WILLIAM & MARY
CHARTERED 1693

W&M ScholarWorks

Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

Toward Efficacy: Examining The Reported Impact of Quality Enhancement Plans on Student Learning in Postsecondary Contexts

Madeline Joy Smith
College of William and Mary - School of Education, mjsmith01@email.wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

🟡 Part of the Education Commons

TOWARD EFFICACY: EXAMINING THE REPORTED IMPACT OF QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLANS ON STUDENT LEARNING IN POSTSECONDARY CONTEXTS

_____

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Madeline J. Smith

March 2017

TOWARD EFFICACY: EXAMINING THE REPORTED IMPACT OF QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLANS ON STUDENT LEARNING IN POSTSECONDARY CONTEXTS

By

Madeline J. Smith

_____

Approved March 2017 by

Pamela L. Eddy, Ph.D.
Chairperson of Doctoral Committee

Christopher R. Gareis, Ed.D.

Jacob D. Joseph, Ph.D.

Dedication

To Twitch—you were born the day of my orientation and have grown to be my favorite

study buddy. Thanks for the memories, pup.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) mandates the completion of a

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which requires institutions to develop and implement

initiatives to improve student learning or the student learning environment as part of the

reaffirmation process (SACS, 2016a). The purpose of this study was to examine the

reported impact of QEPs of various institutional types and topic areas on student learning

at SACS-accredited institutions. Additionally, this study also examined the effective

practices that institutions have identified in the implementation of their QEPs.

The data analysis revealed the following four areas of student learning that the

QEP reportedly impacted: critical thinking, global competence, information literacy, and

reading and writing mastery. The data analysis also revealed the following three

effective practices for use during QEP implementation: the mixed use of direct and

indirect measures of assessment, communities of practice, and high-impact practices.

These findings indicated the occurrence of organizational learning during the QEP

process, as well as a potential for interorganizational learning that could further foster

innovation and maximize impact on student learning.

Keywords: assessment, interorganizational learning, regional accreditation,
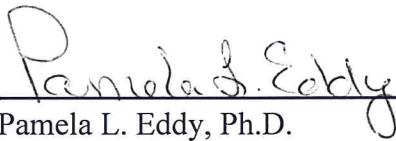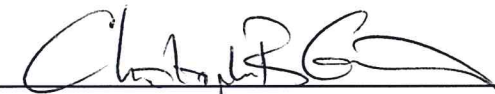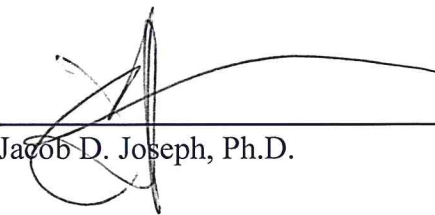
postsecondary education, student learning

TOWARD EFFICACY: EXAMINING THE REPORTED IMPACT OF QUALITY

ENHANCEMENT PLANS ON STUDENT LEARNING IN POSTSECONDARY

CONTEXTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, accreditation in the United States has evolved in both function and purpose to support continuous improvement among colleges and universities (D. Eaton, 2015; Humphreys & Gaston, 2016). Yet, accrediting organizations continue to receive an array of criticisms from institutional stakeholders. Robert Dickeson (2009), a former vice president of the Lumina Foundation, succinctly summarized the major criticisms of accreditation with the following: "Accreditation of higher education in the United States is a crazy-quilt of activities, processes and structures that is fragmented, arcane, more historical than logical, and has outlived its usefulness" (p. 1). Rather than viewing accreditation as a means to improve, many institutional stakeholders instead see it as a bureaucratic and onerous task that fails to yield meaningful results (D. Eaton, 2010).

Despite such criticisms, accreditors continue to develop and promote the continuous improvement aspect of accreditation (Wheelan & Elgart, 2015). For example, most accreditors require colleges and universities to engage in a self-study process that ultimately enables them to implement plans for the improvement of student learning (Humphreys & Gaston, 2016). Many institutions participate in this practice of looking inward at their programming and outcomes (D. Eaton, 2015). In the present study, however, I posit that institutional stakeholders have not had the means to systematically review the lessons learned from the self-studies of others in order to improve the efficacy of their own practices.

Study Context

Originally instituted to improve educational standards, the accreditation of

higher education in the United States (U.S.) dates back more than a century with the

formation of the New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in

1885 (New America, 2013). As D. Eaton (2015) found, the mission of accreditation

since its inception has broadly been to provide quality assurance for institutions of

higher education (IHEs). Private, non-profit organizations are responsible for the

accreditation of institutions in all 50 states that seek to remain eligible for federal

financial aid as well as institutions in approximately 125 other countries (D. Eaton,

2015). Two primary types of accreditation exist—institutional and programmatic.

The focus of the present study will be on the former. According to the U.S.

Department of Education (USDoE) (n.d.), "Institutional accreditation normally

applies to an entire institution, indicating that each of an institution's parts is

contributing to the achievement of [its] objectives" (para. 3). Programmatic

accreditation, rather, pertains to the evaluation of quality assurance at the program,

department, or school level (USDoE, n.d.). Examples of programmatic accreditors

include the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and the

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

Under the umbrella of institutional accreditation, two sub-types of

accreditation exist, national and regional. National accreditors primarily differ from

regional accreditors in that they tend to work with non-degree and/or for-profit IHEs

as opposed to degree-granting, non-profit IHEs (USDoE, 2016). An example of a

national accreditor is the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools

(ACICS). Currently, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and/or

the USDoE authorizes six regional accreditors, each responsible for the institutional

accreditation of IHEs in the states that comprise their respective regions. These six

accreditors include: the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the Middle States

Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), the New England Association of

Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the Northwest Commission on Colleges and

Universities (NWCCU), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS),

and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) (CHEA, 2015).

Depicted in Figure 1 is a map of the states (in gray) that fall under the purview

of SACS for the purposes of institutional accreditation. Approximately 800 IHEs

within these states maintain SACS accreditation. Upon initially being awarded

accredited status by SACS, an IHE must undergo what is known as *reaffirmation*

(i.e., reaccreditation) every 10 years. This process involves both off-site and on-site

reviews of an institution by a team of peer reviewers. As of 2001, each IHE that

undergoes the reaffirmation process must submit a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

to a team of peer reviewers. The completion of an acceptable QEP fulfills Core

Requirement 2.12 of the SACS *Principles of Accreditation* (SACS, 2016a).

