciences. This concept was defined as “an empathetic understanding ... of the everyday lived experience of people in specific historical settings” (Neuman, 2003, p. 75). In contrast to the objective, impersonal, logical, and probabilistic approach of positivism, the interpretive approach was based on practical, subjective interpretation of meaningful social actions and interactions (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982b; Neuman, 2003; Stake, 2010).

Other sociological perspectives that have informed interpretive research include social constructivism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and labeling theory. Very closely associated (often used interchangeably in the literature) with interpretive theory, constructivism asserts that all reality is socially constructed and that events or phenomena do not have any independent or objective existence. Researchers are not finding knowledge then, they are constructing it, and reporting on the methods that their research participants are using to create their reality (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology was presented by philosophers Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz in the 20th century and aimed at studying how people describe their reality through sensory experience (Merriam, 2009). Today, phenomenological research aims at describing the meaning, or essence, of the lived experiences of a group of individuals around a particular concept or phenomenon (Bogdan & Knopp, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Symbolic interactionism, associated with George Mead (1863-1931), also stresses the interpretive theory theme that there is no objective reality in society, aside from individual interaction. It is through people’s interactions that patterns and structures of society are created (Bogdan & Knopp, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Similarly, labeling theory, introduced

in the 1950s and 1960s, asserted that our objective assessment of behavior is no more than labels that society assigns to behavior, which is culturally and historically variable.

In summary, the interpretive approach to social science has held a firm seat at the research table for over a century. The interpretive social science (alternatively, constructivist) paradigm validates a subjective, participatory, in-depth, symbolic, and contextualized search for meaning and knowledge. Neuman (2003) summarized the interpretive approach as follows,

The interpretive approach is the foundation of social research techniques that are sensitive to context, that use various methods to get inside the ways others see the world, and that are more concerned with achieving an empathic understanding than with testing laws of human behavior. (pp. 80-81)

The interpretive paradigm is well suited within which to situate this proposed study.

Major Assumptions, Key Concepts, and Criticisms of Interpretive Social Science

The interpretive or constructivist paradigm, as well as qualitative inquiry in general, carries with it numerous assumptions regarding the nature of reality and explanation, the role of values, the relationship between researcher and study participant, and the purpose of inquiry as they relate to social science research. A central assumption of the interpretive approach is that there is no single objective reality, but rather multiple, socially constructed and interpreted realities (Manning & Stage, 2003; Merriam, 2009; Neuman, 2003). Meaning is nothing more than what people think it is and researchers can only interpret and describe understanding of that meaning within the limited context that it was constructed. The ability to generalize findings across broader populations is limited, as is the ability to assert objective standards by which to judge theory. These, in fact, are common criticisms of the interpretive approach (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The interpretive approach assumes reality can be found in the everyday experiences of people and complexity of their interactions. It relies on rich detail and “thick” description to provide readers a glimpse into another’s social reality (Neuman, 2003).

The interpretive approach, and qualitative inquiry in general, assume a value-laden orientation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Manning & Stage, 2003; Neuman, 2003). Values are considered throughout the research process, including the explicit examination of ethical issues, researcher bias, methodological choices, context for study, and underlying theories being examined. Unlike the positivist paradigm, which claims a

value-free framework for determining “truth,” interpretive social science researchers embrace the role that values and meaning have in all aspects of their work. This leads to the criticism of interpretivism that assumptions are made by the researcher based on what “makes sense,” which may lead to incorrect interpretations or explanations based on the lenses through which subjects are studied and motivations defined (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982a; Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

A significant level of researcher and participant interaction and influence is assumed within the interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Manning & Stage, 2003). As the primary instrument for data collection, the researcher both influences and is influenced by the participants and the overall inquiry process. There is little desire to isolate the influence of the researcher from the research setting in a qualitative approach as, “it is specifically the human interaction that results in high-quality data, findings, and interpretations” (Manning & Stage, 2003, p. 21). The interpretive approach does stop short of the activist orientation held within the critical social science paradigm, however, in which researchers actively call for and support participants’ efforts to improve the socio-economic conditions of their lives (Neuman, 2003). Critical social science theorists criticize the interpretive approach for remaining indifferent to the possibility that the social systems within which subjects function may be inherently flawed or incoherent. Additionally, critics assert that the practical applications derived from interpretive research are limited because “the interpretive approach is always predisposed towards the idea of reconciling people to their existing social reality” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 98).

The overall goal of research from an interpretive or constructivist perspective is to “build a time and context dependent body of knowledge that is expressed as interpretations” (Manning & Stage, 2003, p. 22). The purpose is to understand how people construct meaning around everyday experiences within natural settings. Qualitative inquiry emphasizes a holistic treatment of the phenomena being studied, as opposed to the explanatory goals of identifying cause-and-effect and correlational relationships inherent in quantitative research (Stake, 2010). Other key characteristics of qualitative research include the use of multiple sources of word or image-based data, an inductive data analysis process, respect for an emergent and flexible research design, a

grounded theory and hypothesis generating approach, and posing particularistic questions (Creswell, 2007, 2008; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010).

Guiding Theoretical Perspective

In addition to being guided by the interpretive or constructivist theory detailed in the above section, this study was also shaped by the call for and description of a culture of assessment in student affairs, as defined by the scholarship. Given the assertion of outcomes assessment as an essential dimension of contemporary practice in student affairs (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Helfgot, 2005; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008; Oburn, 2005; Schuh, 2013, 2009), this study sought to reconcile this external mandate with on-the-ground experience as subjectively described by a group of community college administrators. The research method, guiding research questions, and subsequent interview protocol, stemmed from the theoretical assertion that leadership should prioritize assessment practice and that various internal and external factors influence that practice. Broad factors identified by the body of research included the role of leadership, resources, knowledge and skills in assessment, external mandates, and institutional integration.

Open-ended interview questions elicited information about what participants viewed as influencing factors and how present they believe them to be in their own professional environment. This included the influencing factor of leadership and reflection on their own preparedness and approach as leaders. The purpose of this research study was to tell the story of administrators related to their experience with leading student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs. The study, then, sought to expand on the existing body of knowledge about learning outcomes assessment in student affairs by exploring the perceptions of a group critical to the practice. Findings from this study will contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge related to whether student affairs leaders in community colleges are responding to the call for accountability and actualizing recommendations from their field.

Method

The method used for this research was a qualitative collective or multiple case study. The overall intent of case study research is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon within its real life context by focusing on multiple aspects of an identified,

bounded system or “case.” Although this method can be quantitative in nature, it is more commonly considered qualitative research. It was uniquely suited to address this study’s purpose of exploring the perceptions of administrators related to assessment practice in community college student affairs divisions. This section will address the rationale for use and intended application of this research method for this particular study through a discussion of the following: (a) the purpose of case study research, (b) key concepts and features of this method, and (c) major steps in carrying out case study research.

Purpose of the Case Study Method

Like all qualitative research, case study research seeks meaning and understanding through rich description of the lived experience of the study participants. Case studies are uniquely advantageous for gaining a holistic perspective of social behavior within a well-defined context. Yin (2009) encouraged consideration of case study research when the variables are so embedded within the phenomenon that they are difficult to identify ahead of time or when it is impossible to separate the phenomenon from its context. This approach to research is also well suited for addressing “how” or “why” questions and when studying real-life problems in contemporary settings (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Case study has been widely used and found relevant for applied fields such as education.

It is important to identify what a case study is not. It is not intended to be scientifically generalizable. Neither is it intended to be objectively comparative. As Stake (2003) stated, “The purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case” (p. 156). The desire with this type of research is to reveal what can be learned from deep exploration of a particular story at a particular time and place. The learning and knowledge generation, then, occur through vicarious experience as the readers situate their own knowledge and experience within the researcher’s narrative (Stake, 1995, 2003). There is necessarily a great deal of subjectivity on the part of the researcher, as she determines the criteria of representation in the research. Additionally, the process of case study research is dynamic and flexible. Modifications to design, case selection, and even research questions throughout the research process are not uncommon (Maxwell, 2005; Stake, 1995, 2003; Yin, 2009). The result of this method is socially

constructed knowledge, based on experiential and contextual accounts of phenomena, in which everyone – participant, researcher, and reader – plays a part.

Case study method supported the goals of this research well. Grounded in an interpretive, constructivist philosophy, the purpose of this study was to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers related to the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. Deep exploration of individual administrators' experience with outcomes assessment supported the identification of variables impacting successful practice. The challenges, opportunities, and values associated with developing an assessment practice emerged as themes. By studying multiple cases and analyzing findings within and across them, richer thematic generation occurred. Individual cases explored the phenomenon of assessment knowledge and practice. Cross-case analysis, or comparing findings across the multiple cases, explored the existence of emergent themes. The overall study findings may be of value not for advancing "grand generalization," but for "refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability" (Stake, 2003, p. 156). In its creation of an "extension of experience" (Stake, 2003, p. 156), this study may impact public policy and institutional practice decisions related to outcomes assessment within student affairs.

Key Concepts and Features of Case Studies

There are a number features and concepts unique to case studies. The key feature of case study research is that it is the study of a "bounded system," with well-defined boundaries of space, time, and place (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The case or unit of analysis is the focus of the study, not the actual topic of investigation. In the case of this study, the research sought to address the problem of a lack of effective assessment of student learning outcomes within community college student affairs.

In order to explore and gain insight into this issue, cases, or individual senior student affairs officers, representing a variety of similarly sized community colleges within one state were studied. Each case was an integrated system, bound by space and place (a specific individual representing a specific institution) and time (period of time that the individual has been held accountable for assessment efforts). The cases, then,

were used as the instrument for illuminating the practice of assessment. An “instrumental case study” was employed, in which the unit of analysis led to further understanding of the practice of student outcomes assessment (Stake, 1995, 2003). This instrumental case approach studied nine (9) unique cases, called a “collective” or “multiple” case study, in order to achieve a variety of institutional contexts within one particular state (Stake, 1995, 2003; Yin, 2009). The set of cases was categorically bound and thus provided an opportunity for some degree of generalization across the set (Merriam, 2009).

Another important feature of case studies is their uniquely rich descriptive quality. Merriam (2009) described case studies as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Case studies emphasize the particular, as opposed to the general, supporting this design’s effectiveness for exploring practical problems found in everyday practice. This study sought to identify what it was about these particular cases that allowed for an effective practice of student learning outcomes assessment to exist or not. The emergent themes may be useful to compare and contrast with other sites or may be of value in their own right.

A key trait of case studies is their “thick description,” an anthropological term that defines the specific, literal, and detailed portrayal of the site being studied (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2003, 2010). Merriam (2009) explained how case study research is heuristic in that it validates the readers’ individual experience and interpretation. She stated that case studies can “bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). The holistic and deep exploration of cases situated within particular contexts, both common and unique, lead to the case report’s ability to provide a vicarious experience for readers, as described in the purpose section above.

A final unique feature of case study research is that it is a process of investigation and a product, the case study report. It is an all-encompassing method of research. Whether speaking of the process or the product, case studies can be classified in multiple ways including intrinsic vs. instrumental; collective or multiple cases; and exploratory, explanatory or descriptive. This study was an instrumental multiple case study for primarily explanatory and descriptive research purposes.

Major Steps in Carrying Out Case Study Research

The steps in carrying out case study research are similar to other research methods. Yin (2009) offered a comprehensive process, which he defines as linear but iterative, with details specific to the case study method as follows:

1. Plan – Identify research questions or other rationale for doing a case study; decide to use the case study method; and understand its strengths and limitations. (p. 2)
2. Design – Define the unit of analysis or case(s) to be studied; develop theory, propositions, and issues underlying the study; identify the case study design (single, multiple, holistic, embedded); and define procedures to maintain case study quality. (p. 24)
3. Prepare – Hone skills as a case study investigator; train for specific case study; develop case study protocol; conduct pilot case; and gain approval for human subjects protection. (p. 66)
4. Collect – Follow case study protocol; use multiple sources of evidence; create case study database; and maintain chain of evidence. (p. 98)
5. Analyze – Rely on theoretical propositions and other strategies; consider any of five analytic techniques; explore rival explanations; and display data apart from interpretations. (p. 126)
6. Share – Define audience; compose textual and visual materials; display enough evidence for reader to reach own conclusions; review and re-write until done well. (p. 164)

The planning stage of this study's process began with identification of the research problem and extended into a literature review and determination of the philosophical approach and specific chosen method. The literature review provided the rationale for this study and informed both the research questions and the chosen method. Consideration of personal values, beliefs, and biases also led to selection of a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretive or constructivist philosophy. The literature review also supported the design phase of this study, clarifying the issues and theoretical framework within which to situate the research. The design decisions and rationale are

further defined in this section. The preparation, collection, and analysis steps taken for this study are addressed in the procedures section that follows.

Maxwell (2005) stressed the iterative nature of qualitative research clarifying that linear, sequential processes such as Yin's may provide a model *for* conducting research, but models *of* research design must be flexible, reflexive, and ongoing. He stated that qualitative research "does not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps, but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 3).

Procedures

Collecting and analyzing data, as well as assuring the trustworthiness of the process and the ultimate findings, is the basis of academic research (Creswell, 2008). The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the procedures used for carrying out this multiple case study. This section will address: (a) case selection, (b) identification of data needs, (c) data collection techniques, (d) analysis of the data, (e) strategies to ensure soundness of procedures, and (f) strategies to protect human subjects involved with the study.

Case Selection

Yin (2009) asserted that multiple case study research is often considered more compelling and robust than single case studies and that the "analytic benefits from having two (or more) cases may be substantial" (p. 61). He explained that the multiple cases should be considered like replication of experiments in a quantitative study, not like sampling within one experiment. For this study, nine cases were selected. Non-probability sampling, or sampling that does not involve random selection, is the preferred method for identifying study sites and subjects in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Case selection for this study was based on both purposive or purposeful sampling and convenience sampling.

For the purposes of this study a case was defined as a senior student affairs officer at a medium (M2) or large (L2) comprehensive community college in the state of Oregon, based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education size classifications. There are eight such institutions in Oregon. The individual cases for this study were purposefully contained within one state and by size based on the student full-

time equivalency (FTE). The rationale for this containment was to study cases within one overarching system of community college governance in order to establish a similar framework within which administrators function. The state selected maintains a governance system of autonomous, regionally elected boards for each of the seventeen community colleges versus a statewide governance model. Likewise, the rationale for the size of institutions was to establish more comparable institutional characteristics for cross-case analysis. Both the smallest and the largest colleges in the state may lack comparable administrative infrastructure and resources to devote to assessment practice. Finally, the state selected met the researcher's convenience sampling criteria of location and ease of access to participants and campuses.

Potential participants were identified through the membership list of the Oregon Council of Student Services Administrators (CSSA) and invitations to participate were sent via email (see Appendix A) to all ten identified administrators (two institutions identified two senior administrators) from the eight medium and large institutions. Nine administrators, representing all eight institutions, agreed to participate and signed Informed Consent Forms (see Appendix B).

Data Needs

The primary goal for collecting data was to answer the proposed research questions. Yin (2009) identified six sources of evidence relevant for case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. For this collective case study, the following data sources were used: (a) recordings and verbatim transcripts of semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews; (b) transcripts of responses to any participant follow up questions; (c) supporting documents provided by participants; and (d) analytic memos created by the researcher. The interest in this qualitative study was to explore the meaning of a phenomenon through the experiences of the study participants. For this reason, data generated from a common set of open-ended interview questions was the primary source of evidence. Document analysis provided another source of evidence to corroborate data generated by the interviews. Analytic memos created by the researcher resulted in written records of analysis throughout the study and were a data source themselves.

Data Collection Techniques

In qualitative research the primary research instrument is the researcher. A qualitative researcher has a great deal of agency over the data used for a study. As a collaborative, interactive, and subjective process, the data may be considered “made” rather than “collected” by the researcher (Richards & Morse, 2013). The researcher used interviews and pre-existing documents to generate data in the form of words that represented participants’ experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews. Merriam (2009) stated “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 88). In this study the primary data were created through the use of semi-structured interviews with the nine participants (cases) resulting in verbal accounts of experience and opinions on the topic of learning outcomes assessment practice in student affairs. This study was interested in understanding the lived experience of each case or individual administrator. Once participants were selected and access was granted, the following steps were taken to collect and manage interview data:

1. An interview protocol or guide was developed (see Appendix C). Given the researcher’s command of the domain of inquiry for this study, semi-structured interviews were framed through open-ended questions presented in a logical order to address the three guiding research questions.
2. The interview protocol was piloted with student affairs administrators that engage in outcomes assessment, but that were not included in this study. Two rounds of piloting were conducted and the guide was refined after each.
3. Individual interviews of approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration were conducted in person. Although structured enough to reliably gather information on the same topics from each participant, open-ended questions allowed for detailed and complex answers that could not be anticipated by the researcher. The researcher strove to make “good data” by providing ample space for participants to fully present their own perspective and by “guiding” rather than “leading” participants (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 122).
4. Interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Microsoft Word and Excel programs, as well as computer-based

filing protocols were established for organizing, storing, and managing interview data. No personal identifiers were included on any of the audio or electronic documents.

5. Follow up emails were sent to all participants to obtain additional information and/or clarification and all participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and make corrections.

Document review. Existing supporting documentation was requested from participants at the close of each interview. Specifically, participants were asked to “provide or point me to documents that I may review for this study that specifically pertain to or provide evidence of your leadership practice and actions related to student learning outcomes assessment” (see Appendix C). Examples of types of documents for inclusion were provided. A follow up invitation to provide documents was sent via email approximately three months following initial interviews, corresponding with an invitation to participants to review transcribed interviews. Ultimately, five out of the nine participants provided documents to the researcher for a total of 22 documents. Document types included: assessment planning guidelines/templates, assessment training presentation, completed assessment plans and reports, staff communications, assessment related tools, institutional planning guidelines, division planning and prioritization spreadsheets, and web links to institutional level data dashboards. The purpose for collecting these data was to corroborate interview data, as well as help to establish and describe the context of each case.

Analysis and Interpretation

Data for this study were interpreted through a process of thematic qualitative analysis, an approach that supports both the interpretive social science theoretical grounding and the case study method of this research. As described by Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O’Connor, and Barnard (2014), thematic qualitative analysis is an iterative and continuous process that can be approached through two overlapping stages: (a) data management and (b) abstraction and interpretation. The researcher followed their five recommended steps for the data management stage as follows:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Construction of an initial thematic framework.

3. Indexing and sorting the data within the framework.
4. Reviewing data extracts for refining framework.
5. Summarizing and displaying the data in a thematic “Framework” (Spencer et al., 2014).

The Framework is a data management and analytic tool conceived by the National Centre for Social Research in London in the 1980s to support the qualitative analysis process for the social sciences (Spencer et al., 2014). The tool worked particularly well for managing the text-based data of this substantive - dealing with attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and views as identified in text - and cross-case analysis. It also engaged the researcher in a systematic, iterative, and active analysis process. The researcher generated analytic memos throughout the process in order to capture impressions, thoughts, and ideas, which formed a written record of the entire analysis process.

The specific process of constructing the initial thematic framework involved applying well-accepted qualitative approach to coding and categorizing text-based data (Creswell, 2007; Gibbs, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2013). This included first reading through the raw data numerous times and using an *open coding* process of labeling text segments. This resulted in first-order analysis of *in vivo* and descriptive, or surface-level, codes. The next step was to use an inductive and comparative process to begin categorizing units of data by type and group according to similarities and differences. This *axial coding*, or second-order analysis process, resulted in almost 40 categories initially, which were eventually grouped into seven broad categories or initial themes. The initial thematic framework was generated from a within-case analysis of Case 1. The framework was then applied to the remaining eight cases, with the categories or sub-themes being continually refined as each case was analyzed. The resulting “Framework” displayed pragmatic categorization of the data both within and across all cases. The framework incorporated data summaries grounded in participants’ own language for each sub-theme and each case.