SACS (2016a) defines the QEP as a document in which an IHE identifies key

issues emerging from its assessment processes and details a plan for improving

student learning or the environment that supports student learning based on these

issues. SACS expects an IHE to engage a variety of campus stakeholders, including

administrators and faculty, in the selection of a topic for the QEP. Recent examples

of topics include *Learning in a Team Environment* at the University of Alabama at

Birmingham (2015) and *Learning by Doing: Inquiry-Based Experiential Education* at

the University of Tampa (2015). Although the topic selection process is primarily

internal, IHEs can consult the QEPs of comparable institutions as a secondary guide

to their decision-making regarding topic options. For example, Mercer University

(n.d.) features a link to other QEPs on its website that served as a resource during the

institution's QEP topic selection. Of note, since topic selection is an IHE-regulated

process, QEP topics tend to reflect areas of student learning that IHEs believe to be of

vital importance to their respective institutional missions.
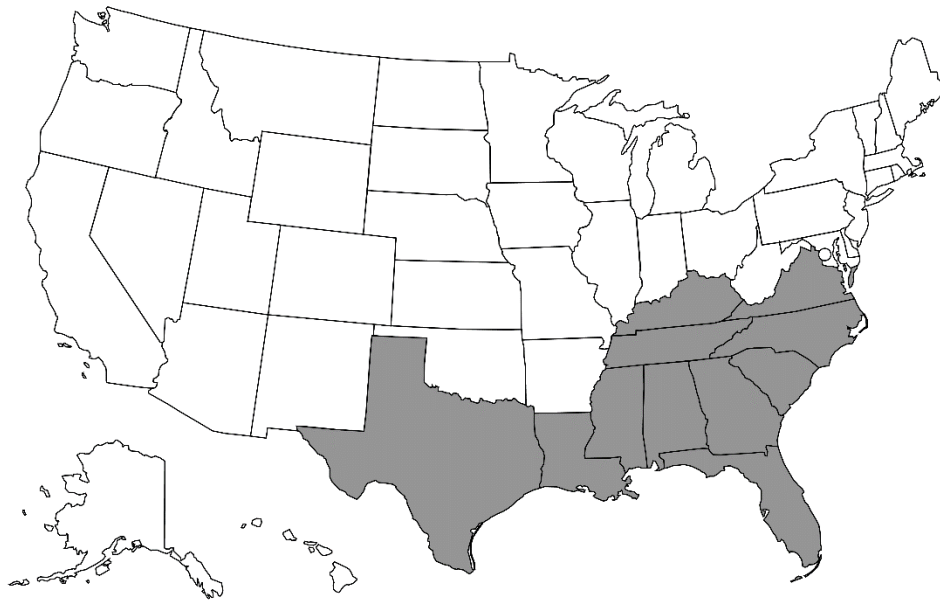
Figure 1. States (in gray) with colleges and universities under the purview of the
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

In part due to SACS' practice of reviewing IHEs every 10 years as opposed to

the more typical 5- to 7-year timeline that other regional accreditors follow, IHEs

must submit a QEP Impact Report (IR) five years into a reaffirmation cycle to enable

SACS to monitor the progress of the QEP implementation (SACS, 2016b). SACS

(2013) specifies that the QEP IR should not exceed 10 pages in length, and must include the following:

- List of initial goals and outcomes of the QEP

- Changes made to the QEP and rationale for the changes

- Description of the QEP's impact on student learning and/or the environment that supports student learning

- Reflection on what IHE has learned from the QEP

Upon the submission of a QEP IR, the SACS Committee on Fifth-Year Interim Reports reviews the document and either accepts it with comments or refers it to the committees on compliance and reports. The latter referral typically occurs when an IHE does not adequately address all requirements of the QEP IR, in which case the college or university must submit an additional plan within 12 months that revisits the implementation of its QEP (SACS, 2013). In the following sections, I address the problem and purpose of the present study, which pertain to improving the efficacy of QEP IRs.

Problem Statement

Although the successful implementation of a QEP can benefit an IHE in a myriad of ways, this additional mandate requires a significant commitment of institutional resources during a reaffirmation cycle. In a letter to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality, former Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman (2011) stated, "It is becoming common for institutions to report that the cost of preparing for a decennial [accreditation] review exceeded $1 million and occupied hundreds of hours of staff time" (p. 3). Thus, such a commitment should

yield QEPs that are as efficacious as possible in terms of improving student learning.

For the purposes of this study, *student learning* is defined as the knowledge, skills,

and dispositions (i.e., values and beliefs) that students are able to demonstrate as an

outcome of competency-based educational programs (SACS, n.d.). SACS (n.d.)

requires that the assessment of student learning includes direct measures, such as

rubric scores, rather than credit hours or clock hours.

In a study on the influential factors involved in the QEP process, Cruise

(2007) found that best practices for satisfying the QEP requirement had not yet been

identified. This lack of best practices was due in part to the relatively new nature of

the implementation of measures to enhance student learning as a regional

accreditation requirement (Cruise, 2007). The problem for the present study emerged

largely because, in the decade that has passed since the time of Cruise's (2007) study,

limited research has been conducted in an attempt to identify effective practices in

QEP implementation from which all IHEs can learn. In turn, this may compromise

the ability of IHEs to ensure that their QEPs are as efficacious as possible in terms of

the overall impact of the QEP on student learning.

Interorganizational learning (IOL) theory, which served as the theoretical

framework for this study, helps institutional stakeholders to better understand how

and why IHEs can learn from each other with regard to the QEP process. According

to the tenets of IOL theory:

> Knowledge creation occurs in the context of a community, one that is fluid
>
> and evolving rather than tightly bound or static…Sources of innovation do not
>
> reside exclusively inside firms; instead, they are commonly found in the

interstices between firms, universities. (Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996,

p. 121)

Broadening the literature base regarding the lessons learned among IHEs in the QEP

process therefore becomes important, as IHEs are in a position to innovate partly on

the basis of such lessons. In turn, such innovation could maximize the efficacy of

QEPs and ultimately improve student learning outcomes (SLOs). This study

examined the impact that QEPs have reportedly had on student learning in order to

better enable the sharing of effective QEP implementation practices between IHEs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the reported impact of QEPs of

various institutional types and topic areas on student learning at SACS-accredited

IHEs. Additionally, this study also sought to examine the effective practices that

IHEs have identified in the implementation of their QEPs. This study relied on the

use of reported data, and I did not evaluate the accuracy of the QEP IRs. Here,

accuracy refers to the extent to which the data in the QEP IRs are actually

representative of an IHE's QEP process. As noted above, the present study addressed

a gap in the extant literature pertaining to the identification of effective practices in

QEP implementation, as evidenced by the reported impact of QEPs on student

learning.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study. Of note, I intentionally

chose to forego the use of the term *best* practices in this study and instead used

effective practices in order to convey that context matters in the QEP implementation

8

process. Practices are not necessarily better or worse than each other, but rather serve the diverse needs of IHEs in different ways.

1. According to Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Impact Reports (IRs), what is the reported impact of QEPs on student learning within the first five years of implementation?

    a. How, if at all, does the reported impact of QEPs on student learning vary by institutional type?

    b. How, if at all, does the reported impact of QEPs on student learning vary by QEP topic area?

2. What have institutions identified as effective practices of QEP implementation within the first five years of their plans?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will first and foremost enable IHEs to learn from the lessons of their peers as they implement their QEPs. According to my observations, QEPs have historically had a tendency to cluster around certain topic areas (e.g., improving research or writing skills). Also, similar institutional types (e.g., baccalaureate colleges, doctoral universities) tend to select similar topics in part due to a SACS requirement that the topics be aligned with institutional mission (SACS, 2016a). Providing IHEs with access to research that examines the impact that related QEP topics have had on student learning, as well as effective practices for QEP implementation, should better enable IHEs to maximize the efficacy of their QEP processes. This study did not seek to promote homogeneity among IHEs through the application of the IOL framework. Rather, I applied this framework in

9

order to better enable IHEs to determine which QEP implementation practices best fit their individual needs. Further, this study also informs the SACS reaffirmation process, as the findings provide this accrediting organization with an overview of how various QEPs have reportedly impacted student learning. Although SACS currently assesses each QEP individually, the findings of this study may better enable the accreditor to determine whether the QEP IR requirement is meeting its intended objectives on a regional scale.

Theoretical Framework

This study was situated within the social constructivist research paradigm. According to Schwandt (2007), the basic tenets of social constructivism hold that "We do not construct our interpretations in isolation, but, rather, against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (p. 38). As Schwandt's interpretation of social constructivism applies to this study, IHEs do not construct their understandings of how to improve student learning and implement their QEPs in the context of a vacuum. Rather, they have the opportunity to learn from within their own institutions as well as from other institutions in order to bolster the efficacy of their QEPs. Schwandt (2007) further explained that, with the use of this paradigm, one must specify what is being constructed. Hacking (1999) identified three different categories of social constructs: (a) items or objects; (b) ideas; and (c) facts. The present study involved an examination all three categories, as the QEP implementation process requires a convergence of ideas and facts to produce the physical QEP and QEP IR documents. I used the lens of social constructivism to examine the implementation of the QEP through the design of the QEP IR, taking

into consideration the context in which the implementation process occurred (e.g., institutional type).

The present study was also framed by interorganizational learning (IOL) theory. This theory holds that the interactions between organizations "improve and expand each participant's knowledge base and boost the potential to create individual and collective comparative advantages" (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014, p. 290). IOL builds on Crossan, Lane, and White's (1999) organizational learning framework through the addition of *cooperation* as part of the updated framework. Here, cooperation is defined as the relational strategies that exist between organizations that seek to gain knowledge and grow from each other (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). If IHEs seek to improve their QEP implementation practices, such relational strategies may include building upon the findings of the present study and opening lines of communication (e.g., via institutional websites) between institutions in order to share effective practices. According to IOL theory, new knowledge creation is a central aim, which—in addition to cooperation—requires engaging in the concurrent processes of intuiting, integrating, interpreting, and institutionalizing knowledge. Through these processes, learning episodes occur and organizations (e.g., IHEs) can move from existing knowledge utilization to new knowledge creation (Crossan et al., 1999; Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). Figure 2 summarizes the processes involved in the application of IOL theory.
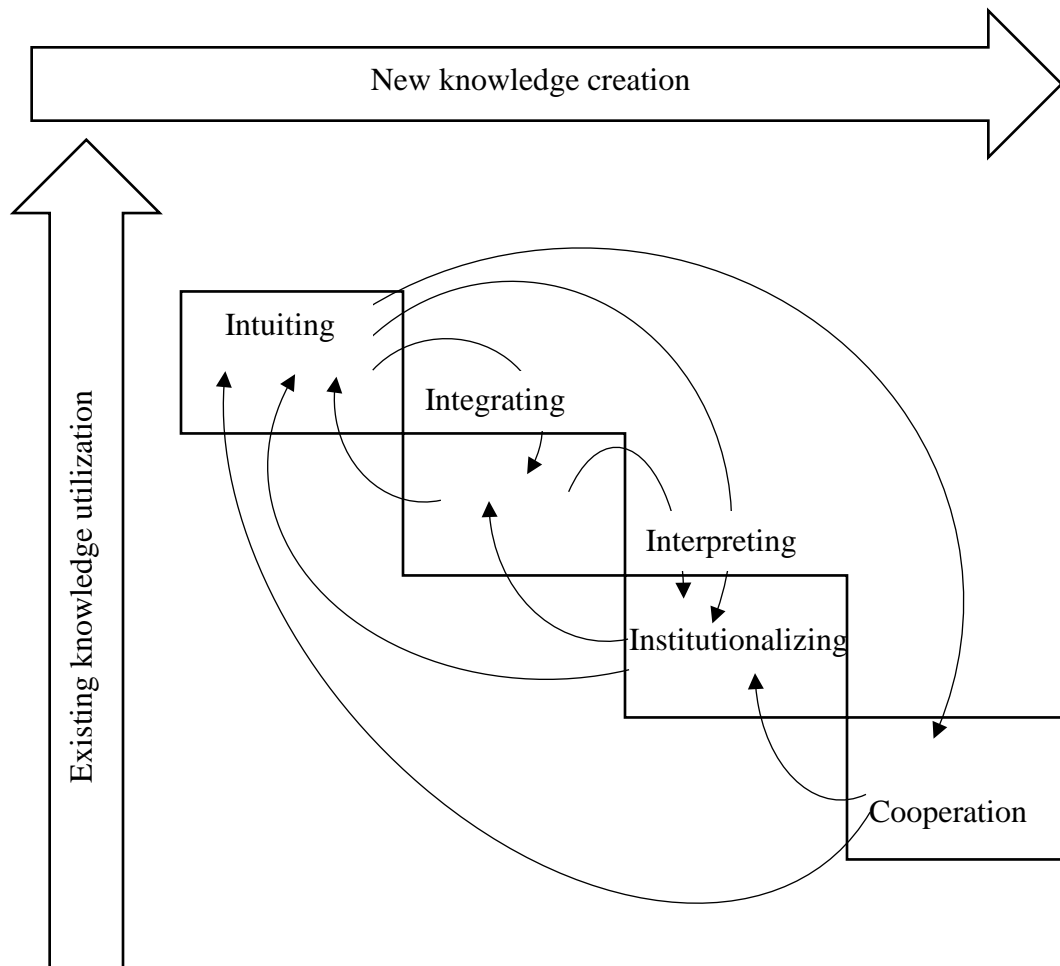
Figure 2. Mozzato and Bitencourt's (2014) process of interorganizational learning. Adapted from "Understanding Interorganizational Learning Based on Social Spaces and Learning Episodes," by A. R. Mozzato and C. C. Bitencourt, 2014, *Brazilian Administration Review, 11*(3), p. 289. Copyright 2014 by the Brazilian Administration Review. Also adapted from "An Organizational Learning Framework: From Intuition to Institution," by M. M. Crossan, H. W. Lane, and R. E. White, 1999, *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), p. 532. Copyright 1999 by the Academy of Management.

Although IOL theory is not frequently applied in the field of education, it is applicable to this study primarily because the sample of QEP IRs will be drawn from IHEs that may seek advantages such as opportunities to innovate during the implementation phase of the QEP process. Cooperation between IHEs to share effective practices in QEP implementation could bolster such advantages. Current

mechanisms for IOL between IHEs during the QEP process include informal

conversations among institutional stakeholders as well as Internet searches. For

example, IHEs may conduct Internet searches for and review the QEPs of others

when designing and implementing their own. However, no formal research to date

has facilitated the improvement of the tracking and intentional use of IOL among

IHEs during the QEP process in order to enable such reviews to occur systematically

rather than piecemeal. The findings of this study are a source for the systematic

review of the impact of QEPs on student learning. I will assess this impact through a

qualitative content analysis of QEP IRs.