The ultimate goal of the data analysis phase is to interpret and ascribe meaning to the data collected. The analysis of data in qualitative research is an iterative rather than linear or step-by-step process. The analysis for this study began simultaneously with data collection and continued throughout the entire research process. The abstraction and

interpretation stage of analysis began in earnest following the data management stage described above. While Creswell (2007) and others acknowledge the “emergent” nature of meaning derived from the views of study participants in qualitative research, this study was framed by clear research questions and took a more deductive and explanatory approach. Rather than a purely inductive, bottom-up or grounded theory approach, the researcher sought to understand similarities and differences among the cases studied to satisfy her theoretical or analytic interest in the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The final step of analysis was an attempt to build abstractions across the cases and to begin to theorize about higher order concepts and ideas and how they may link to theoretical concepts or ideas from the literature. This process involved uncovering and labeling the “elements” present in the data – the perceptions, views, experiences, and behaviors of study participants. The next step was ordering the elements into “key dimensions” to begin to classify and get at what may be happening related to the phenomena in question. This process ultimately led to dismantling the initial thematic framework and reviewing all key dimensions within the context of the three guiding research questions. The result was the identification of 15 categories or sub-themes that fed into six overarching major themes generated by this study. This abstraction and interpretation stage involved a more subjective analysis of the data to get at a coherent account of “meaning.”

The thematic qualitative analysis approach supported an emergent analysis of the data in this multiple case study. Analysis moved from initial and tentative descriptive interpretations of the data through the use of an initial thematic framework towards a more abstract interpretation of the entire data set and construction of a final conceptual thematic framework. The result was an effort to theorize from the collective cases, utilizing constructs from the literature to confirm or deny interpretation of findings. An *analytical* (Yin, 2009) or *naturalistic* (Stake, 1995) generalization was used to generalize findings from the specific case studies to the broader cross-case analysis findings related to assessment of student learning outcomes found in the literature.

It is important to emphasize that statistical generalization was not the aim of the data analysis for this study. Statistical generalization, commonly used in quantitative research, seeks to make inferences about an entire population based on numerical

findings within a sample of that population. The confidence in generalizations is determined through accepted statistical formulas. Analytical generalization builds confidence in generalizability through replication logic, or finding affirming empirical evidence across many similar studies (Yin, 2009).

Figure 3.1 on page 63 graphically depicts the thematic qualitative analysis approach used for this study.

Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Data and Findings

Case studies, like other qualitative research methods, have been criticized for their lack of rigor, lack of generalizability, and inability to show causal relationships. These criticisms stem from direct comparisons to quantitative research conducted from a positivist or post-positivist framework. Yin (2009) asserted; however, that the accepted tests for trustworthiness and quality of data and findings applied to all empirical social research can also be applied to case studies. Rigor inevitably looks different for qualitative than quantitative research, but many qualitative researchers attempt to frame discussions of soundness using the traditional concepts of validity and reliability (Creswell, 2007; Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston, & Morrell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Lewis et al. (2014) asserted that the objective of reliable qualitative research is ...

... not to produce a perfectly consistent coded data set. Rather, the objective is to produce a meaningful account of the phenomenon that addresses key aspects of the research question, and to produce this account in a systematic and transparent way so that the reader can see how concepts, themes or categories were developed. (p. 278)

Table 3.1 on page 65 identifies the commonly accepted strategies that were used in this study to ensure soundness of data collection, analysis, and overall research design.

Strategies to Protect Human Subjects

Careful consideration for the protection of human subjects was given throughout this study. The researcher completed an online training course on the Protection of Human Research Subjects through Oregon State University. This training outlined specific strategies for protecting subjects of a research study. The Oregon State University's Institutional Review Board, upon verification that it met their requirements for ethical research, approved the study. Key to protection of study subjects was assurance of anonymity of participants, as well as affiliated institutions. Interview and

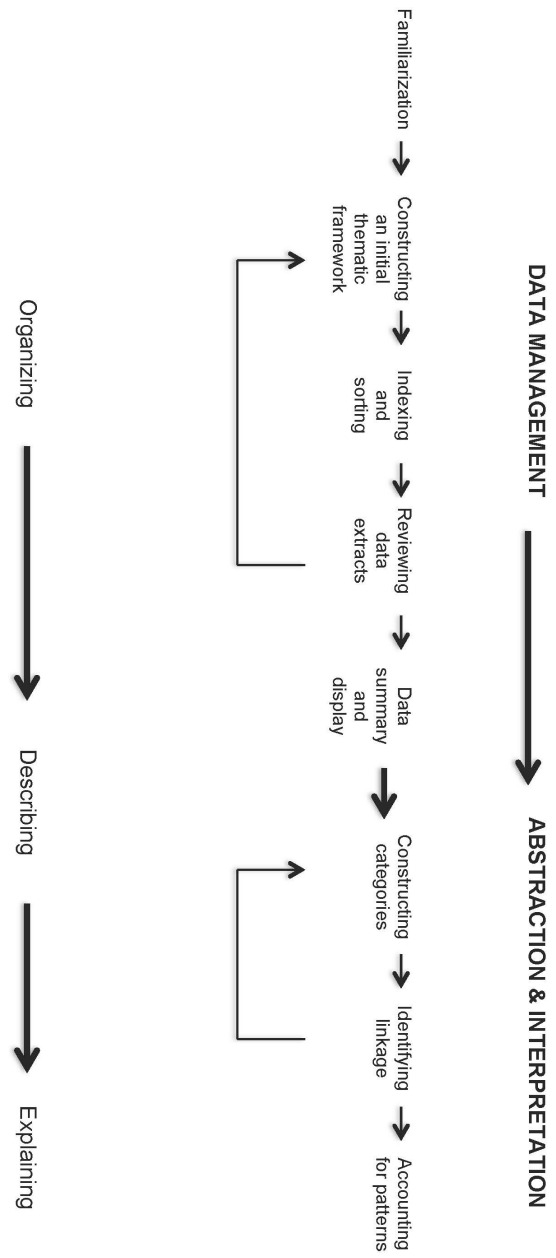


Figure 3.1: Thematic qualitative analysis process. (Spencer et al., 2013, p. 281)

other data collected throughout this study was kept confidential and in a secure location. Participant identifying information was kept separate from research data. Additionally, Informed Consent Forms (see Appendix A) were acquired from each participant. Finally, all Institutional Review Board requirements and policies for individual participants were followed.

Personal Statement

In keeping with an interpretative approach to research I have examined my personal values, beliefs, and biases as they relate both to this study's design and the research topic. Regarding the overall topic, I am biased by a strongly held professional belief that assessing the effectiveness of our efforts in student affairs is a positive and necessary act. As a senior student affairs officer at a community college, I have an acute awareness of the external and internal pressures for institutions and programs to demonstrate their impact on student outcomes. Although these pressures are real, and extend to student affairs units, my deeper belief in the value of this study is that we owe it to our students to assure that we are delivering meaningful services and support that contribute to their overall cognitive and affective development. Assessing the impact of our interventions is essential to determine if we are accomplishing what we claim to be accomplishing in community colleges.

Additionally, I enter into this research study with the belief that many professionals in student affairs lack the awareness, knowledge, and skills to integrate assessment into their daily practice. My observations, over the past twenty years, of staff and administrators struggling with the execution of program reviews and outcomes reporting led me to this belief. Further, I believe that a number of professionals may be resistant to this work due to their lack of self-efficacy with the practice, as well as the real and perceived lack of time and administrative support. Finally, I believe that assessment of knowledge and skills can be learned; however, many institutions lack the commitment to provide the extensive professional development and support necessary to prepare professionals for this work. I believe that the biases that I carried into this study did not have a significant impact on the results based on the fact that they are of a professional, rather than personal nature. Additionally, since I approached this research from an

Table 3.1

Strategies for Trustworthiness and Quality of Research

Phase of Research	Test	Strategy
Research design	External validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied replication logic (and triangulation) through use of a multiple case study with nine sites studied • Applied analytical generalization to generalize results to broader theories of student outcomes assessment • Provided rich, thick description of both the methods approach and findings to allow readers to draw own inferences
Data collection	Construct validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloted interview questions with non-respondents • Triangulated data through multiple sources of evidence including multiple case interviews and document review • Established a chain of evidence through documentation of collection methods and data management system • Sought data saturation by studying all case types defined as medium or large institutions within one state.
	Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established and followed clear interview and document review protocols, including recorded and verbatim transcribed interviews • Used a data management system – Framework – which allowed for systematic organization of data
	Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used member-checking or respondent validation of transcribed interviews to establish inter-subjective agreement
Data analysis	Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used thematic framework analysis approach that established transparency of analytic building blocks • Used member-checking or respondent validation to review case study draft findings and interpretations
Report write-up	Construct validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclosed research bias through personal statement

interpretive perspective utilizing qualitative methodology a certain level of subjectivity on the part of the researcher is assumed.

The interpretative social science approach and chosen qualitative method of case study for this proposed research are in direct alignment with my personal beliefs about the nature of reality and the purpose of inquiry. My personal worldview is solidly constructivist, which wholly influenced the proposed research questions and study design. As a qualitative researcher, my aim is to elucidate the educational phenomenon of establishing a culture of assessment in student affairs by reporting on holistic observations of cases involved with the practice.

Summary of Design of Study

Grounded in an interpretive social science approach, this study used a multiple case study to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. This section detailed the interpretive social science perspective and provided rationale for using this approach as a framework for this study. Compelling reasons included the exploratory aim of the research, as well as the epistemological perspective of the researcher. The section also included a thorough description of the case study method for conducting qualitative research. A rationale for using this method, in its multiple case study form, was provided.

The section also provided a detailed description of the procedures used for participant selection, data needs and collection, data analysis, assurance of soundness of data and findings, and assurance of protection of human subjects. Finally, the section closed with a personal disclosure statement by the researcher.

Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions. Guided by interpretive theory and the mandate for a culture of assessment in student affairs, the study sought to address the following three research questions:

1. What internal and external forces do senior student affairs officers believe are influencing the adoption of student learning outcomes assessment and use of learning outcomes data within student affairs at community colleges?
2. How do community college senior student affairs officers prioritize assessment of student learning outcomes within their student affairs action agenda?
3. How do community college senior student affairs officers perceive they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, institutional support, and resources to lead student learning outcomes assessment practice?

Results of the cross-case analysis ultimately revealed six overarching themes:

1. Factors that inhibit assessment practice.
2. Factors that facilitate assessment practice.
3. Reality versus aspiration.
4. Knowledge, skill, and attitude of leaders.
5. Limited culture of institutional support.
6. Resource challenges.

This section presents the results of the thematic qualitative analysis in response to the study's three research questions and includes the following: (a) an overview of the research context and profiles of cases studied, (b) description of the analysis of the data, and (c) detailed results of the analysis.

Overview of Research Context and Cases

This study used a collective or multiple case study method in order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of learning outcomes assessment within the real life context of senior student affairs administrators, or the "cases." The method offered the opportunity to explore the perceptions of individual administrators, as well as conduct a

cross-case thematic analysis, which generated broader themes and the opportunity for analytical generalization. This section covers (a) an overview of the context of the cases involved in this study and (b) a descriptive profile of each case in the study.

Overview of Context

As described in the Methods section of this study, cases were selected through purposive and convenience sampling and represented full saturation of the case type defined as senior student affairs officers from medium and large comprehensive community colleges in the state of Oregon, as defined by the Carnegie Classifications for higher education.

In addition to the open-ended questions designed to address the study's three guiding research questions, basic descriptive information was gathered for each case in order to help establish the context and support analysis and interpretation of the data. Descriptive characteristics of cases identified include: (a) institution size, (b) number of years as a senior student affairs officer (SSAO), (c) number of years working in the field of student affairs (SA), (d) degree of organizational coordination between student affairs and academic affairs (participant identified), (e) formal education in assessment (participant identified), and (f) if documents were provided. Table 4.1 below displays a comparative overview of the descriptive characteristics of the cases included in this study.

Table 4.1

Comparison of Descriptive Characteristics of Cases

Case (#)	Institution Size (M2/L2)	Years as SSAO (#)	Years in SA field (#)	Degree of Organizational Coordination (H/M/L)	Formal Assessment Education (Yes/No)	Documents Provided (Yes/No)
P1	M2	1	24	H	No	Yes
P2	M2	5	25	M	No	Yes
P3	M2	9	20	M	No	Yes
P4	L2	14	15	M	Yes	Yes
P5	L2	2.5	9	M	No	No
P6	M2	7	30	M	Yes	Yes
P7	M2	9	25	M	No	No
P8	M2	5	*	*	No	No
P9	L2	12	29	H	No	No

* Unable to confirm data

The following section provides a characteristic profile and summary of each of the community college administrators (cases) that participated in the study. In order to protect anonymity of participants, alpha-numeric case labels (P1, P2, P3 ... P9) and non-gender specific pronouns (they and their) have been used in the profiles and throughout the remainder of this study.

Case Profiles

Case 1 (P1). P1 is a senior student affairs officer at a medium-sized institution considered to have a high degree of organizational coordination between academic and student affairs. P1 represents the newest senior administrator interviewed with only one year in the position. P1 has worked in the field of student affairs for 24 years in a variety of frontline and management positions. P1 has a master's degree and has cited no formal education related to program level assessment or evaluation. P1 demonstrated some lack of confidence related to assessment knowledge and skills, especially in terms of student learning outcomes. P1 identified concerted efforts made by leadership two years previously to introduce a student services assessment plan process. These cited efforts were corroborated by the analysis of provided documents, which confirmed initial planning efforts and some assessment of service outcomes, but a lack of focus on student learning outcomes assessment. P1 expressed a high level of concern that they are not doing more to implement assessment practice in student affairs at their institution. P1 explained that, as a leader, it should be a number one priority, but that the constant demand of more urgent activities relegates it to the bottom of the actual action agenda. P1 described a lack of an institutional culture of assessment, although identified some emerging successes and communicated optimism for future practice.

Case 2 (P2). P2 is the senior student affairs officer at a medium-sized institution considered to have a high degree of organizational coordination between academic and student affairs. P2 has responsibilities over both student and academic affairs units. P2 has held this senior level position for five years and has worked in student affairs for 25 years. P2 has a master's degree and is completing a doctoral program, but cited no formal education related to program level assessment or evaluation previous to doctoral research work. P2 spent two years as an administrator of academic units in higher education and during that time received specific training and professional guidance

related to assessment practice in instruction. P2 confidently described knowledge and understanding of assessment practice and the distinction between service and student learning outcomes. P2 expressed a good deal of cynicism about the current efforts of the student affair's profession to identify and assess student learning outcomes, which P2 considered an attempt for increased validation of student affairs within higher education. P2 labeled the institution's culture of assessment as low-medium to medium, although identified a slowly emerging assessment culture. Previous attempts to initiate a practice of program-level outcomes assessment were identified and corroborated by analysis of provided documents.

Case 3 (P3). P3 is the senior student affairs officer at a medium-sized institution and has served in that capacity for nine years, with a total of 20 years experience in student affairs. P3 described the institution as having a medium level of organization between academic and student affairs. P3 has a master's degree and is finishing up a doctoral degree in education. P3 identified having taken some courses in evaluation and research, but having no formal education in assessment, especially related to student learning outcomes. P3 described self-taught assessment knowledge and skills obtained by bringing in professionals from other institutions for training in order to establish assessment practice at their own institution. P3 described the most formalized and established assessment practice in student affairs of all cases in the study, although did not portray the institution as having a culture of assessment, citing student learning outcomes identification and measurement as particularly challenging. P3 provided documents that corroborated that the institution has an assessment model in place for student services and that assessment has primarily focused on service outcomes versus student learning outcomes. P3 also noted, and provided evidence through documents, that student affairs led the practice of program level assessment at the institution, but that they are now waiting for academic affairs to take the lead. P3 expressed some skepticism that the efforts of assessment practice are worth it.

Case 4 (P4). P4 is the senior student affairs officer at a large size institution. P4 has been in this role for two years and has also served as senior student affairs officer at other higher education institutions. P4 has leadership and faculty experience in academic affairs as well. P4 has an extremely strong foundation of knowledge and experience in

assessment in higher education, including student learning outcomes assessment in both academic and student affairs. P4 took an additional 18 credits of coursework for certification in institutional research and assessment as part of their doctoral program. Additionally, P4 received training and mentorship by experts in the field of assessment. P4 has significant professional experience with assessment practice in both siloed and integrated institutional models and has taught and trained on the topic in a variety of settings. P4 described their institution as having a medium level of organization between academic and student affairs. P4 described the institution as being slow to integrate the assessment of student learning outcomes in both academic and student affairs and described an emerging, but still infant assessment culture. P4 seemed to have a high level of confidence in their ability to lead the student affairs team in assessment practice and communicated a sense of urgency that assessment of student learning be done in order to continually improve the student experience and outcomes, as well as to improve institutional accountability. P4 provided documentation that corroborated their own knowledge, skill, and attitude toward outcomes assessment in student affairs, as well as very preliminary efforts towards staff training and assessment planning at their institution.

Case 5 (P5). P5 has been the senior student affairs officer at a large institution for approximately two and a half years. P5 has been in the field of student affairs for nine years. P5 assessed the degree of coordination between academic and student affairs at their institution at a medium level. P5 described very little formal education in the practice of assessment, although cited some coursework taken in their master's and doctoral programs. Training related to assessment in student affairs was described as primarily self-taught and reliant on such tools as the CAS Standards. Additionally, P5 participated on an Achieving the Dream team from which they learned much about operating from a data-driven and culture of evidence approach. P5 communicated a slight lack of confidence in their knowledge and skills with student learning outcomes in student affairs, identifying an imperative to integrate the practice in order to meaningfully improve the student experience and outcomes. P5 described their institution as having a very limited culture of assessment in student affairs due to various institutional factors and seemed discouraged by the lack of leadership and staff capacity to shift this reality.

P5 also clearly highlighted a contradiction brought up repeatedly in this study: the external factors of accreditation demands and outcomes-based funding are identified as both a support and a barrier to the practice of outcomes assessment in student affairs.

Case 6 (P6). P6 is the senior student affairs officer at a medium-sized institution. They have served in this role for seven years and have worked in the field of student affairs for 30 years. P6 described a medium level of organizational coordination between academic and student affairs, although offered multiple examples of coordinated planning and governance at the institution. P6 cited fairly extensive education and training related to student learning outcomes, assessment and program evaluation. The majority of exposure was through on the job experience utilizing and designing assessment tools to support program development in student affairs. P6 also identified multiple courses on research, evaluation, and assessment taken as part of graduate level degrees obtained. They communicated a high level of confidence in their knowledge of the practice and in their ability to lead the student affairs team towards a culture of evidence. P6 indicated an existing institutional culture increasingly focused on access to just-in-time data and evidence-based planning and decision-making. Documentation was provided that corroborated a strong institutional focus on access to data and on engaging staff and faculty in this area. While gaining momentum in these areas, P6 clarified that student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs is not yet in place at the institution.

Case 7 (P7). P7 has been the senior student affairs officer at a medium sized institution for nine years and been working in the field of student affairs for 25 years. They described the institution as having a medium level of organizational coordination with instruction and college services. P7 identified no formal education or training in assessment, rather relies on experience as a classroom instructor and limited professional association training. P7 characterized outcomes assessment as low on the priority list for their division, identifying multiple competing priorities. They also portrayed a lack of institutional expectation or support for assessing learning within student affairs. Additionally, P7 described a sense of isolation from peers and limited access to trained professional student affairs staff due to the institution location. P7 communicated a certain level of skepticism that the practice of learning outcomes assessment was useful

or valued and described maintaining a wait and see approach, as opposed to actively leading the student affairs division towards a culture of assessment.