Definitions of Terms

- *Accreditation.* The self-study and external review process that colleges
  and universities undergo in order to demonstrate standards of academic
  quality (CHEA, 2015).

- *Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).* A nationwide
  organization that promotes academic quality through accreditation on
  behalf of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities (CHEA, 2015).

- *Effective practices.* Actions (other than QEP initiatives) taken by
  institutions of higher education that have reportedly contributed to gains in
  student learning during the QEP implementation period, as evidenced by
  the meeting of QEP goals and SLOs. The assessment of whether QEP
  goals and SLOs have been met may be measured qualitatively or
  quantitatively. Measures of effectiveness are context-dependent, meaning

that institutions will define *effective* differently and that no single measure exists.

- *Impact Report (IR).* A document (maximum length of 10 pages) required for submission by colleges and universities to SACS that is due five years into a reaffirmation cycle and addresses each of the following elements:
  - List of initial goals and outcomes of the QEP
  - Changes made to the QEP and rationale for the changes
  - Description of QEP's impact on student learning and/or the environment that supports student learning
  - Reflection on what IHE has learned from the QEP (SACS, 2013)

- *Implementation.* The process by which a college or university executes its QEP in order to meet the identified goals and student learning outcomes.

- *Institution of higher education (IHE).* A postsecondary degree-granting college or university.

- *Institutional type.* Based on whether an institution is predominantly privately or publicly controlled, as well as how an institution is classified according to the following broad Carnegie Classifications (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2015):
  - Doctoral: Institution awards at least 20 doctoral degrees per academic year (excluding professional doctoral degrees [i.e., JD, MD, etc.])

- Master's: Institution awards at least 50 master's degrees and
  fewer than 20 doctoral degrees per academic year (excluding
  professional doctoral degrees)

- Baccalaureate: Institution awards bachelor's degrees or higher
  to at least 50% of graduates, but fewer than 50 master's degree
  and 20 doctoral degrees (excluding professional doctoral
  degrees) per academic year

- Associate: Institution awards associate (i.e., two-year) degree
  as highest level of degree possible, or predominantly awards
  associate degrees and also awards bachelor's degrees to less
  than 10% of graduates per academic year

- *Interorganizational Learning (IOL) theory.* A supposition that
  interactions between organizations "improve and expand each
  participant's knowledge base and boost the potential to create individual
  and collective comparative advantages" (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014, p.
  290). Emphasizes the element of cooperation as an update to
  organizational learning frameworks (Crossan et al., 1999).

- *Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP).* A document in which an IHE
  identifies key issues emerging from its assessment processes and details a
  plan for improving student learning and/or the environment that supports
  student learning based on these issues (SACS, 2016a).

- *Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) initiative.* An activity that an IHE develops and implements in order to meet QEP goals and/or student learning outcomes.

- *Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) topic area.* The subject matter that an IHE selects as the focus of its QEP (e.g., critical thinking).

- *Regional accreditor.* An organization (e.g., SACS) authorized by CHEA and/or the USDoE to accredit colleges and universities that maintain a physical presence within the states and territories that comprise a geographic region.

- *Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).* A regional accreditor responsible for the accreditation of colleges and universities in the following states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

- *Student learning.* The knowledge, skills, and dispositions (i.e., values and beliefs) that students are able to demonstrate as an outcome of competency-based educational programs (SACS, n.d.).

Summary

Currently, SACS accredits approximately 800 IHEs (SACS, 2016c). Each of these institutions is required to complete a QEP and, subsequently, a QEP IR. Institutions may bolster the efficacy of their QEPs by learning from other institutions' experiences during the QEP implementation process. The IOL framework supports this learning exchange (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). In this chapter, I introduced

the topic of the proposed study as well as provided the problem and purpose

statements. To reiterate, the central problem in this study is that IHEs do not

currently have a systematic way to learn from the lessons of their peers and innovate

accordingly during the implementation of their QEPs. In turn, this compromises the

ability of IHEs to ensure that their QEPs are as efficacious as possible in terms of

impact on student learning. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the

reported impact of QEPs of various institutional types and topic areas on student

learning at SACS-accredited IHEs. Additionally, this study also sought to examine

the effective practices that IHEs have identified in the implementation of their QEPs.

Finally, in this chapter, I explained the research questions, significance of the study,

theoretical framework, and definitions of terms. In the next chapter, I will review the

extant literature on the topics of accreditation, assessment, and theories of

organizational learning as these topics pertain to postsecondary contexts.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study examined the reported impact of quality enhancement plans (QEPs) on student learning within the first five years of implementation, as evidenced by the QEP Impact Reports (IRs) that institutions submit to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) during the reaffirmation process. Guided by the framework of interorganizational learning (IOL) theory, the findings from this study enable SACS-accredited institutions of higher education (IHEs) to learn from the lessons of their peers as they embark upon the implementation of efficacious QEPs. The significance of this study emerges in part from the dearth of literature on the topics of accreditation requirements in general, and the QEP in particular (Cruise, 2007). In this chapter, I will review the extant literature on the topics of accreditation, assessment, and theories of organizational learning as these topics pertain to postsecondary contexts.

Regional Accreditation in the United States

As noted in Chapter One, six regional accreditors are currently authorized to operate by the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and/or the U.S. Department of Education (USDoE) (CHEA, 2015). According to Carey (2012), the original regional accreditors emerged on the east coast of the U.S. in the 1800s to regulate elite IHEs. Since that time, IHEs of all types have gained access to regional accreditation (Carey, 2012). Several previous studies on the topic of regional

accreditation focused on the relationships between IHEs and their accreditors. Cogswell (2016) and Graca (2009) reinforced the notion that, although IHEs are in a contractual relationship with their accreditors, entering this relationship remains voluntary. Theoretically, IHEs are always able to opt out of accreditation, even though it may not be in their best interest to do so given the privileges that accreditation affords, such as federal financial aid and institutional distinction (Cogswell, 2016). Relatedly, Holmes (2002) found that regional accreditation "has value because educational leaders grant it value, and if the educational community loses faith in any accreditation association…the association may be in jeopardy" (Holmes, 2002, p. 162). This finding alludes to the importance of relationship-building between IHEs and their accreditors. The present study bolsters this relationship-building by providing IHEs with an opportunity to better understand the utility of accreditation requirements such as the QEP for the purposes of continuous improvement in academic programming. In the following sections, I examine both the purpose and criticisms of regional accreditation, as well as further address the gaps in the literature from which the need for this study emerges.

Purpose. Several researchers have argued that the purpose of regional accreditation extends far beyond simply ensuring an IHE's continued access to federal financial aid (Cogswell, 2016; Jones, 2005; Patel, 2012). Broadly, much of the literature on the purpose of regional accreditation relates to the facilitation of continuous quality improvement in academic programming. IHEs attempt to demonstrate such improvement through the revision of course objectives and student learning outcomes (SLOs) in order to meet or better meet accreditation standards

19

(Beno, 2004; Kelly, 1983; Patel, 2012; Theule, 2012). Sanyal and Martin (2007) found that accreditors tend to consider worthwhile SLOs to be those that meet "(i) society's expectations; (ii) students' aspirations; (iii) the demands of the government, business, and industry; and (iv) the requirements of professional institutions" (p. 5). Ewell (2001) set forth several recommendations for how regional accreditors should examine evidence of student learning in order to provide academic quality assurance to IHEs. Such recommendations include being clear in the use of terminology when considering evidence of SLOs, addressing the policy choices involved with the examination of SLOs (e.g., how much emphasis to place on SLOs), and taking the time to systematically identify issues pertaining to the examination of SLOs (e.g., determining which standards of evidence to use) (Ewell, 2001).

Aside from facilitating access to federal financial aid and continuous quality improvement in academic programming, the literature reflects several other purposes of regional accreditation as well. Regional accreditation ensures accountability through a peer review process (Sanyal & Martin, 2007). Additionally, regional accreditation aids student mobility by easing the transfer of credits between IHEs that have met the same or similar sets of regional accreditation standards (J. S. Eaton, 2001; Sanyal & Martin, 2007). Further, through self-study requirements, IHEs have the opportunity to reflect on their unique institutional priorities during the accreditation process and make improvements accordingly (J. S. Eaton, 2001). For example, Kelly (1983) examined the impact of regional accreditation on small, private colleges and found that several of the 38 cases involved in the study experienced increased enrollment and improved access to learning, physical, and

financial resources in large part due to self-study requirements. Similarly, Patel

(2012) reported that the regional accreditation of two community colleges resulted in

improvements such as increased engagement in campus-wide planning.

As evidenced above, an array of literature exists on the purpose of regional

accreditation, especially as this purpose pertains to the improvement of SLOs.

However, I assert that a notable gap also exists in the literature with regard to how

IHEs demonstrate to accreditors that students meet SLOs, which in turn leads to a gap

in how accreditation requirements impact student learning. Further, the literature

largely does not take into account the extent to which differences in institutional types

may impact student learning, whether for the purposes of accreditation or otherwise.

For example, the differences in resources available to doctoral as compared to

associate degree-granting IHEs may impact student learning, and yet this remains

largely unknown. The present study sought to address these gaps.

Criticisms and calls for reform. The criticisms of regional accreditation

vary widely. A criticism that is prevalent throughout the literature is that regional

accreditation only enforces minimal standards, which is not enough to foster

meaningful change and continuous improvement (N. B. Brown, 1999; D. Eaton,

2010; Farrow, 1975; Humphreys & Gaston, 2016). Relatedly, the American Council

of Trustees and Alumni (2016) asserted that "The six regional agencies that accredit

the vast majority of America's non-profit colleges and universities have miserably

failed to ensure educational quality but continue to control access to federal financial

aid" (para. 1). Further, Templin and Blankenship (2007) found that the one-size-fits-

all approach that regional accreditors take through the use of common standards and

norms can be oppressive to IHEs with varying institutional missions and access to resources. Researchers have also expressed concern that the one-size-fits-all approach stifles creativity in the college experience by discrediting non-traditional platforms of learning such as those that occur in online environments (Burke & Butler, 2012; Dickeson, 2009).

Alongside the widespread criticisms noted above, regional accreditation reform is also a salient area of the literature. For example, Ashworth (1994) called for the exemption of IHEs that consistently achieve reaccreditation from traditional accreditation processes contingent upon their ability to demonstrate continuous improvement. With regard to the theoretical framework of the present study, if such opportunities for exemption existed, non-exempt IHEs would have much to gain from IOL in order to learn from their exempt peers as to how to achieve this status. Additionally, Haaland (1995) argued for a shift in the focus of regional accreditation requirements from inputs and outputs to ongoing assessment. The operationalization of Haaland's argument is evident in the QEP requirement, as SACS designed this requirement to necessitate ongoing assessment of student learning throughout an IHE's reaffirmation cycle.

Another topic related to regional accreditation reform pertains to calls for increased transparency. Ewell (1994) asserted that making the rationale behind accreditors' decisions more public would increase the accountability of the process. In 2015, the Obama administration unveiled several executive actions that require accreditors to make their criteria for determining whether IHEs meet accreditation standards both clearer and more public (Stratford, 2015). Recently, U.S. Senators

Warren, Durbin, and Schatz (Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, 2016)

introduced a bill to amend the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 that also speaks

to the perceived need for increased transparency among accreditors. This bill, known

as the Accreditation Reform and Enhanced Accountability Act, seeks to provide the

USDoE with more oversight of accreditors in light of recent concerns that accrediting

organizations are not providing transparent quality assurance (Office of U.S. Senator

Elizabeth Warren, 2016). This legislation could result in a proliferation of

accreditation requirements such as the QEP, as these requirements help to promote

transparency in quality assurance.

      The recommendation for regional accreditation reform that most closely

aligns with the focus of the present study originated from Kaplan (1989). Kaplan

(1989) proposed the development of partnerships between accreditors and IHEs in

order to ensure continuous improvement through the completion of self-studies.

Since the time of Kaplan's study, as Humphreys and Gaston (2016) found, the self-

study process has evolved "to affirm the education quality of institutions, prompt

their improvement, and confer eligibility for federal funding" (p. 16). Because SACS

requires IHEs to engage in self-study as part of the QEP, opportunities for IHEs to

learn from each other with regard to effective practices of QEP implementation could

perhaps further bolster the efficacy of the self-study process (SACS, 2016a).

Although the concept of the self-study continues to evolve in its purpose as

partnerships between accreditors and IHEs develop, scant research exists on the

impact that this requirement has on student learning in the context of higher education

(Cruise, 2007). I posit that as regional accreditors in the U.S. increasingly adopt self-

study requirements, research on the efficacy of these requirements becomes more necessary. In the next section, I will address the literature that exists on the assessment of student learning in higher education, as well as how this topic intersects with regional accreditation requirements such as the QEP.

Assessment of Student Learning in Higher Education

According to Ewell (2002), recent decades have ushered in an accountability movement across the field of higher education. This movement originated in the fall of 1985 with the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education (Ewell, 2002). Presently, internal and external stakeholders alike continue to call for IHEs to demonstrate their worth, especially amidst the ever-rising costs of college attendance (Lucca, Nadauld, & Shen, 2016). IHEs often answer such calls for accountability through the use of assessment (Carey, 2010; Freeman & Kochan, 2012; Glenn, 2008). Although assessment can take many forms, a common goal of this practice is to provide stakeholders with evidence of student learning.

To reiterate, I defined *student learning* as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students are able to demonstrate as an outcome of competency-based educational programs (SACS, n.d.). The assessment of student learning involves the systematic examination of student work against standards of judgment (Maki, 2010). IHEs engage in assessment throughout the development and implementation of their QEPs. In the present study, I examined how the QEP impacts student learning based on evidence provided by institutional assessment practices. Thus, my ability to determine the impact of the QEP on student learning was highly dependent upon the clarity and interpretability of such assessment practices, as reflected in the QEP IRs.