Case 8 (P8). P8 has been the senior student affairs officer at their current institution for less than one year, however has served in this capacity at other institutions for a total of approximately five years. The institution is medium-sized. They have also been in leadership roles in instruction and have logged numerous years working in higher education. P8 described a strong desire to provide leadership in developing a culture of assessment and evidence-based decision-making at their institution. P8 described past executive level leadership as not placing emphasis on assessment and a current climate at a very rudimentary level of planning and customer satisfaction assessment. While P8 identified a unified approach at initiating institutional planning efforts with their academic affairs counterpart, it seemed the academic side was no further along the assessment practice path. P8 has had no formal education related to assessment and indicated learning on the job at a previous institution that utilized a comprehensive planning and learning assessment software program. P8 described self-directed learning primarily through reading and webinars. Despite minimal education and training, P8 was confident in their knowledge and skill to lead the student affairs division in this area. P8 emphasized that an anecdotal culture in student affairs was no longer acceptable and did not serve students well. They described a good deal of staff fear and resistance towards the practice, but communicated optimism that, “they’re coming along. They’re not as tentative as they were three months ago. They’re learning and we’re getting there”

Case 9 (P9). P9 is the most veteran senior student affairs officer of the cases in this study, with 12 years in the position at the current institution and nearly 30 years in the field of student affairs. They are at a large institution and described a high level of organizational coordination between student and academic affairs. They state, “Reality is we all ... I think we have developed a sense of a college vision as opposed to an individual division vision.” P9 completed a master’s degree in student affairs over 30 years ago and cited taking one course in assessment, with an emphasis on qualitative methods. They have had no additional formal education or training in assessment, rather learned through professional associations, on the job, and from mentorship of colleagues. P9 described a developing assessment practice at their institution, primarily driven by the

pressures of accreditation standards and led by academic affairs. P9 was very enthusiastic about the initiation of a program review process, which began for academic units but has expanded to include student affairs. They indicated it had created a “buzz” and staff was increasingly enthusiastic about the process. P9 credited individual staff members, with talent and interest, for introducing and fostering assessment practice within the student affairs division. They described pockets of good practice and clarified that instruction was not much further along than student affairs. P9 stressed that program level assessment was going to be very important to student affairs in the future as a way to verify outcomes and validate the multiple student success and retention initiatives their institution has implemented. They also described a state environment that was fomenting accountability and improved student outcomes. Their level of confidence in leading assessment in the student affairs division seemed moderate, with comments made about needing continued education on the practice.

Analysis

This section provides an overview of the specific steps the researcher took to analyze the data set using a thematic framework analysis approach and addresses the following two stages: (a) data management and (b) abstraction and interpretation.

Data Management

The following five recommended steps for data management in the thematic framework analysis approach were adhered to:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Construction of an initial thematic framework.
3. Indexing and sorting the data within the framework.
4. Reviewing data extracts for refining framework.
5. Summarizing and displaying the data in a thematic “Framework.” (Spencer et al., 2014)

The familiarization step was achieved substantially through the researcher’s own transcription of recorded interviews. The verbatim transcripts and all provided documents were initially considered in conjunction with the three guiding research questions. Initial topics or issues of relevance to the research questions were noted and logged in analytic memos. Next, the Case 1 verbatim transcript was reviewed and text or

data segments relevant to the research questions were labeled or coded. This resulted in approximately 140 discrete labels or codes, which were each written on an index card and then manually sorted, reviewed for duplication, and grouped into categories. The resulting 35 categories or sub-themes were then grouped into seven broader overarching themes. The result was an index of thematically mapped data or an *initial thematic framework* (step 2) that established the initial main themes and related sub-themes (see Appendix D). This level of in-vivo labeling or coding and then sorting the data was primarily descriptive, ascribing surface features, participants' own language, and first level analysis grounded in the data (Gibbs, 2007; Richards and Morse, 2014; Saldaña, 2013).

The next step involved indexing and sorting the raw data from the remaining eight cases using the initial thematic framework. Again, verbatim transcripts were reviewed and then labeled or coded, this time using the determined sub-themes from Case 1. As each case was reviewed, the thematic framework was adjusted to incorporate additional sub-themes that emerged and to refine sub-theme and theme language to best reflect the raw data and maintain participants' voice. The initial thematic framework was ultimately refined three times during this step of data management (step 4) and resulted in 38 categories or sub-themes (see Appendix D).

The fifth and final step of the data management stage was to use "Framework" to summarize and display the data in a manner that supported both within case and cross-case analysis (Spencer et al., 2014). Using an Excel spreadsheet, a matrix was created with an individual tab for each of the seven initial main themes, consisting of a column for each sub-theme and a row for each case. The researcher moved through each case, theme by theme, developing summary statements that captured the essence of the participant's meaning and language. In this way the researcher considered the context of each case deeply and the possible relationships between initial themes.

Abstraction and Interpretation

Following the data management stage, the researcher embarked on abstraction and interpretation of the organized data (Spencer et al., 2014), which incorporated description and explanation stages. The first step involved carefully analyzing the data summaries for each case within each sub-theme and uncovering elements – perceptions,

views, experiences, or behaviors - contained in the data. The resulting “detected elements” were then analyzed collectively across all cases and “key dimensions” were identified for each sub-theme (Spencer et al., 2014). Those key dimensions were then categorized within each major theme. At this point, the researcher found it instructive to pull out these newly created categories and their associated key dimensions and reconsider them holistically within the context of the study’s three guiding questions. The result was a refined thematic framework from which six overarching themes stemmed from 13 categories or sub-themes.

A final step of analysis was completed to confirm the final thematic framework and findings on a case-by-case basis. Each case was reviewed and re-labeled or re-coded using the 13 categories of the new thematic framework. Included in this step was additional review and coding of the supporting documents that were provided for five out of nine of the cases. In this way, the findings of the study were further verified. This final analysis demonstrated that the six major themes were clearly detected in all nine cases. Further, all 13 categories or sub-themes were detected in all but two instances across all cases. A crosswalk was generated to confirm results and illustrate this final step (see Appendix E). The thematic qualitative analysis approach effectively supported both a case-by-case and cross-case analysis of data.

Figure 4.1 on page 77 depicts the study’s final thematic framework and findings, expanded upon in the next section. The thematic qualitative analysis approach used for this study was an exhaustive approach which was time consuming and labor intensive, but had the benefit of being highly systematic, comprehensive, and transparent. Audit trails exist that serve to link all overarching themes and supporting categories back to the original data, supporting validity of the research findings.

Results

As a result of this exhaustive process of thematic qualitative analysis, the following thirteen (13) categories or sub-themes were identified: (a) internal factors that inhibit assessment, (b) external factors that inhibit assessment, (c) internal factors that facilitate assessment, (d) external factors that facilitate assessment, (e) perceived imperative, (f) pockets of success, (g) limited progress, (h) level of education and training, (i) attitude, (j) inadequate leadership actions, (k) lack of strategic direction,

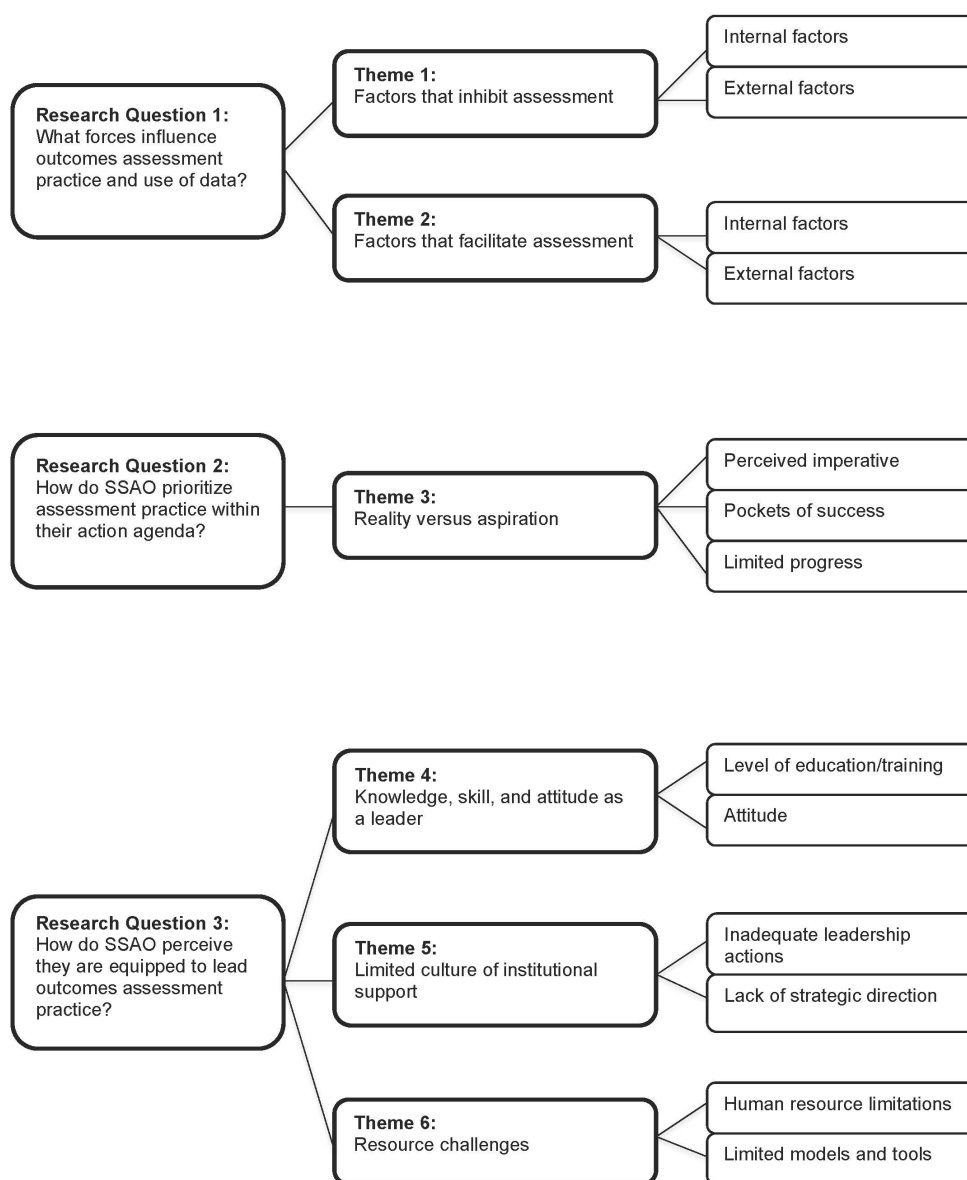


Figure 4.1: Final thematic framework and findings.

(l) human resource limitations, and (m) limited models and tools. The thirteen sub-themes led to the following six (6) overarching main themes:

1. Factors that inhibit assessment practice.
2. Factors that facilitate assessment practice.
3. Reality versus aspiration.
4. Knowledge, skill, and attitude of leaders.
5. Limited culture of institutional support.
6. Resource challenges.

The following describes the cross-case analysis results in answer to the three guiding research questions. Data supporting the overarching themes and sub-themes or categories associated with each research question are presented. Participants (cases) are identified by alpha-numeric codes (P1, P2, P3, ... P9) and non-gender specific pronouns (they and their) are used throughout this study in order to protect anonymity.

Research Question One

The first research question proposed in this study was: *What internal and external forces do senior student affairs officers believe are influencing the adoption of student learning outcomes assessment and use of learning outcomes data within student affairs at community colleges?* The rationale for this question was to illuminate why or why not assessment practice is taking hold in student affairs divisions at community colleges. A critical step to addressing the problem of establishing student learning outcomes assessment practice is to understand the driving forces that promote or detract from its institutional adoption and impact. The overarching themes of factors that inhibit assessment practice and factors that facilitate assessment practice serve to answer this research question. These two themes essentially presented themselves as flip sides of the same coin and are summarized as such in Table 4.2 on page 79. The key dimensions identified through analysis of the data are presented as facilitating or inhibiting factors. Specific data supporting these findings is presented in the following sections.

Factors that inhibit assessment. Throughout the interviews, multiple factors that inhibit assessment practice were identified directly or illuminated more indirectly within the broader interview data. This overarching theme is supported by the two sub-themes of internal and external factors that inhibit assessment.

Internal factors that inhibit assessment. As detailed in Table 4.2 below, participants identified multiple factors internal to the institution that inhibit assessment practice.

Table 4.2

Factors that Influence Assessment Practice and Use of Data

Type	Facilitators	Inhibitors
Internal	1. Leadership expectations/support	1. Lack of leadership expectations/support
	2. Shared language/definitions	2. Lack of shared language/definitions
	3. Inst. strategic planning/direction	3. Lack of inst. strategic planning/direction
	4. Support of institutional research	4. Overreliance on institutional research
	5. Following academic affairs lead	5. Lack of academic affairs role model
	6. Resources/potential of funding	6. Lack of resources
	7. Individual staff strengths	7. Lack of staff knowledge/skills
	8. Staff engagement/value of practice	8. Staff resistance/poor attitude/fear
	9. Enhancement of credibility/validity	9. Efforts discredited/invalidated
	10. Focus on stud. success/outcomes	
External	1. Accreditation expectations	1. Accreditation not holding accountable
	2. Potential of outcomes-based funds	2. Lack of outcomes-based funding model
	3. Potential of external accountability	3. Lack of ext. accountability/state system
	4. Increased expectation in field	4. Lack of models for practice in field

Some administrators identified a lack of institutional leadership expectation and support. P8 described how their past president did not prioritize efforts, “There wasn’t a focus on those kind of things from him. And when there’s not a focus from the top, people just go their way and do what they want to do kind of thing.” P4 noted that it’s a barrier when, “you have a vice president or if you have other administrators that don’t see the value also. Because language does matter and seats at the table matter also.” P2 and P1 noted that they themselves as leaders were not putting enough value on the practice when they explained that “I don’t think I’ve necessarily gone back to the teams with the assignment again” (P2) and “I don’t think there are external factors getting in our way. I think we are in our own way” (P1). P7 was particularly emphatic about the lack of leadership expectation as a barrier. They said, “There would be an expectation. The president

would come to my office and say, hey, by the end of the month or the end of the year I want all this stuff done.”

Similarly, participants described how efforts to identify and assess learning outcomes in student affairs are often discredited or ignored by institutional partners. P2 said,

Well, perspective from instruction that there's no validity to it. ... I would say we're not always included in the assessment meeting. It's like they forget to invite us to the party. So they know it's important because they know we have to document it, but from the instructional perspective, sometimes they don't think about it.

P4 noted, “I would doubt that instruction here, generally speaking, sees any value of assessing in student affairs. So we have some education to do.” P7 identified a lack of institutional value placed on student learning in general and student services contributions to it specifically:

So, there's something about the value of this work too that is a barrier. People don't expect it of you. They don't talk to you like you know anything about students. And there's a culture in student services that's really broad ... It's just interesting that our knowledge isn't valued and so then that doesn't get transferred into measuring our knowledge. Why would you measure? Who cares? Just throw a little salt in there. That's all you need. Who cares if it's a pinch? Or a quarter teaspoon. Don't make too much for god's sake ... but the instructional areas haven't embraced the idea. They're having a hard time understanding that they could have a student learning outcome in a meeting on its own.

They went on to explain,

There's cultural barriers. It's not been expected of student affairs. Board members don't talk to us about the same things that they talk to instructional folks about ... There are all kind of little language barriers like that in the institution that don't put the student first ... The institution doesn't talk about it. The institution doesn't value it.... That has to turn upside down before I feel confident and valued ... no that's not the word ... in spending my time creating learning outcomes for students. I just don't think anybody ... I'm not going to say cares ... but it sometimes feels like that's just not what the institution is about sometimes.

Other participants identified the internal barrier of a lack of shared language and definitions related to student learning outcomes assessment. Participants described challenges with consistent definitions at the community college system level, the student affairs level, and internally in their institutions. P1 questioned, “How do we

communicate a culture of a shared language? We don't take the time to do shared meaning, shared conversations, how are we measuring effectiveness if we don't know what effective means? We don't have a common definition of effective." P4 described the importance of speaking the same assessment language from institution to institution and the confusion over terms of assessment over the years. P6 described the specific challenge community colleges have due to the multiple variables and lack of institutional control over them.

An additional barrier to assessment practice that came up in the interviews is the lack of institutional strategic planning and direction on which to align student services outcomes and assessment work. While many individual or "micro," as P4 labeled them, assessment efforts were identified, a lack of intentional strategy of efforts was evident.

P4 said, "We haven't mapped them intentionally anywhere." P1 described it this way:

That's not assessment. It is continually improving things, but it's not assessment. So I think there's a strong sense as a culture to make things better for our students. What we don't do is set something from the outset, determine how we're going to measure it, measure it, think about it, and then make changes ... So, I think as leadership we need to be finding a tool, developing a strategy to communicate, and then you have to just keep doing it and check in and make sure we're holding each other accountable ... we're kind of doing it but not in a ... I don't think in a holistic consistent way. ... We're just not necessarily strategic in putting it together in a plan of some sort.

P3 described a "whack-a-mole" culture at their institution, in which there is a difficult time saying no to the "sexy" initiatives and projects that pop up rather than being "more of a planning driven institution." They explained,

We're going to make sure it's manageable for people and it can be ingrained into a routine part of what they do then we need to provide the time and space to do that. How we carry that forward and systematize that to the rest, we'll see. ... We don't have a strategic plan. The institution didn't have a strategic plan until last year ... And that's what we struggled with for a lot of years, is that we didn't have this high level institutional strategic plan. We had a student services start of one, we had our priorities, and we had our department assessment plans but nothing to connect all of that in between.

They went on to describe discouragement about student services leading the charge of assessment at their institution without clear direction from the college:

I realized we were all tired of redesigning a model based on the institution changing direction again. We've been doing assessment and adopted it wholesale

for a lot of years. I just said, you know what, stop. Keep doing the assessment stuff informally and the things that help you drive your daily decisions, but we're not going to try and make it fit this model. We're not going to do this. We're not going to do that large of piece until we get more direction from the institution.

Dominant themes related to internal barriers to assessment practice were a lack of staff knowledge and skills, as well as general staff resistance to and fear about the process. All but two participants explicitly described frontline staff that is ill prepared to take on assessment work due to lack of education, training, and background. Some identified lower levels of higher education in general, with most describing little exposure to teaching and learning techniques, learning assessment and evaluation, and even a lack of theoretical grounding for work in student development. P5 captured this common theme:

So very, very surface level because I think that the institution's maturity around learning outcomes in student affairs and student services areas is very, very minimal. ... We don't have individuals that have high-level critical thinking skills, have learned assessment, have learned outcomes – and really understand that process – makes it extremely challenging to teach that and I feel like the depth that we get to go into is very, very surface level, based off the audience that you're trying to teach.

Participants lamented the lack of staff professional development opportunities available to remedy staff knowledge and skill deficiencies, though some cited staff willingness to learn. Others described a high level of staff fear and resistance to the practice of assessment, in part due to fear of the unknown. Again, P5 explained,

I think the overall culture around it is that everybody's trying to avoid having to do it and since I think we are still very fundamental on our understanding and our process around this, I think it makes it even easier for people to shy away from wanting to do it. Because it's this unknown. What's this going to look like? What's this going to mean?

Participants used terms such as “alien language and process,” “scary,” and “overwhelming” to describe the attitude of some staff related to learning outcomes and assessment. They also described a fear of the consequences of assessing the outcomes of their service areas or programs. P4, P5, and P8 described a fear of staff that assessment may lead to discovery that what they are doing is not essential or that they could lose their job. Others indicated staff are set in their ways and do not perceive an imperative to

change what they have always done. As P2 said, “Either they weren’t paying attention or it doesn’t hit them because maybe it’s not something they think about ... somehow or another they didn’t get the memo.”

While student affairs staff ability and attitude were identified as a barrier to assessment practice, a commonly held view by participants was that their instructional colleagues were not much further along. Although not explicitly identified as a barrier to their practice, the lack of a role model for assessment in academic affairs within their institutions was clear. P1 identified, “I would say too from the instructional side we were slow on the instructional side to do student learning outcomes.” P4 described they may not see the value of assessment on the instructional side yet at their institution. They said,

And a lot of our instructors don’t have an idea about how to do assessment either. Because they’re not teachers. This is the biggest problem in higher education ... But we hire content experts and we don’t expect them to have any teaching skills. And then we don’t train them to be teachers. And assessment is a piece of that. Most of our academic colleagues need as much basics on assessment as the student affairs practitioners ... And its like, oh you all aren’t really that far are you? All right, we can probably ramp up a lot quicker than you can.

P3 clearly identified that student affairs had a model of outcomes assessment in place long before their instructional counterparts. P5, P7, and P9 all described academic affairs units struggling with integration of program level student learning outcomes assessment, despite access to support resources and accelerating demands of accreditation.

Lack of resources in terms of personnel and time, was identified as another significant barrier to assessment practice. A dominant comment across interviews was that administrators and their staff consistently prioritize assessment low on their list. Participants described multiple competing priorities that push assessment to the “back burner.” It was clear that the administrators interviewed desired or felt an imperative to make assessment practice a priority, but the day-to-day demands on their time do not allow it. As P3 stated,

I think our barriers are the time and space to do it and the resources to really do it right ... So time and space is really to me the biggest barrier. People know it’s a priority but so are five hundred other things.