In the following sections, I conduct further inquiry into the literature on effective

practices in, outcomes of, and challenges to assessment.

     Effective practices in assessment. In an ongoing attempt to monitor whether

SLOs are met, IHEs engage in various forms of assessment. Gallagher (2007) found

that effective assessment does not occur by happenstance, but rather through

"deliberate policies and practices, driven by strong leadership aimed at improving

institutional effectiveness" (p. v). In turn, effective assessment can facilitate

institutional improvement (D. Jenkins, Ellwein, Wachen, Kerrigan, & Cho, 2009). D.

Jenkins et al. (2009) identified the following five steps for institutional improvement

through assessment: commit to improving student outcomes, identify and prioritize

institutional problems, engage stakeholders to address such problems, implement and

evaluate strategies throughout the assessment process, and institutionalize policies

and practices deemed to be most effective (D. Jenkins et al., 2009). These findings

indicate that context matters in the cultivation of an institutional culture that

prioritizes the use of effective assessment practices. Thus, culture also matters with

regard to the effective assessment of the QEP.

     With regard to what constitutes effective assessment practices, the findings of

previous studies vary. Banta (2008) conducted case studies of assessment practices

taking place on more than 150 college campuses throughout the U.S. The findings of

these studies revealed that the most effective practices, in terms of their ability to

provide sound evidence of student learning, included the use of locally developed

direct measures for assignments and capstone projects. Direct measures are defined

as assessment tools that "require students to represent, produce or demonstrate their

learning" (e.g., standardized instruments, portfolios, capstone projects) (Stanford University, n.d., p. 20). Further, Banta (2008) asserted that the use of standardized test scores as an assessment practice is most effective when combined with such direct measures. Chun (2010) also alluded to the importance of using direct measures in assessment with his recommendation for the use of authentic assessment. This type of assessment involves the measurement of students' abilities to demonstrate the knowledge and skills that are necessary to complete real-world tasks (Chun, 2010; Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2012). Although authentic assessment can involve the use of both direct and indirect (e.g., surveys) measures, Chun (2010) indicated that the use of the former is a best practice in the assessment process. According to S. Brown (2015), "We often assess what is easy to assess…rather than the learning itself" (p. 2). Authentic assessment can be particularly effective in addressing this concern, as students must perform a task rather than simply speak or write about it in order to demonstrate learning (S. Brown, 2015).

Other considerations for the use of effective assessment practices by IHEs pertain to the roles of those involved in the assessment process. Lauer and Korin (2014) found that students might become more invested in assessment when they have the opportunity to collaborate with administrators and faculty to develop assessment tools. In turn, IHEs may experience improved evidence of student learning from their assessment practices. Nelson (2014) took the notion of student-centered assessment a step further and contended that many current models of assessment do not account for the responsibility that students have for their own learning. According to Nelson (2014), assessment processes tend to "prescribe in

advance the outcome for the student; the student can achieve nothing of significance, as far as assessment goes, except what the professor preordains" (para. 5). Thus, those responsible for assessment practices must consider the input and needs of students in order for these practices to be most effective in measuring student learning.

As for the role of faculty in assessment, Jacobson (2001) conducted a study to examine faculty involvement in and attitudes toward assessment in postsecondary contexts. The findings of this study indicated that faculty tended to be more invested in course-level assessment than in assessment at the departmental or institutional levels. Further, lack of time and distrust in the assessment process, especially at the institutional level, were identified as barriers to faculty participation in assessment. This finding in particular prompted Jacobson (2001) to recommend that the implementation of assessment practices be tailored to meet the needs of faculty. For example, institutional assessment staff should remain cognizant of the timing of such implementation during a given semester, and how the timing impacts faculty workload (Jacobson, 2001). Hutchings (2010) also explored the topic of faculty involvement in assessment and put forth the following six guidelines for cultivating more faculty engagement with this process:

- Build assessment around the regular, ongoing work of teaching and learning;
- Make a place for assessment in faculty development;
- Integrate assessment into the preparation of graduate students;
- Reframe assessment as scholarship;

- Create campus spaces and occasions for constructive assessment

   conversation and action; and

- Involve students in assessment. (Hutchings, 2010, p. 3)

Hutchings's recommendation to involve students in the assessment process aligns

with that of Lauer and Korin (2014) as well as Nelson (2014). Some degree of

consensus exists in the literature regarding the importance of the roles of both faculty

and students in conducting effective assessment practices. However, a gap in the

literature remains with regard to how these practices apply to the assessment of SLOs

for meeting accreditation requirements in general, and the requirements of the QEP in

particular (Davis, 2009; Gordin, 2006; Rodriguez, 2015).

   Outcomes of assessment. Effective practices in assessment are often

identifiable through the outcomes of assessment. Among the most salient of

outcomes is the ability to determine whether students are meeting SLOs, as well as

the institutional change that can occur through a process of continuous quality

improvement (D. Jenkins et al., 2009). Chaffee and Tierney (1988) were among the

first to address the possibilities of such change, as they contended that assessment can

enable institutional leaders to make more informed, data-driven decisions that

ultimately improve learning outcomes (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). Effective practices

in assessment can also lead to institutional innovation, which I further examine in the

diffusion of innovations theory section of this literature review (Craig, 2006; Glenn,

2008; Maki, 2002; Rogers, 1983).

   One of the most prominent outcomes cited in the literature that has resulted

from effective assessment is Kuh's (2008) identification of 10 high-impact practices

(HIPs). The past QEP topics of many IHEs closely relate to at least one HIP. Kuh

(2008) defined HIPs as widely tested practices that contribute to cumulative student

learning as well as increase retention and engagement across student demographics.

Kuh recommends that IHEs facilitate students' exposure to at least two HIPs during

the undergraduate experience in order to bolster student learning. These practices

include the following: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual

experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative

assignments/projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service

learning, internships, and capstone courses/projects (Kuh, 2008).

In a longitudinal study on the impact of HIPs on SLOs in a liberal arts setting,

Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella (2014) found that only two of the 10 practices listed

above (i.e., collaborative assignments/projects and undergraduate research)

significantly and positively impacted student learning in this particular context. Such

impact became evident through growth in students' attainment of liberal arts

educational outcomes (Kilgo et al., 2014). The identification of the factors within

each practice that contributed to student learning was beyond the scope of this study.

However, as Kuh (2008) suggested, various factors of HIPs (e.g., exposure to diverse

beliefs and extracurricular time spent with faculty) can positively impact student

learning (Kilgo et al., 2014). Kuh, O'Donnell, and Reed (2013) also examined the

relationship between HIPs and SLOs among college students, finding that authentic

assessment can be an effective tool in delivering HIPs that positively impact student

learning. For example, one IHE made use of e-portfolios to measure and monitor the

development of interpersonal competencies when students engaged in HIPs (Kuh et

al., 2013). This finding echoes that of Chun (2010) with regard to the effectiveness of authentic assessment. The present study was informed by HIPs during the analysis of the practices which IHEs have employed in order to impact and assess student learning. More specifically, the 10 HIPs identified by Kuh (2008) each served as an a priori code during data analysis.

Challenges to assessment. The existing literature on challenges to the assessment of QEP SLOs is essentially non-existent. However, literature does exist on the challenges of assessing student learning at the institutional level, the level at which the assessment of QEP SLOs occurs (Friedlander & Serban, 2004; M. A. Miller & Ewell, 2005). Challenges to assessment can impact the ability of IHEs to measure student learning. For example, M. A. Miller and Ewell (2005) found that IHEs may experience difficulty with cultivating buy-in among institutional stakeholders to commit to assessment as well as difficulty with coordinating the logistics of administering assessments. Such challenges can prevent the collection of assessment data and, thus, the measurement of student learning. Friedlander and Serban (2004) not only identified challenges that exist for IHEs in the assessment of SLOs at the institutional level, but also made recommendations for overcoming these challenges. For example, the researchers recommended that IHEs address the issue of ineffective data collection by facilitating professional development opportunities for faculty who are involved in assessment (Friedlander & Serban, 2004).

Another challenge to the assessment of SLOs at the institutional level is the cultivation of an environment in which students take ownership of their learning (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002; Hutchings, 2010; Werder & Otis, 2010). Werder and

Otis (2010) asserted that students tend to perform better on assessments at all levels when they take such ownership. Therefore, if students are not active participants in their learning, IHEs may experience difficulty assessing the impact of their educational practices on student learning (Werder & Otis, 2010). Such known challenges to assessment must be taken into consideration in the assessment of QEP goals and SLOs.

To reiterate, the development and implementation of a QEP requires a great degree of institutional-level assessment in order to determine the extent to which students meet SLOs. Institutions document the results of this assessment in their QEP IRs with evidence of student learning five years into a SACS reaffirmation cycle. As reflected in the literature cited above, many previous studies have identified effective practices in, outcomes of, and challenges to assessment. However, a limited amount of this literature addresses assessment for the purposes of regional accreditation. In the next section, I will review the literature that bridges the topics of accreditation and assessment, as the QEP requirement exists at this intersection.

Interrelationship of Accreditation and Assessment

Given the decades-long accountability movement in higher education, the concepts of accreditation and assessment are inseparable (Ewell, 2001). According to Ewell (2001), "As regional accrediting organizations gradually moved into assessment in the 1990s…many states appeared happy to allow them to assume the burden of reviewing institutional assessment programs" (p. 3). However, one should not make the assumption that accreditation is the primary driver for assessment across campuses. Banta (2008) found that less than half of surveyed IHEs—including

community colleges, liberal arts, and research institutions—indicated that regional accreditation is a major force for institutional-level assessment. Rather, the majority of IHEs reported that an institutional desire for continuous improvement tends to drive assessment (Banta, 2008). Yet, regional accreditation enables IHEs to examine their assessment practices as well as the results of these practices in an effort to ensure continuous improvement. In particular, SACS encourages IHEs to use the results of institutional-level assessment to guide the selection of their QEP topics. IHEs must then assess the extent to which students meet the SLOs of a QEP in order to determine the overall impact on student learning (SACS, 2013).

Additional literature indicates a need for the comparative analysis of accreditation requirements' (e.g., the QEP) impact on student learning across regional accreditors (Ewell, 2001; J. N. Jenkins, 2006). In turn, such comparative analysis could inform future targets for student learning in postsecondary contexts as well as inform the practices which IHEs implement to achieve such targets. J. N. Jenkins (2006) examined the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's biennial report entitled *Measuring Up*, which contains state-by-state statistics on higher education performance. J. N. Jenkins highlighted the fact that all 50 states received an "incomplete" in the category of student learning in past reports "because there are no comprehensive national data available that would allow for meaningful comparisons across states" (p. 66). Further, Ewell (2001) found that accreditors increasingly need to determine the comparability of SLOs across IHEs as academic programming becomes more varied (e.g., an increase in distance education options). Although it was beyond the scope of this study to conduct such comparative analyses,

the examination of QEP IRs across institutional types and topic areas will enable the comparison of SLOs among SACS-accredited IHEs.

More evidence pertaining to the need for research on the impact of accreditation requirements on student learning emerges from recent discussions on the reauthorization of the HEA. The 2006 report from the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education "was particularly critical of accreditation; a greater focus on student learning and the development of a more outcome-focused accreditation system was recommended" (Gulliford, 2016, para. 3). Largely due to this report, the 2008 HEA reauthorization enabled accreditors to focus less on fiscal and administrative matters and more on pedagogy and SLOs. The next reauthorization is expected to continue this trend (Gulliford, 2016). In particular, the area of teacher preparation has been significantly impacted by the shift in focus to SLOs (Pianta, 2016). In response to Title II of the HEA, which addresses the regulation of teacher preparation programs, the USDoE proposed reporting requirements that include SLOs for the students taught by the graduates of all teacher preparation programs (Pianta, 2016). The SLOs for the students taught by program graduates are, in turn, indicative of whether the graduates themselves are meeting their own SLOs. As demonstrated in the next sections, literature pertaining to the impact of the QEP in particular on student learning is limited.

QEP development. Much of the literature on QEP development focuses on the organizational dynamics that affect this process. Batten (2010) examined the influence of group attributes on QEP development, finding the extent to which a QEP committee is unified and clear on its goals to be a statistically significant predictor of

the group's success. Relatedly, Cruise (2007) explored factors that influence QEP development and identified such factors as the internal motivation of each QEP committee member, support from the accrediting agency, and focus (i.e., topic area) for the QEP. Of note, the focus for the QEP factor alludes in part to the significance of the present study. The community college involved in Cruise's (2007) study "identified and selected an issue it considered important to improving student learning by using external and internal research" (p. 192). This attention on topic for assessment is further evidence that IHEs have a need to search outside of their institutions to determine which topic areas may yield the most efficacious QEPs. The present study sought to add to the available research on QEP topic selection.

Rodriguez (2015) also explored QEP development, and found that participants from two community colleges consistently identified teamwork as having a significant effect on this process. Further, according to Rodriguez (2015), "professional development served as a catalyst for teamwork" (p. 89). Davis (2009) also indicated the importance of professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators involved in the QEP development process. Such development opportunities brought faculty and administrators together for training on topics such as QEP implementation and the effective use of assessment. In fact, Davis (2009) found that a lack of such professional development opportunities could subsequently become a barrier to the QEP implementation process. What remains unknown is the incorporation of professional development opportunities into the QEP implementation process by the IHEs that fall under the purview of SACS.

QEP implementation. The literature regarding QEP implementation loosely

clusters around two major areas, course-level and institutional-level implementation.