Participants identified a lack of personnel in general as a barrier, as well as lack of staff specifically trained to support assessment work. P4 said, “Because most of us don’t have student affairs assessment experts attached to our units.” And P5 described the college hiring an assessment coordinator that “had no idea how to help us” in student services. Even those participants that identified spending time on assessment efforts have to balance demands. As P6 said, “There’s a lot of tension between where I put my data time.”

A less commonly mentioned inhibiting factor related to assessment practice was an overreliance on the institution’s institutional research department. Participants described staff believing that assessment for their programs means asking institutional research for data. One participant indicated that, “I don’t know that that’s where assessment should be led from.” Another participant described their institutional research department as being stretched thin and that they could not rely on them for data other than what already existed.

External factors that inhibit assessment. As detailed in Table 4.2, participants also identified four factors external to their institutions that serve to inhibit assessment practice. Participants across this study painted a clear picture that while accreditation may be driving institutional work on assessment in general, the external accrediting agency is not holding student affairs to the same standard as instruction. As P2 reflected,

I’m trying to think about the visits we’ve had from accreditation. They haven’t emphasized it. I think what they’ve emphasize is capacity. Like do you have the right number of people to serve the students that are coming? And that’s the conversation we get stuck in, right? They’re interested in looking at quality output ... I mean they don’t ask it. They’re nominal. It’s almost as though they know we need to do it and so they ask certain questions, but they’re not digging very hard.

Participants described accrediting teams wanting to see something from student affairs, but not reaching the level of expectation as in instruction. P5 noted,

The accreditors like to hear that you’ve been doing some assessment, but it’s never like in instructional – you have to assess your areas, you have to develop learning outcomes for student services, that’s just not something ... we know we should, but we’re also not really been asked to ... I’m experiencing they like to see that we’re doing something, but it isn’t required. Just like in instruction, it’s required. You need to be doing reviews of your areas – whether they’re effective reviews or not never really comes into question – it’s just that you’re doing it. In student affairs it just doesn’t seem like we have that similar pressure.

Other participants described accreditation expectations as being “somewhat random” (P6), “softer” on student affairs (P9), and that “how it drives down to student affairs hasn’t felt important” (P7). There was a strong sense that a greater expectation from the external accrediting body would support their practice. As P5 said, “I think another pressure that would be helpful as well, too, is from the accrediting bodies to put more pressure on institutions for student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs.” And P8 indicated falling short of compliance as a motivator, “I would say dings are good because it motivates ... when the law says you have to do it, you’re more focused on doing it and sometimes it takes that to get the work done.”

Another external factor that serves to inhibit assessment practice is the lack of a real outcomes-based funding model in the state. Many participants noted that outcomes-based funding would have a significant impact on institutional learning outcomes assessment, but that the reality is they have not seen it come to fruition in Oregon. P1 laughed, “Well we thought it would be performance funding, but I hear that that might not happen. Outcomes based funding, right? Certainly would have been an external factor, I still don’t know if that’s happening or not.” And P5 noted that outcomes-based funding was a significant external facilitating factor, but then added ...

Well, I would probably just add on the outcomes-based funding as an external, it hasn’t happened yet. And I think that is one of the little cushions that we have right now. It’s well, yes, we’re getting serious about it, and you can see the numbers have grown over the past couple of years of completers and some of the areas ... but I would say until it’s a real deal – until you don’t get \$2 million of your budget one year because you didn’t do this - I think that everybody is just kind of thinking it will go away.

Similarly, some participants in this study identified external accountability, especially at the state level, as a facilitating factor but were also quick to add there is no state system directing the efforts. P4 explained, “And there isn’t one tried and true, this is the way you do it. And it doesn’t mean the same to everybody. And that makes it difficult and we don’t have a system that tells us you have to do it this way.” P7 described cynicism about the idea of external accountability measures, “I heard more skepticism than support. Rather than an acknowledgment that it’s a good idea and wouldn’t it be great if we actually did this, the conversation went to, really, where are they going to get that money?”

A number of participants mentioned the lack of models and tools in the field of student affairs in general. P2 explained deficiencies as compared to instruction, “I mean across the field I think there’s a lack of awareness of how to do it correctly. There’s a lack of tools and resources. There’s definitely a dearth of it in student affairs as compared to instruction.” P4 described a long history of student affairs particular struggle with learning outcomes assessment, “I think back a decade ago we were still trying to even define an outcome from an objective. We were just starting the performance indicator language. And what’s a goal? And so I think we’re past that. I think we have this pretty well delineated, which is a step in the right direction.” P5 lamented a lack of current models and guidance related to student learning outcomes,

Where nobody really has – here’s the perfect model and here’s how it really works ... But I think the missing piece is that student learning outcomes assessment is just – there isn’t a model that everybody just goes to ... Because I just think the maturity level of student affairs and really getting serious about assessing just wasn’t there. And I feel like we’re closer to that place, but I think everybody is kind of looking for who’s going to be the big role model and tell us how we’re supposed to do this ... when it comes to actually building learning outcomes for student affairs, I think it’s a skill that I don’t know who has an expert level skill set in doing that. And I think that is probably one of the biggest reasons it doesn’t go as far as it could.

In summary, this study revealed nine internal and four external factors that inhibit integration of assessment practice and use of assessment data in student affairs, as perceived by the senior student affairs officer participants.

Factors that facilitate assessment. Just as factors that inhibit assessment were identified, the inverse – or facilitating factors - was identified through both direct and indirect interpretation of interview data. This overarching theme is supported by the two sub-themes of internal factors and external factors that facilitate assessment as evidenced by the data.

Internal factors that facilitate assessment. As detailed in Table 4.2, participants identified ten internal factors that facilitate assessment. The expectation and support of leadership was identified as a significant motivating force behind assessment practice. Participants identified executive level leadership support within the context of progress made at their institutions. Leaders were described as “really supportive” and “really good about asking for data” (P1). Efforts were seen as “driven more at a leadership level” (P3)

and that “they understand from the leadership that assessment is important. ... that it’s being expected all the way across the institution so it doesn’t feel like somebody’s not doing something” (P6). P4 described the importance of leaders integrating assessment expectations across the institution,

It’s important to strategically place people who can articulate at an institution level so that it’s not just student affairs trying to do this but it just becomes part of the fabric – oh, we’re all going to do assessment. And the academic side understands what and why we do assessment as well. So you’ve got to hit both.

The particular background of leaders was noted by P9 when describing support from the president in shifting towards an assessment climate, “But, so, I think our climate ... you add onto it that we now have a president that comes from a business background. Her bent is everything needs to be data informed.”

Participants also identified their own leadership actions as having a positive impact on assessment practice. P2 described,

Internally, what drives it is the appropriate student services leadership at the institution and mostly that would be at my level and my associate deans ... Ensuring integration with the rest of campus so that others understand and value it. Both from a service perspective, as well as student learning outcomes perspective.

And P6 discussed his management actions emphasizing outcomes assessment within student affairs,

Within the management team people will consistently want to look at data and there are those that have access to a lot more than others so they will bring that to the table. When we’re making assignments or something or someone has an idea, what’s the data piece that’s going to say ... what’s your goal and how do you measure it? And it’s not about measuring whether you did it, it’s a measure of what was the impact of it.

Finally, P9 affirmed his messaging around assessment as, “It has been during the last year that at every one of those meetings that that’s been my focus, is talking about assessment.”

Leadership is inextricably tied to the facilitating factor of institutional planning and direction. As P3 explained, “So to me, that’s the biggest internal factor – is having the leadership to do it in a planful and intentional way ... We need that internal stability and that internal roadmap to make it an inherent part of what people do in their daily jobs

and someone to shepherd that through.” P3 was particularly vocal about the need for clear institutional direction to support student affairs efforts. They described putting their long-standing assessment practice in student affairs on hold until a cohesive institutional plan could be developed,

And what was interesting is we said we’re going to put this on hold until the institution says what are we doing collectively at this institutional across instruction and all administrative units – student affairs or otherwise ... if we’re going to do this right we’re going to do it systematically ... But now that we have something larger to aim for at the institutional level it won’t make it so nebulous or undefined or give us some level of boundaries to work with anymore ... So my assumption is those conversations or those documents will evolve to more the assessment piece once we get into that campus wide focus ... we can get into a place where we’re adopting a routine part of what we do across the institution.

P4 described the importance of tying efforts to institutional learning outcomes, “I think it’s a mistake if we do not map in some way to institutional learning outcomes.” They go on to explain,

It’s important to strategically place people who can articulate at an institution level so that its not just student affairs trying to do this but it just becomes part of the fabric – oh, we’re all going to do assessment. And the academic side understands what and why we do assessment as well. So you’ve got to hit both. ... This works. Let’s use it. It helps to build that institutional culture. We can map to it.

This idea of student affairs being able to “map to” broader institutional goals was expressed by P6 as a facilitating factor. They said, “internal support is a clear set of strategic goals that student affairs areas can clearly identify with and find ways that they can contribute to.” Multiple participants discussed planning and budgeting efforts taking off at their institutions and supporting outcomes assessment efforts in student affairs as a result.

Some participants also noted shared language and definitions around assessment as a facilitating factor. Primarily this centered on a common understanding of assessment terminology in the field of student affairs, such as “Understanding and defining terms appropriately so people can actually do the work. Differentiating service based from student learning outcomes based outcomes” (P2). Participants also emphasized, however, the importance of a shared language with their instructional counterparts. As

P3 asserted, “you gotta tie it to instruction speak in order to really have it make sense.”

P4 also described the importance of student affairs speaking instructional lingo,

I’ve found that faculty don’t speak our language and we don’t necessarily speak their language and they’re not likely to adapt so the more that we can speak their language the better. And so I think having that perspective helps. I think where we’re aligned the most is we have the same common goal; We want students to be successful ... And having the right people there who can, again, talk the same language.

P7 described “all kind of little language barriers” that exist at their institution that serve to not put the student first.

Multiple participants referenced their academic counterparts as serving in a lead role for assessment efforts. As P1 described, “I think it’s sort of a natural progression that we have gone from the instructional side to their student outcomes and now we’re starting to follow.” And P3 again, emphasized the need for student affairs to speak the same language as instruction, “It’s highly expected on the instructional side. It’s routine for a lot of faculty in their daily classes, in their daily work in that sense. But in order to have that equity and credibility, I think ... with instruction we need to be able to speak their speak.” P3 also described the strong potential of program reviews, born in instruction, to serve as a model of self-assessment in student affairs. Most participants described movement towards program reviews in student affairs and cited instructional efforts as serving as role model for these efforts. Participants described that assessment efforts come easier to instruction. P6 reflected on what student affairs can learn from instruction, “Are there things from faculty that we can learn? ... So we’ve got a pretty active and very faculty driven outcome ... really focused on the assessment part of outcomes piece.” Similarly, P7 shared how instruction helped out student affairs, “And we had a couple of faculty members on that board that helped us build that rubric. It comes more naturally to them, I think.” Finally, P9 confirmed that it was the instructional-related units within student affairs at their institution that led the way towards outcomes assessment practice.

Another less mentioned factor that has facilitated assessment practice in student affairs is the strengths of individual staff members within the division. P1 and P2 identified a couple of key individuals at their institution as being the driving force for

their outcomes assessment efforts. They identified that these individuals add the “capacity” and “capability” and that they simply “made the time” to engage and provide direction for others. Similarly, P9 identified multiple individual staff members and administrators that came to the institution with a particular skill set and passion for assessment work. They described specific, tangible processes and tools that they introduced to others, as well as the strong influence they have had on efforts in student affairs assessment.

More generally speaking, staff engagement and perceived value of assessment efforts was identified as a facilitating factor. As P2 stated, “If you don’t find resonance, than you don’t want to keep doing it.” These leaders identified their efforts to meaningfully engage staff in the practice. P3 described their encouragement and that many staff members are showing an interest,

My goal is to make it an enjoyable part of what someone does. Or they see the value in it. That it becomes a routine part of their daily job. But that means getting to a model that is manageable... yea, I think people would like to step back and say what’s our plan? And there’s probably one or two that we are going to have to pull along, but for the most part, yea, I think people will really like that space to do that.

P4 described the importance of getting “everybody on board” and articulating to staff why the effort is important. They described their own journey to embracing assessment and bringing others along,

But then I realized that information is power and this gave me the power to make better decisions and we’re in an information culture so I need to know how to do this. And it made me do my job better and that was great. I love that ... And getting many people involved is I think crucial. And celebrate it. And share it. I think that’s the other thing we don’t do a good job of. We don’t celebrate how good we are.

P6 described their efforts and the shifting culture towards valuing data and assessment-informed practice at their institution,

We do better and we need to do better about actually putting data in front of people more often ... part of the culture change is trying to get people used to looking at it and understanding it ... so a lot of practices are being put into place based on what does the data say. Let’s try it. The data’s going to change, we’re going to watch it ... and they value that. So they know that’s helping them make their work better. I think another shift in culture is that we’ve tried to become really transparent on a lot of ... so the growth of dashboards has been phenomenal

... And they are saying I want to have something that gives me that kind of feedback because then I can actually make improvements that affect students every day. They can see the parts that they can contribute to.

Other participants described that staff were seeing that the results of assessing their programs or service areas were not negative, as they had imagined they would be. P5 described an openness to the process based on the observed experience of others, “I think the reality is that we’ve had some success and it wasn’t that painful ... there were painful moments ... but I think people actually see that we didn’t eliminate any positions or cancel a department, because that was a big fear of folks.” Similarly, P9 described the initial dread of their staff to participate in the program review process and the shift to an attitude of, “it’s the best thing we’ve ever done,” upon completion.

Staff engagement and value may be linked to the facilitating factor of a focus on student success and the improvement of student outcomes, a key intention of student affairs services and programming. Most participants in the study identified the ultimate goal of assessment as improving the student experience and impact of services on student success. Some noted that they are driven to assess by external forces such as accreditation, but that “we should be doing it anyway” (P1). P1 went on to explain,

If we don’t know what we are expecting students to do or know then how we can improve our services to them? So we have to start with something or else we just keep doing the same activity over and over and over again with no impact for change. And we know our students aren’t staying. They aren’t graduating. So that’s our role. So how do we make that change?

Similarly, P3 noted, “We’ve used accreditation as an excuse to do assessment, rather than assessment is the right thing to do and we just happen to call out certain information to meet accreditation standards.” Multiple participants spoke of integrating assessment because it is the right thing to do for students. They described this in terms of “trying to do better work,” “helping student learn and achieve better,” “meaningful interactions,” “better retention and persistence,” “value to the students’ experience,” and “it matters from an equity and social justice perspective.” As P4 summarized,

It’s about trying to do better work. And help students learn and achieve better ... And so it’s so crucial because our assessment is really about improvement. Improving what we’re doing. Accountability is there but that’s not our motivating force. It’s we want to do better. We want a better meter of students needs. We

want to serve them better. We want to use our money better. Whatever the case may be.

Being able to link improved student outcomes as a result of student affairs interventions emerged as another facilitating factor of assessment. Participants described the imperative of enhancing student affairs credibility and validity and the usefulness of assessment to that end. P2 described this in a cynical way – that student affairs professionals feel compelled to “mimic” the language of student learning outcomes in their work in order to “ensure that people validate them” and their existence within the context of higher education. They described it as student affairs practitioners driving their sense of legitimacy around their work. P3 supported this concept and expressed, “But, in order to have that equity ... credibility, I think ... with instruction we need to be able to speak their speak ... I think from that credibility standpoint student affairs folks across the U.S. need to get stronger at it.” P8 identified the need to justify their existence through assessment, “It’s like if we can’t justify using the data while we’re here, then why should we be here. And sometimes that’s the only way to get people to understand why we’re doing this work.” P9 identified this area as a critical rationale for assessment:

Number one - and this goes back to an old tape of mine - but the validity of student services ... and also verifying for everyone that is working so hard on academic advising that it really is worth it ... We’ve put a lot of investment in it, financially. So I think that’s another validity piece. We have to report back ... to legitimize student services.

Other participants articulated that assessment of student learning outcomes allow service areas to demonstrate their effectiveness and be more accountable. As P4 described,

It’s important because we still need some accountability on what we’re doing – and seeing if what we’re doing works. And that is where we started. We have been doing that forever, because we’ve been doing evaluations and student satisfaction stuff for a half a century. But, especially satisfaction, doesn’t tell us a whole lot. And then the student learning outcomes – I’m really a proponent if your college has institutional outcomes you assess those. Because I think that lends credibility to what we do in the out-of-class. And we have to capture the uniqueness of what we do ... in tight resource times ... demonstrating our importance is vital. We can’t do it through anecdotal evidence anymore.

P6 agreed that focusing on student outcomes, rather than satisfaction, is the key, “We can play with satisfaction all the time. But students being happy with one service and less with another service in your department isn’t going to get you more money.” They add, “And I think we’re getting to the point where we know that just being busy and counting stuff doesn’t mean it’s worth anything more. It just means you’re really busy. And are you busy doing something of value?”

Having adequate resources, in addition to the idea that assessment of student outcomes could lead to additional resources, emerged as another facilitating factor. Participants identified that having dedicated time and space for assessment is critical. The need for human resources that have an adequate skill set in assessment practice was also identified. The link between assessment and the potential of additional or ongoing funding was identified by a number of participants. P5 noted an institutional shift in their budget process, which now links a body of evidence to justifying service areas’ existence and growth. P6 echoed this, describing their emerging budget allocation process:

If you’re going to do this then you’re going to come back and tell us how it’s impacting the metrics that we find most valuable. And if you’re just doing something that’s interesting, we don’t give you any backing for it ... And again it’s being clear we’re not giving performance packages based on service level metrics, its going to be student progress outcome metrics. That’s what will get the money so we’re not spending a lot of time on student satisfaction data collection during assessment.

P8 and P9 discussed similar internal funding drivers linked to demonstration of student outcomes related to service areas and initiatives.

A couple participants noted the positive impact of their institutional research (IR) departments on their assessment practice. P1 described their IR department and leader as being instrumental in changing the culture of data-informed decision making at their institution, including in student affairs. P6 noted “another internal support is a really solid research office.”

External factors that facilitate assessment. As detailed in Table 4.2, participants also identified four external factors that facilitate assessment practice. Every participant in the study identified accreditation expectations as a significant external facilitating factor. It was the most common response to the direct question of what, externally, supports assessment practice. Participants described accreditation as “driving” the

process, that it “sort of forces you more,” that they are “stuck in the mode that accreditation is the driving force,” and “number one, accreditation.” Participants described their assessment efforts – program reviews, assessment plans and reports, etc. – as being directly linked to satisfying accreditation requirements. While most were quick to add that the real reason for assessing outcomes was to improve quality of services and student experience, the driving force for prioritizing the effort was identified as accreditation. Most participants identified a lack of genuine accountability historically enforced by the accrediting body within student affairs; however, there was a sense that this is changing. P6 described a common perspective shared in this study:

I think the shift is coming. I feel like here the shift is coming in that as we’re finally recognizing that accreditation is really serious this time, instead of kind of serious, really serious ... now that we’ve been at it for thirty years ... that assessment is critical and that learning outcomes are absolutely vital ... We need to do it because the institution for accreditation needs to show how all aspects are working in alignment with one another ... And accreditation being serious about, you’ve got to show how well you are really having a quality environment for students – all the way around – not just in the classroom.

Another external facilitating factor identified by participants is the potential of an outcomes-based funding model being applied to community colleges in the state where this study was located. P3 commented, “Key performance measures and potential for outcomes based funding. That will force some of that to happen.” And P1 stated that outcomes-based funding “certainly would have been an external factor. I still don’t know if that’s happening or not.” P4 described it as, “We started to see this push for performance based funding and common ways to measure and compare. So we saw the proliferation of all these external forces. Which are still with us today.” P5 described the potential of state performance based funding enthusiastically, identifying that many states have such models in place and that it would ultimately benefit higher education and indeed, has already had an impact on assessment practice in student affairs:

So, I think from an external perspective that supports it, outcomes based funding is one of the biggest keys. I think the reality of not just paying for people in seats but actually what they’re doing while they’re in those seats - and what you’re doing for them as well - really kind of forces us to look at what happens ... I’d say the outside, obviously outcomes-based funding is probably the – in my opinion - the single largest factor. I think if it weren’t for outcomes-based funding, we likely would still be dabbling in some form of learning outcomes

assessment, but I think this has kind of forced it more so, because all of the easy fixes are gone ... I really attribute the shift to an outcomes-based funding model as the reason why we're gaining more ground around assessment.

Related to the idea of outcomes-base funding, is the concept of external accountability in general as a motivating force behind assessment practice. Participants identified a heightened sense of accountability related to the work of higher education, both at the state and national level. The "achievement compacts," an Oregon state education initiative with the intent to demonstrate progress towards identified institutional outcomes, were cited numerous times. Participants described these, and other general ideas of accountability to external entities, as important drivers of assessment practice. A less frequently shared idea was the potential benefit of state standards for assessment in student affairs. As P5 stated, "I think that if we had something consistent that would probably be helpful." Others identified the broader concept of the national completion agenda and imperative to improve student persistence in higher education as a supporting factor to operate in a more data-informed manner. P8 described accountability in terms of the state return on investment, stating, "If we have everyone in the room meeting for one hour, this is how much it costs the college. This is how much it costs the state of Oregon. It's an investment. We're just not spending money, we're investing money so we have to do something worthwhile."

The final external facilitating factor noted in this study is the increased expectation of learning outcomes assessment in the field of student affairs. Participants indicated seeing increased presence of the topics of program evaluation and measurement, student learning outcomes, and outcomes-based assessment at professional conferences and within professional organizations. As P1 said, "I think when you are out at conferences and things and people are talking about it, that becomes external support. I think it becoming a topic at conferences is external support." P2 confirmed, "It is a substantive conversation with a body of work behind it, a body of professionals behind it ... so that was an external driver, or our own sense of self saying 'we should.'" Another participant (P4) noted the "student learning outcomes movement" in general as an external factor. P9 emphasized the saturation of the topic, "It's a topic every single time I go somewhere."

Summary of findings related to research question one. Upon thematic qualitative analysis of the data, this study identified the two overarching themes of factors that inhibit assessment practice and factors that facilitate assessment practice within student affairs divisions at community colleges. Fourteen discrete internal and external factors were identified that facilitate practice and thirteen discrete internal and external factors were identified that inhibit practice, based on the perception of the individual administrators that participated in this study. A summary of results is found in Table 4.2 on page 79.

Research Question Two

The second research question posed for this study was: *How do community college senior student affairs officers prioritize assessment of student learning outcomes within their student affairs action agenda?* As Bresciani (2006) and others asserted, a barrier to assessment practice is the lack of importance placed on it by institutional leadership. The rationale for this question is that institutions and individuals act on what they value and response to this question served to shed light on how important assessment practice is to student affairs administrators and, subsequently, how they are prioritizing and accomplishing efforts in this area. This research question is answered by the overarching theme of reality versus aspiration.

Reality versus aspiration. Results of this study presented a complex response to this research question. It can best be summarized by a conflict between a strong desire to implement and sustain an outcomes assessment practice in student affairs with the reality of a lack of demonstrated progress. The categories or sub-themes of (a) perceived imperative, (b) pockets of success, and (c) limited progress fed into and supported the generation of this overarching finding.

Perceived imperative. Across the board, participants communicated a strong sense of imperative to assess student learning and achievement outcomes within their divisions. Key elements that emerged from the data included a sense of accountability as leaders to integrate assessment practice, the potential negative impact of not assessing outcomes in their division, the potential for student success and service improvements, the desire for continuous improvement of program and service areas, and the imperative to enhance credibility and justify the work of student affairs.

In general, participants communicated that assessment was simply the right thing to do. Indicators of this came from such statements as, “I think it’s very important,” “I think we all know it’s the right thing to do,” “It’s what do we need to demonstrate our effectiveness, so it’s what we’re going to do,” “It’s one of these things that we are supposed to be doing if we’re not,” and “But of course it’s important, so we have to do the work.” P5 asserted, “So, I think it’s hugely important. I think that that’s probably one of my biggest struggles is emphasizing how important it truly is.”

Some participants communicated the imperative a bit begrudgingly, such as, “we don’t get to not do it anymore” and “I think the barebones piece is that you gotta do it and that you gotta tie it to instruction speak in order to really have it make sense” and “I think it’s got a long history of trying to be important. I think we’ve tried to make it important.” P7 communicated the sense of challenge of placing importance on assessment when the institution may not value it:

So for me, it’s a ... oh yeah, that’s right, that’s really important. I know it is. I mean I believe in it and I know that it is. It’s hard to concentrate on. The institution doesn’t talk about it. The institution doesn’t value it.

And P3 struggled with their doubts about the impact of the practice, “So I’ve got to find something as the chief student services person to tip this in the right direction on assessment. And deal with my own, perhaps, concerns about whether or not it can be an effective tool.” P1 communicated their fear of the impact of not assessing program outcomes:

Part of my fear is that we are trying so much and we are not assessing it and that we will not know what’s impacting the success of students and that we’ll just keep doing things we shouldn’t be doing, or worse, not doing other things we should be doing to help student success.

Other participants identified the imperative in terms of a strong sense of wanting to make things better for students. P4 said, “We need to think and understand what students are experiencing better.” P5 communicated the importance of assessment leading to action, “I knew the importance of getting through the process so we could modify, adapt, make changes, start practicing differently.” They went on to explain, “You actually have to do something different. You need to learn about why what you’re doing isn’t working and actually learn something from that to make it work better.” Similarly, P8 stated,

We want to make sure that what we're doing has value and that it retains the students and supports students in achieving his or her goal. It's so important that we measure how we do what we do. We don't know if what we're doing is effective unless we measure that.

Finally, participants identified the imperative of assessment practice to enhance the credibility of student affairs. As identified previously, P3 communicated the imperative of assessment for the profession when stating, "I think from that credibility standpoint student affairs folks across the U.S. need to get stronger at it." P4 urged that we (student affairs) "have to get better at it" and "we have to capture the uniqueness of what we do. And I think that continues to become, in tight resource times, demonstrating our importance is vital. We can't do it through anecdotal evidence anymore." P6 identified a motivation in the field to be respected like faculty, "that we're teachers ... we're not just administrators or we're not just service people. That we're teachers." P8 stressed the imperative they see, "To me, it's 100% important. It's like if we can't justify using the data while we're here, then why should we be here. And sometimes that's the only way to get people to understand why we're doing this work." Finally, P9 summarized the importance of verifying that the interventions of student affairs at their institution have made a difference. They predicted:

Assessment is going to be really important for us – program assessment rather than student assessment. Program assessment is going to be very important for us from the perspective of maintaining it and selling it to the faculty and administrators and for the frontline staff who have to do it.

Pockets of success. While no cases in this study identified an established "culture of assessment" in their divisions, all identified efforts and pockets of success. The implementation of program reviews, largely modeled after academic efforts, was a dominant theme in this study. Participants identified greater success with identification and assessment of program or service outcomes as opposed to student learning outcomes across the service areas. Examples of assessment efforts leading to some level of unit, division, or institutional decision-making were offered. Some participants asserted an "emerging" culture of assessment in certain areas, as witnessed by increased staff engagement and value placed on assessment efforts. One-time attempts, past assessment activity, and future intended activity were all noted. Additionally, data collected from

institutional surveys and assessment practices of grant-funded programs were highlighted as assessment successes.

The recent or planned implementation of a program review process in student affairs was offered as key progress in assessment from most of the participants in the study. No administrators claimed that these program self-reviews were evidence of a culture of assessment, but there was pride communicated in this development and program reviews were identified as a more accessible activity than other forms of assessment practice. Some institutions were modeling and aligning their program reviews with the academic process, while others have developed their own process using tools such as the CAS Standards for self-evaluation. Participants that have completed program reviews noted a very positive response to the process by staff involved. P5 shared that student affairs staff are more open to the process after watching their colleagues go through it, “I think the rest of the staff, if you were to frame a question – okay, after watching advising going through it they’d probably be able to go, oh yeah! I know about that assessment and what they’re doing”. P9 shared that there was a “buzz” at their institution related to program reviews and that staff found great value in the process. Similarly, most participants noted that student affairs units participate in some form of planning tied to institutional level mission, goals, and objectives. As leaders, participants communicated the importance of tying student affairs goals and assessment plans with institutional strategic priorities.

Participants offered examples of institutional decision-making related to budget and staffing as a result of the presentation of student affairs data. Data used was identified as primarily service or program outcomes based (such as usage numbers), as opposed to learning outcomes-based. P3 explained about their resource allocation process, “I push staff to provide whatever data they could that came out of their department assessment plans or other resources to justify that” and “the ones that I’ve brought forward in the last 6 or 8 months that we’ve been doing this process are very heavily driven by assessment data or data we’re collecting for other mechanisms. And if it doesn’t have it, it gets sent back.”

Some participants identified past attempts and isolated activities that they viewed as promising, while others communicated plans for future assessment activities. P3

articulated a long-standing student affairs assessment model under their leadership at the institution. P1 and P2 described a concerted effort to develop and integrate an assessment model for student affairs two years prior to this study. The effort included strong leadership direction and participation and was strategically tied to broader institutional efforts. There were also attempts to identify student learning outcomes within student affairs units, in addition to program or service outcomes. P4 and P8 described their intentions to lead their student affairs divisions towards full implementation of an assessment practice in the future, while currently at the preliminary stage of training unit leaders and staff. P4, P5, P6, and P9 all shared their plans to integrate a program review process in student affairs, following the lead of their academic counterparts. Regardless of type of assessment activity, participants generally communicated optimism about the experience as noted through such comments as: “We did do some good work last year,” “The reality is we’ve had some success and it wasn’t that painful,” “I think there’s a shift in how we’re looking at it, which means I think there’s going to be much greater progress,” “So our culture is starting to ask questions or ask to see data,” and “But, I’m excited ... and we’re doing it right now.” As P9 asserted, “They’re coming along. They’re not as tentative as they were three months ago. They’re learning and we’re getting there.”

Throughout the examples of progress, a dominant theme was that program or service outcomes are far easier to identify and measure than student learning outcomes. Participants noted that student learning outcomes were more easily identified and measured in some student affairs departments, such as advising, student life, multicultural programming, and all of the instructionally related units in the division such as the library, counseling, and student success courses. Areas that offered multiple interactions with practitioners and that focused on student learning and development were highlighted as a more logical fit for student learning outcomes than the more transactional and one-time services areas such as enrollment services. Additionally, a continued reliance on data related to usage, customer satisfaction, and self-reported outcomes was noted. Participants communicated a desire to increasingly identify and measure student learning outcomes within their divisions. P4 offered the strategy of tying student affairs efforts to the institutional core learning outcomes and said,

We are just going to use our core learning outcomes because they work. I was actually surprised. Even the definitions are really good underneath it. This works. Let's use it. It helps to build that institutional culture. We can map to it.

P5 described how assessment of their advising department ended up transforming practice in that area towards more learning-centered interventions. P6 confirmed that while they haven't focused on student learning outcomes in student affairs, their institution has fully embraced a data-driven culture, making "dashboard data" transparent and available to all members of the campus community. The dashboards include data related to metrics determined to be important by the institution. Some frontline staff have also been equipped with "just in time" data points related to student use of their services, allowing them to make decisions about practice in real time.

Some participants also noted assessment success as it relates to the grant-funded programs in their division such as TRIO, Title III, and CAMP, based on the focused and strict federal guidelines associated with these programs. Other successful efforts were identified in relation to Institutional Research studies and tracking of student success indicators for cohort interventions such as First Year Experience and other student retention efforts. A few participants cited their institution's participation as an Achieving the Dream school and the data generated and emphasized by this effort.

Limited progress. Although multiple pockets of success were identified, the inability to sustain efforts and the absence of cultures of assessment within all cases was striking. Participants shared one-time efforts that were not ultimately sustained. A lack of strategic assessment planning was identified. A dominant theme was the fact that there were always higher priorities on the student affairs' action agenda that trumped assessment efforts. Major factors cited as limiting progress of assessment practice included a lack of understanding of and skills in assessment, difficulty identifying and measuring student learning outcomes, difficulty "closing the loop," student learning outcomes viewed as a poor fit for student affairs, and the challenge of data collection and analysis. Resource challenges emerged as it's own major theme and is addressed in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

The consistent opinion of participants in this study was that no culture of assessment exists within student affairs at their institutions. Comments affirming this

included: “I don’t think that there is a culture of assessment here. We haven’t created the culture strong enough yet,” “I’d say it’s a medium low priority,” “We’re in the formation stages ... Our assessment process here has been, I would say, more informal,” and “I would say that assessment is not as integrated into the work as it maybe could be and should be.” Even the case identifying the most established student affairs assessment model clarified, “It’s not that higher level, kind of nirvana of assessment, hasn’t been fully believed, adopted, supported yet. It still feels a bit like a chore.”

Participants described difficulty in beginning or sustaining assessment efforts. P1 communicated frustration, “We did it that one time ... sort of that snapshot of assessment ... and we haven’t gone back to it since.” Lack of time and the need to prioritize other more pressing issues and activities was a dominant theme. As P1 lamented, “The reality is that it becomes the thing that is sacrificed.” Others identified the lack of broader institutional planning for or value of assessment practice. P3 described how they ceased their longstanding assessment efforts in order to wait for the institution to catch up:

But when pushed a little I realized we were all tired of redesigning a model based on the institution changing direction again. We’ve been doing assessment and adopted it wholesale for a lot of years. I just said, you know what, stop. Keep doing the assessment stuff informally and the things that help you drive your daily decisions, but we’re not going to try and make it fit this model.

Participants identified a lack of institutional priority for the work of assessment – in instruction, as well as student affairs. P4 stated, “I also say they may not totally see the value of institutional assessment on the instructional side yet. So we still have a lot of foundational work to do on developing that culture. Or let’s call it the strategic culture.” P7 shared directly that they were not being held accountable to assess learning outcomes in student affairs because it was quite simply not a priority nor valued by executive leadership. They said, “And so learning outcomes, I think, are something that we keep our eye on for a moment. Something else comes and gets our attention or we have to then lobby for ourselves again and we tend to lose those.”

P5 shared frustrations about the preparedness for assessment work that they encountered at their institution:

Through the process, I found that the staff that were actually conducting really had no idea what an outcome was and mainly just starting from the very surface level of something that’s measurable – something that we can actually say - our

goal is to do this and here's how we're going to actually measure whether we're doing this or we're not doing this. So very, very surface level because I think that the institution's maturity around learning outcomes in student affairs and student services areas is very, very minimal.

P8 shared similar concerns:

It's much slower than I wanted to do it, but then people didn't have the training and the skills to go forward with it. And I only have the training and skills because I've taken the effort to learn it myself because it hasn't been taught and it hasn't been pushed.

Participants also described the particular challenge that staff has with understanding student learning outcomes specifically. Participants identified certain transactional service areas that particularly struggle with the concept, such as registration and records. P1 shared that they have observed individuals having a hard time coming up with both program and student learning outcomes, but particularly the learning outcomes. They added, "What are we measuring besides usage?" P2 questioned the relevance of identifying learning outcomes in "service" areas, "And in a particular way we might even then say, do we really want to assess what they're learning in service, because isn't service just about getting them what they need?" They described staff struggling with differentiation between service-based and learning-based outcomes. Other participants identified a challenge with the process of outcomes assessment and a lack of tools and accessible processes. P4 said, "And this is where we either tend to default to satisfaction because we still don't know how to measure complicated things or we come up with 25 outcomes for a program and have no way to assess them." P6 also identified that practically speaking, "There's a challenge collecting and analyzing qualitative data in a systematic way because of volume." P5 expressed the desire for better tools stating, "Where nobody really has – here's the perfect model and here's how it really works. But I think the missing piece is that student learning outcomes assessment is just – there isn't a model that everybody just goes to."

Finally, the data pointed to a lack of progress with "closing the loop," a term some participants used to describe not moving fully through the assessment cycle to ultimately modify programs or services as a result of assessment discovery. As P1 explained:

We haven't done a good job of saying we as a program want to do this. What is the outcome? And even if we can get there we can't even identify how we want to measure it and what we really fall down on is closing the loop. How we circle back to say, did we meet those outcomes? What should we change?

P3 also identified this challenge and said, "And then the harder part that they struggled with was how do we articulate what we did? How do we close that loop?" P5 painted a picture of broad resistance towards the efforts of assessment at their institution:

I think the overall culture around it is that everybody's trying to avoid having to do it and since I think we are still very fundamental on our understanding and our process around this, I think it makes it even easier for people to shy away from wanting to do it. Because it's this unknown. What's this going to look like? What's this going to mean?

Summary of findings related to research question two. The data related to research question two painted a complex picture of the relationship that the senior student affairs officers in this study have with prioritizing assessment efforts in their divisions. There was evidence of a genuine sense of an imperative to implement outcomes assessment practice and to use outcomes-based data, but a fact pattern that supported a lack of significant progress made in the area. Pockets of successful assessment efforts were identified, but sustained progress towards cultures of assessment in student affairs (and instruction, in many cases) was not. The overarching theme of reality versus aspiration captures this conflict within the action agenda of the administrators in this study.

Research Question Three

The third research question posed for this study was: *How do community college senior student affairs officers perceive they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, institutional support, and resources to lead student learning outcomes assessment practice?* Student affairs administrators play a critical role in leading, guiding, and motivating student affairs practitioners to engage in outcomes assessment. Little is known about how prepared or supported these administrators are to accomplish this task. Response to this question illuminates to what extent senior student affairs officers perceive they are prepared and what additional resources may be required. Three overarching themes answer this question: a) knowledge, skill, and attitude as a leader; b) limited culture of institutional support; and c) resource challenges.

Knowledge, skill, and attitude as a leader. The results of this study revealed various levels of administrator knowledge and skills related to leading outcomes assessment efforts in their divisions. With the exception of two outliers, participants described limited formal education and training and rather a reliance on seeking out and creating their own learning opportunities. Individual attitudes towards the work also varied, with the majority demonstrating a fair degree of motivation to engage in the work, while some participants portrayed negativity, futility, and discouragement. The two sub-themes of level of education/training and attitude led to the generation of this major theme.

Level of education and training. In all but two cases, participants identified an almost absence of what they considered formal education focused on assessment of outcomes in student affairs. Table 4.1 on page 98 illustrates this and other case characteristics. Although most participants have achieved a minimum of a master's level degree, they identified little to no coursework specific to assessment in student affairs in their education programs. Some cited courses in evaluation or research, which they identified as not directly applicable to leading program level assessment efforts. Even those having gone through doctoral programs in education identified a lack of relevant coursework. As P5 said, "It's one of those areas that you really don't learn in school. I mean going through a doctoral program, you really don't learn a lot about that. You learn how to write a dissertation." Others cited completing programs decades ago or as P7 shared, "I'm an old time student services person, so I didn't go through a student affairs program."

All participants identified self-directed learning to gain knowledge and skills in assessment practice. P1 described, "Mostly just ad hoc learning to try and figure out a way to tackle this." Participants identified attending workshops, trainings, and sessions on the topic at professional conferences and through their professional associations. Some administrators identified "on-the-job" training they received when assigned responsibility for assessment tasks. This included expert trainers being brought to their institutions for staff professional development or training associated with assessment software and tools, such as the CAS Standards. Some participants were involved in assessment work with instructional units. Other participants identified lots of self-

directed reading and webinars, although few could cite specific authors or theories from the field. Some participants sought out peers for guidance and support. P7 lamented not having peers accessible in their area for such mentoring opportunities. Finally, some study participants consult and conduct their own trainings on assessment for other institutions.

Two participants were outliers in the study in that they identified extensive education and training in outcomes assessment. During their doctoral studies, P4 took an additional 18-credit certificate program in institutional research and assessment. Although they clarified that “they didn’t have assessment classes back then,” they confirmed that the training and practicum experience working directly with known experts in the field provided a solid background and skill set. P4 lamented that assessment “is still not uniformly taught in graduate school.” P6 also identified an extensive background and formal education in research, evaluation, and assessment. They cited numerous courses taken throughout higher education degrees, as well as professional experience in institutional research. They also confirmed wide-ranging experiences conducting qualitative and quantitative program and intervention-level assessment during their numerous years in the student affairs field. Both of these study participants expressed a solid grasp of assessment terms and concepts during their interviews and a high level of confidence related to leading assessment practice among their teams.

Most of the remaining participants shared a desire to gain more knowledge and skill in the area. P5 noted, “I think professionally, I would love to learn more and actually feel like I am an expert in assessment, but I think that there’s a lot of people that feel that way as well, too.” P1 shared a desire to reflect on assessment practice and concepts more within their own institution, “We don’t take the time to do shared meaning, shared conversations. How are we measuring effectiveness if we don’t know what effective means? We don’t have a common definition of effective.” P9 indicated embarrassment that they actually teach a course in student affairs and the topic of assessment is not well covered. They laughed, “But I need to go back to school. No, I feel like you have to keep going and keep learning.” P7 justified their lack of expertise:

I personally haven't seen assessment conversations moved to a real high sophisticated level to me that would indicate that there's some known baseline that everybody agrees on ... we seem to kind of still be down in the ... What are we doing? How do you guys do that? It makes me think, okay, I'm not that far behind.

Attitude. This study discovered a range of attitudes – or personal views, orientation and general approach - towards student learning outcomes assessment among the administrators interviewed. Overall confidence in the terms and concepts of assessment varied greatly as observed through the interview process. The two participants that identified a great deal of formal education, training, and experience portrayed a command for the material and a confidence in their ability to lead their teams towards integration of assessment practice. Neither of these case sites, however, was noted to have a “culture of assessment” at the time of the study. P4 described a guiding philosophy that learning and development take place outside of the classroom and that the work of student affairs contributes to students’ achieving institutional learning outcomes. Learning outcomes assessment in student affairs was portrayed as a natural extension of this framework. P4, a self-described “assessment geek,” advocated using instructional assessment tools, such as rubrics and one-minute papers, to assess student life and other student affair interventions. Similarly, P6, said, “And so I have a long history of being a data geek, which is helpful because people just kind of know I want to see some data.”

Participants that identified very little formal education and training expressed varied confidence levels in the topic and in their skills. Some participants spoke hesitantly when asked to define assessment terms and concepts, while others communicated confidence in their self-acquired knowledge base. P7 shared, “So, I didn’t go through a student affairs program ... I didn’t have the opportunity to learn and I feel like an old-fashioned student services person whose catching up with the concept of assessment.” Others that identified less formal education communicated a higher confidence level. P8 portrayed a high level of confidence in their ability to develop a culture of assessment. They identified it was their “focus” and that ...

... initially it may be extra work, but in the end its not extra work. It’s work that supports the work that you’re doing. So, I think we’re getting past that. If we had

this discussion at this time next year, it would be totally different than it is this year. Or it better be (laughter)!

A sub-section of participants communicated a sense of skepticism that the implementation of outcomes assessment practice has or would make a real difference. As P3 described,

I have to show my cards in that I don't know if it ... we've gone down this road so many different times just to turn back and take another road that I don't know if we've been effective with it or not. On small things here or there - this program, this service – absolutely. But wholesale change, I don't think so. And that's a little disappointing and at some point you kind of get jaded to, is this even worth it?

Other skepticism seemed to stem from a mismatch of the concept of learning outcomes assessment with student affairs practice. P2 described learning outcomes assessment as a possible reach by the field of student affairs for a sense of legitimacy within higher education. As they considered assessment terms and concepts, they questioned,

I didn't know if they had an application to our field and since that is where I've struggled sometimes – we're trying to connect these two things together because we don't necessarily have another set of tools. And I looked at them and thought, okay, that's how they're classically defined and we try to make them fit.

Finally, P7 appeared skeptical that the practice would have staying power and questioned the worth of investment in the practice, especially given there is little encouragement for it at their institution. They said, “So, I guess maybe I've just been doing the work too long, but I've become kind of a wait and see sort of a person.”

Most participants shared a strong hope or desire to better integrate assessment into the work of their division. Some expressed a deep connection with the concepts and goals of assessment and continual improvement to support student outcomes. Others felt compelled that it seems to be the right thing to do. Some portrayed a sense of guilt about not having figured out how to integrate the work into their action agenda. P1 appeared very hard on themselves for not being able to prioritize assessment practice in their work. They identified assessment as “obviously one of the last” priorities and went on to say,

To some extent, to me strategic planning and assessment should be the top priorities. But what we end up doing is student of concern and personnel problems and we have a culture here where it's just something new every day that needs to be done by Friday, so that's what I end up working on.

This clearly pained P1, who described it in terms of a leadership deficit, “And as a leader I’m falling down for sure.” P5 shared similar disappointment in their lack of prioritization of assessment as a leader,

And I think as much as we read and learn about the importance of assessment, I think it’s even tougher. So, I’m having kind of that moment of, oh, you bum. Get on it. And I wish I had really good answers to why not. But I think the volume of work is so overwhelming that there’s just no way ... because you never want to feels like you’re just falling short all the time.

Even those that expressed doubts about the impact of the practice seemed resigned that it would continue to be expected of them and their teams. P3 concluded that they understood it to be imperative that they reconcile their own doubts,

So I’ve got to find something as the chief student services person to tip this in the right direction on assessment. And deal with my own, perhaps, concerns about whether or not it can be an effective tool. And I don’t have a very good poker face (laughter). And most of my direct reports I’ve worked with for 5 to 20 years and they know me too well for me to be able to B.S. my way through it.

Finally, P7 identified a similar sense of expectation and lack of ability to fulfill it,

So unfortunately, I would say that assessment is not as integrated into the work as it maybe could be and should be. Because it doesn’t come naturally to me it feels like an extra thing. So it does kind of go to the bottom of the pile.

Some participants shared a true sense of optimism, enthusiasm, and commitment to the effort of assessment practice. P5 described feeling encouraged when the state started looking at performance-based funding models,

I just remember that period in time actually being really cool because of my background and learning around student services assessment and learning outcomes in student affairs ... it was like, all right! Finally we’re going to get something that kick-starts us. I hope it’s sooner than later because I actually think we need that push. I mean, I’m one where achievement compacts and outcomes-based funding ... I get excited ... We’re going to be forced to figure out a solution to this because we can’t just run from the problem. And that gets us into the work that I think we should be doing naturally that we’re not.

P4 described their enthusiasm for assessment at a personal level as follows,

But then I realized that information is power and this gave me the power to make better decisions and we’re in an information culture so I need to know how to do this. And it made me do my job better and that was great. I love that. Even like faculty evaluations – student evaluations of faculty. I always read mine. I always make changes.

P9 declared enthusiastically, “But, I’m excited ... and we’re doing it right now. And so that culture ... and we’ve hired for it, we’ve put money in it. It’s been the conversation ... That, my gosh, let’s do something that’s meaningful.” As P1 summed up, laughing, “I remain optimistic until I retire.”

Limited culture of institutional support. The concept of the need for, and not yet fully developed, broad institutional support for assessment practice emerged as a major theme of this study. Participants reflected on the key role that they themselves and other executive leaders have to guide and sustain assessment practice at their institutions. Additionally, the role of institutional strategic planning and decision-making was highlighted as necessary for providing the framework for assessment in student affairs. The sub-themes of inadequate leadership actions and lack of strategic direction led to the generation of this major theme. Data acknowledged in support of this theme restates some data presented in previous themes.

Inadequate leadership actions. Across all cases the role of leaders emerged as critical to the practice of assessment in a variety of ways. This included reflection on themselves as leading the process, as well as the general role institutional leadership plays in emphasizing the value and importance of the work. Participants described that senior leadership needs to set expectations and actively support assessment activity at their institution, including establishing systems of accountability. Leaders were viewed as responsible for facilitating and guiding the work of staff and faculty. Additionally, leaders were viewed as needing to provide resources for the work. The cases studied revealed a general leadership commitment to the idea of assessment and the ideal role of leaders, but a lack of specific and ongoing fulfillment of leadership actions needed to establish a culture of assessment.

Participants identified a wide range of roles that institutional leaders *should* assume related to assessment practice. Some mentioned the imperative of support from the highest leadership level – college presidents. P1 and P9 identified that their presidents are driving an expectation for data-informed practice and decision-making. P7 and P8 communicated the opposite. They are not being held accountable from the top. The rest of the participants did not specifically mention the individual commitment level of their presidents. Overwhelmingly participants focused their comments on their own

leadership actions. P5 identified that assessment in student affairs was driven by their leadership level, “I would be the senior most support for anybody who is wanting to do one [program review], as well, but nobody is really jumping at the opportunity to do it.”

Participants identified multiple roles that their level of executive leadership *should* assume related to the practice of assessment, including: assigning and prioritizing the work, accountability, communicating value and importance, training and coaching, providing a manageable model and tools, engaging all staff, and tying work to strategic planning. P1 explained,

So, I think as leadership we need to be finding a tool, developing a strategy to communicate, and then you have to just keep doing it and check in and make sure we’re holding each other accountable ... and our teams and directors ... to say, did you finish your assessment? Where are you with your assessment?

P2 described leadership as needing to be confident in assessment terms and concepts in order to bring more clarity for staff,

Understanding the practice itself. Understanding and defining terms appropriately so people can actually do the work. Differentiating service based from student learning outcomes based outcomes, I would say. Ensuring integration with the rest of campus so that others understand and value it. Both from a service perspective, as well as student learning outcomes perspective.

Others stressed their role in engaging staff meaningfully and helping them find value in assessment activities. P3 explained, “... my goal is to make it an enjoyable part of what someone does. Or they see the value in it. That it becomes a routine part of their daily job. But that means getting to a model that is manageable.” P4 echoed the idea of engaging all staff and helping them discover meaning,

And so part of that is if you can tackle that sense of fear and that resistance to change and you equip people to figure things out what resonates with them so that it’s not top down – I think the teaching is top down – but the, how do we get to here, is bottom up. And getting many people involved is I think crucial. And celebrate it. And share it.

P6 described the importance of giving staff access to data and coaching them in their use and presentation of it,

We need data. We do better and we need to do better about actually putting data in front of people more often. And that’s where the dashboards are. So, it’s trying to get ... part of the culture change is trying to get people used to looking at it and understanding it ... So it is going back and then coaching through it, saying

so when we talked about this, this is what we'd really like to see. And we know you have it you just haven't put the time into it or you haven't thought it through all the way.

While participants shared multiple roles that they should be fulfilling in support of assessment practice, there were many examples of leadership actions falling short of the ideal. The previously described theme of reality versus aspiration details pockets of success, but also paints the picture of very preliminary leaderships actions and an overall lack of progress being made. A number of participants shared they have just recently started – within the past one to two years - to bring up assessment tasks with their management teams and some staff. They have just begun to ask their teams questions about intended outcomes of their programs and to challenge them to consider what evidence they might gather to demonstrate outcomes achievement. They have provided some initial training – primarily to their student affairs leads – and some ongoing coaching. These efforts represent preliminary actions, as opposed to integrated and sustained efforts.

Participants described not regularly assigning assessment tasks to staff and if they do, no system of accountability to assure they are completed. Many participants identified their communication and training has only reached the leadership level within student affairs, as opposed to permeating to frontline staff. Participants identified that assessment work receives a lack of priority attention by them. P5 even described feeling guilty assigning his team assessment work. They said,

And I don't have the heart to say, hey, we're doing your area right now. We need to do this. Because they just know it would not be the most positive experience based off of what we've been going through the last couple of years.

P1 confirmed, "Actually assigning assessment planning, I don't think it's happening. I think it's all organic now and not in a strategic, prescribed way." And P2 described previous efforts, but that, "I don't think I've necessarily gone back to the teams with the assignment again." And P2 included, "We don't incorporate absolutely everybody." Similarly, P4 described the importance of broad inclusive engagement but that practically speaking, "I'm still trying to build the consensus that we need to do this at the managerial level so they can do it in their departments." P7 echoed that the conversation has remained at the management level and has been limited at that,

So it does kind of go to the bottom of the pile and, I'll be honest, every summer when I've got my managers together we talk about what can students do and know when they're done with us. And usually it's really a small kind of, very conservative goal for them.

P9 also confirmed that they have, “pushed a lot of people in leadership roles and, well I would say leadership, as I don't know that it's trickled down to anyone else.” All study participants confirmed they do not incorporate assessment knowledge and skills in their staff evaluations. Finally, administrators in this study rarely mentioned the allocation of targeted resources in support of assessment practice (e.g., staff training, hiring assessment-specific coordinators, etc.).

Lack of strategic direction. Participants consistently discussed the link between assessment practice in their divisions and broader institutional planning and decision-making. Institutional strategic planning emerged as a critical factor that facilitates assessment and brings meaning to the work. Isolated examples of assessment work leading to staffing and funding decisions were offered, however, evidence of systemic planning and assessment efforts was lacking in this study. Additionally, some participants noted that the role of student affairs in supporting student learning and in assessing student learning was discredited at their institutions.

Just as pockets of success were identified related to leadership actions, efforts to strategically align student affairs assessment to broader institutional strategic priorities and decision-making were also identified in this study. Overwhelmingly participants identified their division's engagement with improved overall institutional planning and documentation. They described preliminary efforts in the areas of program reviews, unit and program planning documents, and budget allocation processes. Some institutions have participated in strategic planning efforts for numerous years. Others cited a lack of strategic planning. Most participants acknowledged preliminary efforts being made to tie their student affairs level assessment work to these institutional planning and decision-making tools.

Descriptors such as “we tried to align,” the “process is supposed to sort of drive this,” “it was supposed to be part of that improvement cycle,” and “we didn't do it great, but we'll improve upon it” communicated the lack of fully formed assessment and planning models at the case sites studied. Participants communicated a good deal of

enthusiasm for the efforts, but many communicated the desire for more systemic and comprehensive planning. P3 described a desire for an institutional approach to assessment and planning that they could link student affairs efforts to, “I think we’re finally getting to the place that if we’re going to do this right we’re going to do it systematically.” They add, “How we carry that forward and systematize that to the rest, we’ll see.” P3 promoted aligning efforts with the accreditation calendar and adopting them as “a routine part of what we do across the institution.” P5 described a disconnect between the work their student affairs team has done with assessment and the institution’s budget planning process. For this reason they think it may be a hard sell to staff. They explained, “And I think it makes it even more challenging to sell the idea of building assessment, because here we did this whole process and still we don’t have the resources that we need to be successful in this.” P1 described a less than positive reaction to their planning process, “We all end up just doing our [process] as an exercise because we have to do it without doing the thinking behind it and the analysis behind it because of time. And it doesn’t feel good to anybody.”

Those participants that described using student affairs assessment data to inform resource allocation and other decisions emphasized that the data being presented is still largely service or program outcomes - like usage numbers - and not student learning outcomes. P1 talked about staff preparing their unit reports and that, “A lot of them couldn’t identify what data they needed. Didn’t know what to ask for, because we hadn’t built the ‘what are we trying to change?’ first.” P7 confirmed they are not looking at student learning outcomes, “I would say largely that we’re not. We still depend on enrollment data more than learning outcomes information.” P6 described a new budget allocation process at their institution requiring units demonstrate the metrics they will use to gauge success. They confirmed, however, that student affairs is not currently identifying or assessing student learning outcomes.

P7 and P8 described little formalized assessment efforts, rather a focus on foundational work related to aligning student affairs work with the college’s strategic plan. P4 also described waiting for more institutional direction as they develop college level core learning themes and strategic plan objectives, which student affairs will eventually tie into. They affirmed currently conducting “micro-assessments” but that,

“we haven’t mapped them intentionally anywhere.” None of these three cases identified a current formalized budget planning process that incorporates assessment data from student affairs.

Resource challenges. The final overarching theme that addresses research question three of this study is the challenge of lack of resources to support and sustain the practice of assessment. Resource challenges were apparent in the identified factors that inhibit assessment practice. Two specific categories of challenge emerged in this study that speak to how well equipped senior student affairs officers are to lead assessment practice: human resource limitations and limited models and tools. Data offered in support of this theme restates some data presented in previous themes.

Human resource limitations. Participants identified multiple limitations related to human resources such as poor staff attitude and fear, lack of knowledge and skills, lack of training and professional development, a high degree of staff and leadership turnover, lack of staff/leadership capacity, and a lack of staff to specifically support assessment efforts.

Overwhelmingly participants described limitations related to student affairs staff attitude and hesitancy related to assessment work. Some described that staff were resistant because they feared the process and exposure of their lack of knowledge and skills, while others feared losing their jobs as a result of assessment findings. P4 summed up both perspectives,

I think being fearful of the unknown. And that’s both in terms of what the outcomes of the assessment is going to be – and that, oh I could lose my job if something goes wrong. Like even at a departmental level, if our assessment outcomes ... even if satisfaction, if it’s horrible ... oh, I’m going to get fired ... to the fear of, I don’t know how to do this.

P5 also described the dynamic he sees with staff resistance,

I think the overall culture around it is that everybody’s trying to avoid having to do it and since I think we are still very fundamental on our understanding and our process around this, I think it makes it even easier for people to shy away from wanting to do it. Because it’s this unknown. What’s this going to look like? What’s this going to mean?

P8 described witnessing fear and paranoia among their staff as well. They also described a more basic distaste for change, “I have people who have been here for quite a few years

and so they're used to doing things the way they've done them. They're used to not stretching. They've become very comfortable in their positions.” P1, P2, and P6 reiterated this idea. P7 added that some staff members have had bad experiences attempting to approach their work differently, such as integrating teaching and learning into largely transactional student services areas.

Some participants speculated staff resistance resulted from a lack of knowledge and skills related to assessment terms, concepts, and techniques. Many noted that while most managers and coordinators may be able to speak to assessment at some level, frontline staff has been quite removed from the topic. Participants noted the contrast of the educational background of student services and enrollment staff with their instructional counterparts. P2 explained,

Although our staff work here, we don't hire student services and enrollment services staff with backgrounds in instruction. And so they step into an environment where the language is alien and the process is alien and they have to become educated in it all together as opposed to already having a leg up because it may have come from the field they were already in. So, you have to learn something more. And a little bit of that is also – I don't know, every institution is different – but sometimes our educational requirements are completely different or much diminished.

P5 agreed. They said,

We don't have individuals that have high-level critical thinking skills, have learned assessment, have learned outcomes – and really understand that process – makes it extremely challenging to teach that and I feel like the depth that we get to go into is very, very surface level, based off the audience that you're trying to teach this to.

P4 clarified many student affairs staff don't even know the theories and framework of their field, let alone learning outcomes development and assessment strategies. P7 identified institutional location as a possible barrier to attracting better educated student affairs professionals. As P8 summed up the challenge, “It's much slower than I wanted to do it, but then people didn't have the training and the skills to go forward with it.”

The most widely reported resource challenge to integrating learning outcomes assessment in student affairs was the lack of capacity for staff and leaders to do the work. More than one participant when describing the many higher priorities that trump assessment work mentioned the term “back burner”. Participants described this in terms

of their own and their staff members' capacity. P1 stated, "I think there's a want. But the barrier of time is killing us. We all spend too much time putting out the fire that is right in front of us instead of taking the time." P3 noted, "I think our barriers are the time and space to do it and the resources to really do it right ... People know it's a priority but so are five hundred other things." For their part, administrators mentioned such pressing issues as student mental health, behavioral concerns, Title IX compliance, returning veterans, and state/institution initiatives that pull their attention away from assessment. P5 talked about pushing back assessment deadlines multiple times due to workload issues. They cited an advising department program review taking over a year to complete as opposed to the 3-month plan. Many participants cited being constantly short-staffed in student affairs, creating a reactive environment of responding to the most urgent day-to-day needs, rather than the more reflective and deeper dive that assessment work requires. P7 lamented, "But we can't really pay attention – even to the strategic plan – as much as I would like, because we are – probably like everyone in student affairs – we are just staffed so thinly." P4 even believes student affairs at the community college level should be conducting research, in addition to assessment, but acknowledged, "I'm not sure how we'll have time to do it, but it's what we should do."

Another human resources limitation that creates a challenge for administrators to initiate and sustain assessment practice is a high degree of staff and leadership turnover experienced at some of the institutions. P1 said,

And so we did it once. And so we spent a lot of time on it. And, this will not change, but we had a lot of turnover. We had turnovers of directors. And we had turnovers of staff. And we had turnovers in leadership.

Other participants identified similar significant transition, particularly in leadership. P3 explained,

And unfortunately, with four years of significant transition in our instructional administration - we've had two permanent and three interim vice presidents for instruction and we've had eleven deans fill our three instructional deans positions. So a lot of turnover.

P5 described the impact that a high level of administrative turnover has had on staff in their area. They described years of revolving supervisors and high-level administrators. This has resulted in staff that doesn't necessarily take new leadership seriously, but rather

has a “flavor of the week mentality” and believes they can wait out any new projects or activities.

A final human resource limitation is the lack of staff to specifically coordinate or support outcomes assessment work in student affairs. Most participants have not been allocated, or chosen to allocate, resources to assist their teams with training, technical support, and guidance. P3 and P5 joked about the luxury of being able to have dedicated support for this work. P5 noted it’s a “nice wish list,” but that there are too many greater needs and vacancies that it simply is not a priority. Some participants noted their institutions are hiring assessment support staff for instructional areas only. P7’s institution hired an assessment coordinator that is theoretically available to student affairs, however when they invited the individual to support an effort in the division, they reported, “She had not idea how to help us.”

Limited models and tools. Across the majority of cases, a lack of tools and models to make assessment practice accessible and doable were cited. Participants lamented the lack of models specifically for learning outcomes assessment in student affairs, especially given description of confusion about terms and concepts of assessment practice. Some identified the challenge of data collection and analysis in student affairs, especially related to student learning outcomes. Finally, a few participants suggested it may be helpful for a state system of assessment in student affairs to be developed.

Most participants identified a desire for a better model of assessment practice in student affairs and the perception that there is a lack of tools available to assist with the work. P1 was particularly adamant about the need for “developing a tool that is easy for people to use.” They went on to plea,

... is it too optimistic to think that there’s a silver bullet? That there’s a tool that we could all use? Or is it bringing someone in that teaches us how to ask the right questions in student affairs that gets to program and student learning outcomes? So, someone that helps you frame that. And then someone that helps you develop the culture on your campus.

They identified that it is difficult to get their teams to know what questions to ask, what they are trying to measure, and how to come up with student learning outcomes for service areas. P2 compared resources to academic areas, “I mean across the field I think

there's a lack of awareness of how to do it correctly. There's a lack of tools and resources. There's definitely a dearth of it in student affairs as compared to instruction." P3 described the difficulty in finding what peer community college student affairs divisions are doing, as there is very little shared. They described picking up pieces over the years from colleges, universities, and higher education organizations as opposed to any one particular model or resource. Some participants cited using the CAS standards as a tool, but noted there are not standards for every service area and they do not provide guidance on outcomes assessment strategies or techniques. P5 said, "I think everybody is kind of looking for who's going to be the big role model and tell us how we're supposed to do this."

Some participants noted the particular challenge of data collection and analysis within student affairs, particularly related to student learning versus program or service outcomes. P1 noted, "If you were on the ground they would say we love to make change but we don't know how to measure it." P5 described the challenge,

So everybody's an expert in that regard, but when it comes to actually building learning outcomes for student affairs, I think it's a skill that I don't know who has an expert level skill set in doing that. And I think that is probably one of the biggest reasons it doesn't go as far as it could.

Assessment reporting and documentation was also identified as a challenge. P3 explained,

Then when it came to measuring it and running numbers and changing service models and that kind of thing, that was kind of the easier part. And then the harder part that they struggled with was how do we articulate what we did? How do we close that loop?

P6 shared that assessment of outcomes is particularly challenging for community colleges due to the institutions' lack of ability to influence variables like their 4-year higher education counterparts. P4 also noted that community colleges are behind in the practice of outcomes assessment, even on the academic side. P6 commented on the challenges of outcomes assessment practice in general,

So the challenge is how do you create broad enough assessment to incorporate lots of things and not get assessment fatigue on the part of faculty, staff, students ... and the other barrier is ... how do we get good at behavioral assessment instead of self-report assessment. So that's the challenge.

Two participants mentioned the potential of a “system” that would mandate assessment in student affairs. P4 noted Oregon’s lack of a community college system and the fact that there is no centralized directive related to assessment for the state’s institutions. They clarified that they weren’t advocating for that, but that it is difficult when everyone approaches the task in a different way. P5 described external support as being beneficial, “Because trying to teach it internally is a challenge. I think bringing an external source in ... Especially if we had state standards in assessment in student services. I think that would be a huge key of support.” They identified that a consistent practice would be helpful to everyone.

Summary of findings related to research question three. Through the qualitative thematic analysis of the data, three overarching themes were revealed that serve to address the third and final research question of this study: a) knowledge, skill, and attitude as a leader; b) limited culture of institutional support; and c) resource challenges. While the majority of administrators studied received little or no formal education and training in the practice of learning outcomes assessment, their perceived skill level and attitudes towards the work varied widely. There was evidence across the cases of a lack of strategic direction and leadership actions resulting in less than robust institutional support for assessment practice. Finally, there was also evidence of resource challenges in terms of human resources and a lack of assessment models and tools specific to student affairs and community colleges. These findings elucidate multiple opportunities for improving the conditions within community college student affairs divisions for student learning outcomes assessment practice to take hold.

Summary of Findings

This multiple case study sought to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within their community college student affairs divisions. This section presented the findings of the research. Specifically, it included an overview of the research context, including a descriptive profile of each of the cases studied – the nine senior student affairs officers from medium and large community colleges in the state of Oregon. Next, it provided a detailed description of the steps taken to conduct a cross-case thematic analysis of the qualitative data generated from interviews and some documents. A thematic framework

analysis approach was used for data management and eventual abstraction and interpretation of the data. The cross-case analysis resulted in the identification of following six overarching themes:

1. Factors that inhibit assessment practice.
2. Factors that facilitate assessment practice.
3. Reality versus aspiration.
4. Knowledge, skill, and attitude of leaders.
5. Limited culture of institutional support.
6. Resource challenges.

Finally, this section provided detailed results of the analysis in response to the study's three guiding research questions. Characteristic of the case study method, a "thick description" of the data was provided to support the validity of findings of this study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Thirteen sub-themes or categories that were constructed from the data analysis led to the six major themes. Themes one and two answered research question one and were supported by the sub-themes of: (a) internal factors that inhibit assessment, (b) external factors that inhibit assessment, (c) internal factors that facilitate assessment, and (d) external factors that facilitate assessment. Theme three answered question two and was supported by the sub-themes of: (a) perceived imperative, (b) pockets of success, and (c) limited progress. Themes four, five, and six answered research question three and were supported by the sub-themes of: (a) level of education/training, (b) attitude, (c) inadequate leadership actions, (d) lack of strategic direction, (e) human resource limitations, and (f) limited models and tools.

Chapter V: Discussion and Implications

The preceding chapters of this study established the focus and purpose of the research, presented a comprehensive review of the literature on this topic, established and described the research approach and method, and detailed the research findings based on a thematic qualitative cross-case analysis. This final chapter will cover: (a) a discussion of the major findings and key insights within the context of existing literature, (b) implications of the study for practice, (c) limitations of the study, (d), areas for further research inspired by the study, and (e) final thoughts and reflections of the researcher.

Discussion of the Major Findings and Key Insights

The following section will discuss the major findings of this study as they are situated within the guiding theoretical perspective of the mandate for and description of a culture of assessment in student affairs. The following key insights are presented in an effort to deepen and advance the discussion of this topic: (a) assessment imperative, (b) no culture of assessment, (c) significant barriers to assessment, and (d) hope for the future of assessment.

Assessment Imperative

Evidence from this study affirms that student affairs senior leadership has absorbed the message of the higher education reform movement that has permeated the body of literature on assessment (Blimling, 2013; Burke & Minassians, 2004; Ewell, 2009). The sub-theme of perceived imperative revealed that participants perceive that assessment of student outcomes is indeed imperative and that as leaders they are compelled to use performance-based data to improve quality and efficiency of education outcomes (Banta, 2010; Beno, 2004; Blimling, 2013; Ewell, 2009; Serban & Friedlander, 2004). Participants identified accreditation expectations, outcomes-based funding, increased expectation within their field, and general external accountability as external factors that influence assessment practice at their institutions. They echoed the literature that identified external pressure for improved student outcomes.

All participants in this study emphasized accreditation as a primary driver and many cited preparation for visits as igniting assessment work. Studies exploring the motivations for assessment practice confirmed accreditation as one of the most significant (Bresciani, 2002; Kinzie, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Interestingly, this

study highlighted a contradiction in that participants identified accreditation expectations (and outcomes-based funding) as external factors that facilitate assessment, but in the next breath confirmed that these external pressures have really not played out. The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is not holding student affairs accountable for assessing learning outcomes and performance-based funding has not yet been clearly established in the state of Oregon. Most participants were quick to add that the real reason for assessment, however was to improve student outcomes, an internal facilitating factor that emerged from the data. Key elements identified in the data that supported the sub-theme of perceived imperative affirmed a more altruistic view by participants of assessment for continual improvement, student success, and student learning. This was a prominent view in the literature (Banta, 2007a; Banta, 2011; Blaich & Wise, 2011; O'Banion, 1997; Wehlburg, 2013).

A few participants in this study did question the benefits of assessment practice and whether the efforts are worth it. Following her research study on how model student learning outcomes assessment programs are established in community colleges, Ebersole (2007) recommended that external mandates for institutional assessment efforts be delayed until further research into the impact of assessment and a cost benefit analysis could be conducted. Indeed, there has been very little empirical evidence that suggests improved student outcomes, administrative decisions, or institutional changes as a result of assessment practice (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Blaich & Wise, 2011; Bresciani, 2012; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Peterson & Augustine, 2000a, 2000b; Peterson & Einarson, 2001).

No Culture of Assessment

Despite the perceived imperative of assessment practice, the pockets of success happening at their institutions within student affairs are not rising to the level of what the administrators in this study would deem a “culture of assessment.” Key elements emerged from the data that led to the sub-theme of limited progress. No participants in this study described the high level of integration of outcomes assessment in their student affairs divisions that is described and called for in the literature (Blimling, 2013; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Haney & McClellan, 2009; Helfgot, 2005; Livingston & Zerulik, 2013; Oburn, 2002; Schuh, 2013). Even the one participant that identified having a student

affairs assessment model in place for nearly a decade affirmed the lack of a sustainable model and described that they put the practice on hold in hopes of a more unified institutional effort emerging. The major theme of reality versus aspiration is supported by a complex mix of study data that confirms both a strong desire and multiple attempts to prioritize assessment in their action agendas, but with a significant lack of demonstrable progress.

Challenge of learning in student affairs. Findings of this study did not affirm the idea that assessment of student learning and development outside of the classroom is critical. There is a significant body of literature that has reinforced this concept over the years within the field of student affairs (ACE, 1937; ACPA, 1996; ACPA & NASPA, 2004; NASPA, 1997). Only one participant communicated a deep connection and commitment to the concept of learning outcomes in student affairs. A few participants actively challenged the concept, questioning the relevancy of learning outcomes for transactional services areas. Most simply identified the challenge their staff has in identifying and assessing learning outcomes. Lack of staff knowledge and skills, as well as lack of shared language and definitions were viewed as factors that inhibit assessment. These findings were widely affirmed in research studies (Bresciani, 2002; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008). The pockets of success identified in this study as a sub-theme have focused primarily on assessment of program or service outcomes and isolated examples of using this type of data for limited budget decisions. Studies have affirmed that learning outcomes assessment in student affairs remains a challenge and a less common practice (Bresciani, 2002; Doyle, 2004).

Not just a student affairs issue. Study participants were quick to affirm that a culture of assessment also did not exist within instruction at their institutions. This is an interesting finding in that it contradicts some national studies that point to the culture of assessment taking root and beginning to flourish. Survey and qualitative studies conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA; Kinzie, 2010) revealed the prominent theme that assessment has taken root and is thriving on many campuses. Possible explanations for the discrepancy could be that respondents in the NILOA study had a stronger interest in the topic due to their association with the professional groups targeted and the fact that they chose to participate. It is possible that

the findings of this study represent more common practice or that the experience within the state of Oregon is unique. Additionally, the senior academic affairs officers at the institutions studied may report something different than the senior student affairs officers.

Study participants also identified a lack of role models in academic affairs, lack of institutional strategic planning, efforts discredited by the institution, and a lack of higher-level leadership expectations and support as factors that inhibit assessment. The existence of these factors at their institutions was reported by participants, which led to the overarching study theme of a limited culture of institutional support. This is an important finding because the literature reflects the importance of a unified, institution wide effort. Numerous research studies found internal integrated institutional and leadership support – tie to mission and strategic plan, communicating the importance and impact, institution wide activities focused on assessment, and use of data for decision-making - to be critical to establishing an assessment culture (Dale, 2009; Ebersole, 2007; Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Haney & McClellan, 2009; Jones, 2009; Kinzie, 2010; Peterson & Augustine, 2000b). These findings suggest dynamic relationships are necessary among institutional constituent groups and that a strategic focus from the top that emphasizes student learning may have a positive impact on assessment practice across the board.

Significant Barriers to Assessment

Findings from this study affirm the overwhelming finding in assessment research for both student affairs and instruction – resources are insufficient to support the development and sustainability of meaningful assessment practice. Participants were quick to identify that they need knowledgeable and skilled staff, training and professional development, additional staff and lower turnover rates, support from institutional research, and assessment specific staff and tools. Across the board, studies have identified time and capacity as the greatest barriers to practice (Banta, 2011; Bresciani, 2002; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008). This study was no different. The major theme of resource challenges emerged from the data and contributes to the sense that the administrators in this study are not well equipped in terms of institutional resources to lead assessment efforts.

Inability to prioritize assessment. Administrators have many competing priorities for which they are being held accountable. Multiple studies supported the imperative for significant involvement from senior level leadership including direct assessment activity and providing training and resources for staff (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Ebersole, 2007; Green, Jones, & Aloï, 2008; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). The administrators in this study largely affirmed that their attention is being pulled by many competing priorities and that assessment work often takes “the back burner.” Issues related to compliance, student behavior, and numerous external and internal student success initiatives leave little room for facilitating assessment practice with their teams. While some studies (Nunley, Bers, & Manning, 2011) viewed leaders in a background support role, findings from this study confirmed that student affairs administrators must play a very active role in training, establishing models, developing tools, and documenting assessment efforts, due to a lack of assessment specific staff and resources, as well as deficiencies in student affairs staff knowledge and skills. These results challenge the lack of research focused on the significance of leadership role in the assessment process (Hadden and Davies, 2002).

Knowledge, skill, and attitude deficiencies. Some studies identified attitudinal barriers as a factor impacting assessment efforts (Bresciani 2002). Study participants affirmed that staff resistance, poor attitude, and fear inhibit assessment practice in student affairs. Indeed, the administrators themselves reflected a range of knowledge and skills, as well as attitude towards assessment work. Harris and Cullen (2008) described that administrators must become knowledgeable about all aspects of assessment practice in order to influence its success. No studies were located that specifically addressed senior student or academic affairs officers’ level of knowledge and skills in assessment processes, models, and tools. This study affirmed that formal education and training in assessment practice remains extremely rare, as all but two participants identified relying on self-directed learning and hand-on experience to establish their knowledge and skill base. Interview data revealed a range of command of assessment concepts, terms, and models.

Blimling (2013) asserted leaders might be reluctant to invest in assessment efforts due to lack of time and interest. In a small qualitative study of college administrators,

however, Banta (2005) found that leaders believed that fostering a culture of evidence would lead to institutional transformation and improved student outcomes. Banta also claimed that leaders might be drawn to assessment as a way to focus the attention of faculty and staff on what is important. The administrators interviewed for this study affirmed that they believed assessment was the right thing to do to improve outcomes for students and credibility of student affairs contributions.

Hope For the Future of Assessment

The majority of findings of this study point to the challenges that senior student affairs officers at medium and large community colleges in the state of Oregon have had in achieving meaningful and integrated assessment practice in their divisions. Program reviews emerged as an approach to program level assessment as reported by almost all of the participants. While program review as an assessment tool did not specifically come up in the literature review, the practice is promising in that it ties instructional and student affairs efforts together, as reported in a previous section within this discussion. Participants confirmed either following academic units' lead or collaborating to design the institutional process together. Participants that confirmed completion of program reviews in student affairs reported very positive results and staff enthusiasm for the effort.

There is also hope for the future of assessment as witnessed by the generally positive attitude and optimism of the senior student affairs officers in this study. Unlike the findings of Blimling (2013) who asserted that many student services administrators do not have an interest in doing assessment, the leaders in this study overwhelmingly support the idea and the potential benefits of assessment practice within their divisions. Despite the fact that almost all participants cited no formal education or training in assessment practice, the level of confidence in their ability to lead assessment efforts is quite high. Many participants identified significant self-directed learning and engagement with peers in their field, as well as a commitment to continued efforts. As P1 declared, "I remain optimistic until I retire."

Finally, the sheer volume and longevity of literature published on assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education serves as an indicator that meaningful assessment practice may eventually take hold. The push for accountability of higher

education has not diminished. There may come a time when the “just-right paradigm” promoted by Wehlburg (2013) is fully established, with the core purpose of assessment being improvement of learning and subsequent documentation of results satisfying demands of accreditation and accountability to the public. The following section suggests implications for practice as a result of the findings of this study, which if heeded, may result in this ideal paradigm.

Summary of Discussion and Conclusions

This section discussed the major findings of this study within the context of the guiding theoretical framework of research on learning outcomes assessment in higher education. This theoretical framework of research asserts that leadership prioritize assessment practice and that various internal and external factors influence that practice. Key insights that emerged from the study findings were presented to contribute to further exploration and understanding of this research topic. The discussion affirmed responses to the study’s three guiding questions and situated them within the greater body of research. The first key insight was that this study affirmed that the practice of assessment in student affairs is perceived as imperative, as communicated in the literature. The second insight was that, despite the sense of imperative, cultures of assessment have yet to take hold within student affairs in the community colleges studied. The third insight was that significant barriers to assessment practice continue to exist, as is well documented in the literature. Finally, the fourth insight discussed was that there remains a hope for the future of assessment practice in student affairs as supported by the attitude and enthusiasm of this study’s subjects.

In conclusion, results of this study largely confirmed the body of research related to the sense of imperative to develop a culture of assessment in student affairs, as well as the factors and necessary conditions for such a culture to thrive. Results also highlighted that the obstacles to integrating a culture of assessment are real and are yet to be overcome within community college student affairs divisions. This study serves to illustrate that student affairs leaders may desire to respond to the call for accountability and to actualize recommendations from their field related to assessment of student learning, but be unable to answer to call due to the significant barriers that remain in the way.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study present practical implications for practitioners, administrators, and policy makers in the field of student affairs, in community colleges, and at a state or federal level. Working from the premise that there is a benefit to integrating assessment into practice and that it will result in improved student outcomes at our institutions of higher education, the following actions should be considered.

At a policy-setting level, accrediting bodies and state agencies must set clearer expectations for assessment of services and programs that touch students outside the classroom. As emerged from this study, paying lip service to the practice without genuinely holding student affairs units accountable is not compelling institutions to prioritize the work. If institutions received recommendations for lack of compliance with standards – and if the work of student affairs was more clearly defined within those standards - prioritization of action would follow, as we have seen in instruction. Enhanced training for peer evaluators would support this effort. Additionally, results of this study point to the impact that state or federal performance-based funding may have on assessment practice. If funding for institutions were tied to demonstration of impact and student achievement, there would be a compelling reason for college's to integrate a cycle of assessment and continual improvement in a meaningful way.

A challenge presented by the findings in this study is that simply advising institutions and administrators to assess their programs and services is not enough. The cases in this study communicated a high level of imperative to do the work and a genuine sense that it would make a positive difference to students. However, granting the work a high level of importance did not translate to action. A critical missing element is resources. Institutions demonstrate what they value through their investments. The participants in this study have tried to make progress in the work through their own efforts. They have served as the trainers, model developers, tool creators, data generators, and cheerleaders. They have attempted to take on the duties of a specialized area of knowledge and skills. It would be similar to senior student affairs officers picking up academic advising shifts as part of their leadership workload. Institutions must invest in specifically trained assessment specialists, as well as data management systems, for the work to happen.

While specialists are a key to supporting efforts, a culture of assessment relies on full participation of faculty, staff, and administrators. This study revealed that current masters and doctoral level education programs might be missing the mark on preparing professionals for the nuts and bolts work of assessment. Professional education programs in student affairs should integrate practical skill-building curriculum and practice with qualitative and quantitative program level assessment tools. Student affairs professionals at all levels should have a high level of comfort with assessment aims, concepts, and terminology. This study also found that while administrators are taking advantage of the many training opportunities and reading the literature focused on assessment in their field, a desire for a more effective model of practice remains. Professional organizations should invest resources in developing more manageable models and tools that translate directly to assessing the types of services and interventions found within student affairs.

Finally, even with more knowledgeable and skilled staff and administrators, developing a true “culture” of assessment will require an integrated and strategic approach at the institutional level. This study found a limited culture of institutional support for assessment, as evidenced by a lack of explicit connection with institutional strategic direction and a lack of accountability set by leadership. At the executive level, leadership needs to become more top-down in their approach and set clear expectations for all units – in and out of the classroom – to operate in and document a continual improvement mindset. Assessment plans and reports must be required of all units and must be explicitly tied to the institution’s strategic vision, as well as funding decisions. Literature advises that the actual work of assessment must happen bottom-up, in order to meaningfully engage faculty and staff. However, the most interested and enthusiastic staff will disengage if they do not see their efforts tied to the greater college vision and translated into some direct benefit to their programs or the students they serve.

The recommendations outlined here represent a multi-pronged approach to compelling and investing in a culture of assessment. Shift in one area would likely not see significant results. For a new culture to be established a holistic vision and plan for change must be in place.

Limitations of the Study

This study used a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study method to answer its guiding research questions. It sought to understand the perspectives of individual administrators – the cases – and as such, presents a very small sample size within a very particular context. The limitations of this study may be presented in terms of the study context and the study design.

Study Context

Cases in this study were limited to medium and large institutions. Although intentional, in order to conduct a more valid cross-case analysis, the findings may not have relevancy to smaller or larger institutions as the organizational dynamics and resources may be different. Another limitation related to context is that the study occurred within the state of Oregon only. The particular dynamics of the state may influence the experience of participants. Oregon has a very loosely coupled community college system, with 17 independent institutions that connect through a state oversight and funding agency and through participation in a voluntary organization focused primarily on lobbying efforts. A study of cases within states that have a centralized community college governance system may yield a different experience for administrators and a different set of research findings.

Study Design

As a qualitative study with a limited sample size and purposive sampling, the findings of this study are not generalizable across the broader population. It is impossible to assert that the lived experience of the administrators in this study would be the same as another group of administrators. Nor does the qualitative thematic analysis approach of this study yield quantifiable results that would serve to rank or place emphasis on certain results over others. In keeping with the qualitative case study approach, there was an attempt to present all voices equally in the findings, even outlier perspectives. This approach could be viewed as a limitation in that certain minority perspectives could get more attention than deserved within the broader conversation on assessment. Another possible limitation of the study design is the research instrument used. The semi-structured interview protocol included open-ended questions that stemmed directly from the three guiding research questions. This instrument may have served to guide the

participants' responses in a manner that may have limited a free association with the topic and the potential of other emergent themes.

Areas for Further Research

All good inquiry leads to even more inquiry. This study illuminated one particular aspect of the problem of assessment of student learning outcomes within higher education. While the findings are informative and may have implications for practice, as well as theory building, the study generates many ideas for further research on this topic.

One area for further research would be replicating this study in different contexts to overcome some of the identified limitations identified in the previous section. *Would student affairs administrators from other states reveal a similar lived experience? Would different findings emerge within smaller or larger institutions?* Another informative context for replicating this case study would be to interview senior academic affairs officers and community college presidents. Findings from this study revealed a perception that the academic side of the house was also struggling with implementing assessment practice. *What is the lived experience of senior academic leadership related to implementing student learning outcomes assessment? Are the factors that facilitate and inhibit assessment practice the same?* Findings also revealed a limited culture of institutional support for the practice at the case sites studied. *What would college presidents reveal about their action agendas as it relates to establishing cultures of assessment in their institutions? Would states that have implemented performance-based funding reveal different findings?*

This qualitative study was primarily descriptive and sought to explore and understand the lived experience of a particular set of individuals within a particular context. While analytic generalizations have been drawn by the researcher, and also allow readers to draw their own, the findings do not provide explanations or correlations that may be helpful to practitioners. Findings of this study present an unranked list of factors that are viewed as facilitating or inhibiting assessment practice. *Which factors have the greatest influence on practice? What particular conditions would tip the scale or be motivating factors for senior student affairs officers to prioritize assessment in their action agendas?* Further survey and/or correlational quantitative studies could shed light on these questions.

Another potential area for research related to this study would be an analysis of the organizational or leadership conditions necessary for shifts in practice related to assessment. This study revealed that after decades of prescriptive literature and emphasis by professional organizations to foment assessment of student learning within student affairs, an entire cohort of executive level leadership in one state has been unsuccessful in doing so fully. *What organizational and leadership theories explain the dynamic of desire for versus actual action taken? At what level is organizational change necessary for the full integration of cultures of assessment in higher education?*

Finally, another question that stems from this study is *does it even matter?* There is very little evidence in the body of literature that the practice of assessment in higher education – in or out of the classroom - leads to improved outcomes for students. Perhaps the most important area of further research would be evaluating the actual impact that having a strong culture of assessment within student affairs divisions has on student learning and development. *Are improvements to services and interventions being made as a result of assessment such that there is a demonstrable impact on student achievement?*

Summary of Discussion and Implications

This qualitative multiple case study sought to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within their community college student affairs divisions. This closing chapter served to discuss the major findings and key insights of the study, which concluded that assessment practice is viewed as imperative by the senior student affairs officers, there is a lack of culture of assessment within student affairs divisions, there are significant barriers to assessment practice within student affairs, and there is hope for an expanded assessment practice in student affairs in the future.

This chapter proceeded to discuss possible implications of the study for practice including specific recommendations for policy-makers, institutional leadership, and professional education programs. Recommendations addressed factors believed to facilitate assessment practice such as enhanced accountability, improved education and training, increased resources, and heightened institutional organization. Next, limitations

of the study were presented in terms of study context and study design. Finally, areas for further research inspired by this study were offered.

The results of this study affirmed the research problem it proposed to address: assessment of student learning within student affairs has not taken hold in a meaningful way in community colleges. Findings affirm both the role and inadequacy of institutional leadership in addressing the problem. As accountability for enhanced student outcomes continues and builds steam, it is imperative that student affairs staff are prepared to articulate the importance of the work they do that leads to improved student success. Until there is shared meaning in the field, and across institutional units, of the value and the imperative of learning outcomes assessment, a meaningful shift in practice will not occur. Implications for practice point to the need for clear and mandated compliance expectations at the state and accrediting agency levels. This would lead to a sense of urgency around the practice at an institutional level, which would inspire top-level leadership to integrate a data-driven and strategic approach to guiding the work of their colleges. Just as we have taken to say that “students don’t do optional,” nor do the staff and leadership that run our institutions. Wanting to do the right thing has proven to not be enough. Additionally, the development of an approach to assessment in student affairs (and instruction) that can be truly integrated into day-to-day work, as opposed to being viewed as a separate task is critical. Living systems theory points to the need for a system to coalesce around a clear sharing meaning, which will result in all parts of the system self-organizing around it. Until this “meaning” is better identified and the practice of assessment leads to tangible benefits for students, staff, and the organization on the ground, it will continue to flail.

Final Thoughts and Reflections

As a first time researcher, this dissertation presented the opportunity to learn and practice new skills pertinent to my work as a senior administrator in higher education. The interpretive social science approach resonated with my personal epistemology and felt congruent throughout the entire process. The process that led to this final product was long, arduous, and lonely. It affirmed for me that I am a practitioner at heart. I thrive on “doing.” I am most alive and satisfied professionally when I am engaged with colleagues and students, determining how to improve upon systems and services. I

appreciate tangible action plans that lead to demonstrable outcomes. This research process pushed me to develop a different professional side - that of “knowing.” It required deep reflection on concepts, thoughts, and theories. It required abstraction and interpretation within a broader body of knowledge.

In order to reconcile this heavy thinking and abstract process with my “doing” side, I must connect to the study findings as a practitioner. The major findings of this study were both affirming and alarming. Affirming in that the experiences of my colleagues in this study highly reflect my own. I, too, have wanted to establish and integrate a culture of evidence within my division, but have been ultimately unsuccessful in doing so. I resonate deeply with the lack of formal education, limited bandwidth of my staff and myself, and the lack of broader institutional and external support and accountability for assessment in student affairs. I am alarmed by these findings in that no one has been able to truly figure it out, which makes me question why leaders like me are agonizing over and feeling guilty about our lack of progress. If the work of assessment, as defined in the extensive body of literature on the topic, were so critical to the outcomes of our institutions, wouldn’t our systems be shifting to accommodate the practice?

Ultimately, this process led me to understand that as a practitioner it is critical to stop once and awhile and think deeply about our day-to-day actions. As a leader and public service agent, I am responsible for investing resources where they will make a positive difference. Without pausing to study the outcomes of our institutional actions, and changing course as necessary, I am not being a responsible leader. Indeed, that is the very goal of the topic of this study – assessment. Research – in some shape or form - will remain a critical supporting aspect of my work in higher education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate in Study



RECRUITMENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS

Dear *(insert Senior Student Affairs Officer name)*:

I am a doctoral student at Oregon State University in the Community College Leadership Program. My dissertation focuses on understanding the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within student affairs divisions. To this end, I am seeking to conduct confidential interviews with senior student affairs officers at medium and large community colleges in the state of Oregon. You have been identified as a senior student affairs officer at your institution based on inclusion as a member of the Oregon Council of Student Services Administrators. If you are considered the senior student affairs officer at your institution and have the primary senior level administrative assignment (over 50% of workload) of managing student affairs or student services areas, I am hoping you will agree to participate in this study.

The interviews will be face-to-face, on your campus or at a location of your choosing, and should last about one hour depending on the length of your answers. The interview questions will focus on your perceptions of the practice of student learning outcomes assessment within student affairs. I will be making audio recordings of the interviews, which will then be transcribed. The names of the colleges and participants will be kept confidential.

I am conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Earl "Joe" Johnson, my major professor at Oregon State University. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. Your participation in the interview is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the process at any time.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have about the study or the interview process. Please email me or call me if you are willing to participate in an interview. An Informed Consent Form is attached for your convenience.

Thank you for your time and for considering this request.

Best regards,

Heather Lang


langh@onid.oregonstate.edu

(503) 290-6876

Perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers on the State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

	EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH
Project Title: Principal Investigator: Student Researcher: Version Date:	Perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers on the State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Dr. Earl P. "Joe" Johnson Heather Lang April 29, 2015

Introduction: This study seeks to examine and understand the perspectives of senior student affairs officers on the state of student learning outcomes assessment within community college student affairs divisions.

Procedures: This study asks that you participate in a confidential, face-to-face, audio-recorded interview. Audio-recording of the interview is required for participation in the study. During the interview you will be asked a series of open-ended questions about student learning outcomes assessment. The questions are designed to collect your perception of the state of student learning outcomes assessment practice within student affairs divisions. Depending on the length of your responses, the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. The student researcher or a professional transcription service will transcribe the recording at a later time. You will also be asked for reference and access to any documents that substantiate or pertain to your interview responses. You may be contacted after initial data analysis to confirm initial interpretations and analyses. You are not required to participate in this activity, however if you choose to do so you will have 14 days to respond to the request.

Risks/Discomforts: There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participants. However, it is hoped that through your participation, researchers will learn more about the current state of learning outcomes assessment practice within student affairs.

Confidentiality: The answers you provide will be kept confidential, and your name and identity will not be connected to the interview transcript. However, security and confidentiality of information collected and stored on paper, or through electronic means, cannot be guaranteed. There is the possibility that information collected and stored can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, arrive late or incomplete, or contain viruses. Additionally, there is a chance that we could accidentally disclose information that identifies you.

Compensation: There is no compensation.

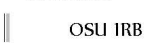
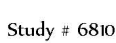
Participation: Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will not affect your employment or benefits at your respective institution. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to you or your institution.

Questions about the Research: If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Heather Lang, student researcher, at 503-290-6876 or via email at langh@onid.oregonstate.edu.

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant: If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the student researcher, you may contact Dr. Earl P. "Joe" Johnson, Major Professor and Principal Investigator, at joe.johnson@oregonstate.edu; or if you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

I have read and understand the above consent form and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study and to be audio-recorded.

Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature	Date
	
OSU IRB	Study # 6810
	Expiration Date: 04/28/2020

Appendix C

Interview Protocol



PI: Dr. Earl P. "Joe" Johnson
SR: Heather Lang

Protocol Attachment

Interview Guide
v. date 06052015

Dissertation Proposal Title: Perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers on the State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

ACTION PRIOR TO INTERVIEW:

Participants will be provided with the working definitions as used in this study for the following terms: Assessment, assessment data, culture of assessment, student learning outcomes, program outcomes, senior student affairs officer, and student affairs.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

The below open-ended questions will be posed to participants. Follow-up questions may be asked in order to encourage the participants to elaborate on or clarify their answers.

Experience and setting:

- Before we begin, do you have any questions about the working definitions of terms as used in this study?
- To start, I would like to understand a little more about your experience and institutional organization.

As an administrator of student affairs in higher education:

How long have you been a senior student affairs officer at your current institution?

How about at other institutions?

Have you had other administrative level roles in student affairs? If so, what positions, where, and for how long?

Did you work as a practitioner in student affairs prior to your leadership role(s)?

Organizational structure:

What is the organizational relationship between instruction & students affairs at your institution?

How coordinated is the leadership and work of the two areas?

1. What type of education and/or training have you had related to assessment? Include description of specific training related to *student learning outcomes* assessment?
 - a. Formal education programs?
 - b. Professional development opportunities?
 - c. Self-study – if so, what and when?
 - d. Training from your institution?
 - e. Other?
2. What is your understanding of the practice of program level assessment and the assessment of student learning outcomes in particular?
 - a. How would you describe program or service outcomes? What has been your experience with assessment of program or service outcomes?
 - b. How would you describe student learning outcomes? What has been your experience with assessment of student learning outcomes?
3. What is your perception of the practice of student learning outcomes assessment specific to student affairs?
 - a. How important to the work?
 - b. How is it emphasized in the field?
 - c. What is required of leaders? What is required of staff?

- d. Is there clarity about the practice of outcomes assessment in the field?
4. Describe what the actual practice of outcomes assessment in student affairs looks like at your institution.
 - a. How does it connect or relate to assessment in instructional programs?
 - b. Are student learning outcomes being identified and assessed?
 - c. To what extent does a "culture of assessment" exist?
 - d. If I were to ask student affairs staff to describe the practice of assessment in the division and within their programs, what would they say?
5. As a leader, how do you prioritize assessment of student learning outcomes in relation to the other work of your division?
 - a. How does your staff know that outcomes assessment work is a priority (or not)?
 - b. Describe/provide examples of your specific actions as a leader related to assessment
 - c. Is the topic of assessment coming up daily? Weekly? Monthly? Quarterly? Annually?
 - d. Is the work of assessment assigned daily? Weekly? Monthly? Quarterly? Annually?
 - e. Is the work of assessment integrated into staff performance reviews?
6. As a leader, how do you use assessment data for planning and budget decisions at your institution?
 - a. Use of program/service assessment data?
 - b. Use of learning outcomes assessment data?
 - c. Can you provide examples?
7. What internal and external (to the institution) factors do you believe *support* the adoption and practice of student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs at your institution?
8. What internal and external (to the institution) factors do you believe *serve as barriers* to the adoption and practice of student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs at your institution?

Documents:

- Can you provide or point me to documents that I may review for this study that specifically pertain to or provide evidence of your leadership practice and actions related to student learning outcomes assessment?

These may include, but are not limited to: assessment documents or guidelines, meeting agendas, staff announcements or communications, staff training/professional development agendas or outlines, daily action item lists, criteria used for staff performance evaluations, your annual goals, your performance evaluations, hiring screening documents, etc.

Appendix D

Initial Thematic Framework

LANG Study - Initial Thematic Framework (v.3)

[v.2 changes](#)

[v.3 changes](#)

1 Assessment Failures

- 1.1 Unsuccessful attempts and failure
- 1.2 No culture of assessment
- 1.3 No strategic assessment plan
- 1.4 No sustainable assessment process
- 1.5 [Resistance to change](#)

2 Assessment Successes

- 2.1 Multiple attempts and pockets of success
- 2.2 Emerging culture of assessment
- 2.3 Assessment efforts leading to planning
- 2.4 Program reviews
- 2.5 Positive impact of grants
- 2.6 Institutional student surveys

3 Leadership

- 3.1 ~~Lack of~~ Education/training
- 3.2 ~~Lack of~~ [Level of](#) confidence
- 3.3 Always higher priorities
- 3.4 Failing as leader
- 3.5 Accountability to assessment practice
- 3.6 Imperative/priority of assessment
- 3.7 Negative impact of not assessing

4 Resource Challenges

- 4.1 Lack of time
- 4.2 Lack of human resources
- 4.3 Lack of training and support
- 4.4 Staff and leadership turnover

5 Assessment Practice Challenges

- 5.1 Lack of assessment guides and tools
- 5.2 Lack of clarity regarding assessment practice
- 5.3 Difficulty measuring outcomes and impact
- 5.4 Difficulty identifying & measuring student learning outcomes
- 5.5 Difficulty closing the loop
- 5.6 [SLO assessment poor fit for student affairs](#)

6 Internal Drivers

- 6.1 Executive leadership expectations
- 6.2 Consistent use of language
- 6.3 Retention/completion efforts
- 6.4 Institutional Research pressure and support
- 6.5 Individuals with skill/capacity
- 6.6 Instructional assessment as prompt and guide

7 External Drivers

- 7.1 Accreditation
- 7.2 Outcomes-based funding
- 7.3 Peers/professional associations
- 7.4 [Heightened sense of accountability](#)

Appendix E

Final Thematic Framework and Cases Crosswalk

Final Thematic Framework and Cases Crosswalk

Lang Study: Perceptions on the State of Learning Outcomes Assessment

THEMES & SUB-THEMES	CASES								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 - FACTORS THAT INHIBIT ASSESSMENT PRACTICE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Internal factors that inhibit (1.1)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of leadership expectations and support (1.1.1)	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	
Lack of shared language/definitions (1.1.2)	x			x		x	x		
Lack of institutional strategic planning (1.1.3)	x	x	x	x					
Overreliance on Institutional Research data (1.1.4)					x	x			x
Lack of role model from academic affairs (1.1.5)	x	x	x	x	x		x		x
Lack of resources (1.1.6)	x	x	x		x		x		
Lack of staff knowledge/skills (1.1.7)	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Staff resistance/poor attitude/fear (1.1.8)		x		x	x	x		x	x
Efforts discredited by institution (1.1.9)		x		x			x		
External factors that inhibit (1.2)	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Accreditation not holding SA accountable (1.2.1)		x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of outcomes-based funding model (1.2.2)	x			x	x				
Lack of external accountability/state system (1.2.3)		x		x	x		x		
Lack of tools/models for practice in field (1.2.4)				x		x			
2 - FACTORS THAT FACILITATE ASSESSMENT PRACTICE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Internal factors that facilitate (2.1)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Leadership expectations and support (2.1.1)	x	x	x			x	x		x
Shared language/definitions (2.1.2)	x	x	x	x	x		x		x
Institutional strategic planning and direction (2.1.3)	x	x	x	x	x	x			
Support of Institutional Research (2.1.4)	x					x			x
Following lead of academic affairs (2.1.5)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Resources/potential of funding (2.1.6)	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Individual staff strengths in assessment (2.1.7)	x	x							x
Staff engagement/value placed on assess. (2.1.8)		x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Enhancement of cred./validity/justification (2.1.9)		x	x	x		x		x	x
Focus on student success/outcomes (2.1.10)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
External factors that facilitate (2.2)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Accreditation expectations (2.2.1)	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Potential of outcomes-based funding (2.2.2)	x	x		x	x	x			x
Potential of external accountability (2.2.3)		x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Increased presence/expect. in field/peers (2.2.4)	x	x			x				x
3 - REALITY VERSUS ASPIRATION	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Perceived imperative (3.1)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pockets of success (3.2)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Limited progress (3.3)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
4 - KNOWLEDGE, SKILL, & ATTITUDE AS A LEADER	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Level of formal education/training (4.1)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Attitude (4.2)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
5 – LIMITED CULTURE OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Inadequate leadership actions (5.1)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of strategic direction (5.2)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
6 – RESOURCE CHALLENGES	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Human resource limitations (6.1)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Limited models & tools (6.2)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	