Chaffin (2015) focused on the latter, finding that administrators play a key role in the

implementation of QEP initiatives, "particularly when those initiatives require

substantial data collection and assessment activities" (p. 183). Davis (2009) also

addressed the role of administrators in the QEP implementation process. Findings

from this study indicated that administrators can bolster the success of the QEP by

adopting existing policies and practices. For example, the community college

involved in Davis' (2009) study experienced success with the implementation of its

QEP when administrators recognized the utility of existing assessment practices for

the assessment of QEP SLOs. Also related to institutional-level assessment, Peterson,

Augustine, Einarson, and Vaughan (1999) found that governance matters with regard

to which stakeholders have input in the assessment process. In this study, community

colleges experienced more difficulty than their four-year peers with institutional-level

assessment, largely due to administrators holding significantly more power than

faculty to make assessment-related decisions (Peterson et al., 1999). Administrators

must remain aware of such dynamics throughout the QEP process.

As for QEP implementation at the course level, Anitsal, Anitsal, Barger,

Fidan, and Allen (2010) emphasized the importance of collaboration among faculty

across the disciplines to share and discuss approaches to course design and delivery in

alignment with the goals of the QEP. Similarly, Harris (2012) emphasized that

collaboration among faculty members and administrators is critical to ensuring that

activities at the course level are measurable for the purposes of the QEP. Related to

the assessment component of QEP implementation, Rodriguez (2015) found that course-level assessments were not as effective as institutional-level assessments in determining the extent to which students met QEP SLOs. Rodriguez also echoed the findings of Peterson et al. (1999) on the importance of faculty-developed assessments for the purposes of the QEP.

QEP impact on student learning. As previously mentioned, an overall gap exists in the literature regarding the impact of the QEP requirement on student learning. This gap bolsters the need for the present study. To date, only two previous studies have examined QEP IRs, and only one of these two focused specifically on how QEPs impacted student learning according to QEP IRs. This study was conducted by Rodriguez (2015), who noted the relatively recent availability of QEP IRs, as the first of these reports were submitted in 2009. According to the findings of Rodriguez's (2015) study, "The QEP process had a slightly positive influence on student learning" and "The exclusion of an internally designed direct measure in the QEP process made it more challenging to demonstrate enhanced student learning of critical thinking and use results for improvement" (p. 158). These findings helped to inform the present study, particularly as I analyzed how an IHE's assessment of its QEP SLOs enables a determination of the QEP's impact on student learning. As for the other study that addressed the QEP IR, Chaffin (2015) primarily focused on the effect of this report on the QEP implementation process, finding that activities related to the QEP tended to ramp up as the QEP IR deadline approached.

Of note, the majority of the studies on QEP development, implementation, and impact on student learning discussed above involve data collection exclusively from

community colleges. The findings from these studies inform the present study, as they provide insight into the role of the QEP in the community college sector. Although the present study also involved data collection from community colleges, it addressed the evident need for data from other types of IHEs (e.g., four-year liberal arts and research institutions) as well. Broadening the scope of the data collection is especially necessary considering the widely varied needs of each institutional type in the QEP process. In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical framework that guided the present study.

Theoretical Framework

Scant literature exists in which interorganizational learning (IOL) theory serves as the theoretical framework for an examination of how IHEs may learn from each other in the accreditation process. However, researchers have applied IOL and related theories in studies from other sectors (Fridriksson, 2008; Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson, & Sparks, 1998; Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). For example, Larsson, Bengtsson, Henriksson, and Sparks (1998) applied IOL in their examination of strategic alliances formed among corporations, finding that IOL may enable corporations to maintain competitive advantages in the marketplace. In the following sections, I further explore this literature as well as discuss the implications of previous findings for the present study. I will also explore existing literature on two other theories related to IOL: community of practice (CoP) and diffusion of innovations (DoI) theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogers, 1983). As discussed below, both inform the IOL framework, as they help to further explain why IHEs may be interested in learning from each other in the QEP process.

37

Interorganizational learning theory. In the present study, IOL theory

framed the argument for why SACS-accredited IHEs have or should have an interest

in learning from the lessons of their peers, specifically with regard to the

implementation of a QEP. Simply put, sharing such lessons through institutional

collaboration can facilitate improvement and innovation in student learning (Crossan

et al., 1999; Powell et al., 1996). Given the resource commitment that the QEP

requires from IHEs, QEPs should be as efficacious as possible in terms of their

impact on student learning. According to Larsson and colleagues (1998), "IOL can

be achieved by transferring existing knowledge from one organization to another

organization, as well as by creating completely new knowledge through interaction

among the organizations" (p. 289). As this pertains to the QEP implementation

process, IHEs have the potential to experience IOL from both sources.

Although the IOL framework has not been applied extensively in the field of

education, it can be found in the literature related to corporate management.

Fridrikkson (2008) examined both the enablers of and obstacles to IOL in corporate

contexts. The findings of this study indicated that the cultivation of trust between

organizations as well as the employment of strong leadership among organizations

were two such enablers, while an unclear agenda for projects was a primary obstacle

to IOL (Fridrikkson, 2008). A major implication of these findings for the QEP

process is that the leadership of IHEs must not only clearly articulate the goals of the

QEP with internal stakeholders, but must also do so for external stakeholders—

including other IHEs—in order to foster IOL. A likely mechanism for IOL would be

the communication of lessons learned from the QEP process via institutional

websites. Relatedly, Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) examined how IOL occurs from a practice-based perspective. The researchers found that "establishing cooperative relationships between different actors favors the occurrence of learning episodes, triggering IOL" (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014, p. 294). An impetus for such cooperative relationships could be the shared goals of meeting accreditation standards and improving student learning through the QEP process.

Within the field of higher education, Adrianna Kezar has extensively studied the role of organizational learning (OL) in campus settings. Although OL does not involve the cooperation of multiple organizations to the same extent as IOL, the former still informs the dynamics at play in the latter. Kezar (2005) identified the following as features of organizations that promote OL: "decentralization (rather than hierarchy), trust between employees and managers, new information systems, incentives and rewards, learning culture, open communication, sharing of information, staff development and training, and inquiry units (such as institutional research or teams within units)" (p. 11). Of note, both Kezar (2005) and Fridrikkson (2008) identified trust as a key feature of OL and/or IOL. Further, Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) alluded to the importance of supporting a learning culture and open communication to IOL just as Kezar (2005) did with regard to OL. These findings are all considerations for collaboration between IHEs that seek to learn from the lessons of their peers, specifically regarding how to positively impact student learning through the QEP process.

Kezar (2007) also conducted a study on the role of institutional leaders in creating OL. One of the key findings from Kezar's (2007) study was that the

processes of student learning and organizational learning are circular, with student learning perpetuating organizational learning and vice versa. This finding informs the present study, as the impact of a QEP on student learning could presumably lead to OL. If IHEs cultivate this cycle of using student learning to inform OL and vice versa, they may be better prepared to introduce the element of cooperation into their practices in order to share and benefit from knowledge exchanges with other IHEs via IOL (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). For example, when an IHE uses assessment data on student learning to inform changes to curriculum and pedagogy, OL occurs as the institution evolves in its practices. In turn, the IHE better positions itself to engage in knowledge sharing through IOL as well. In the next sections, I will briefly introduce two additional theories related to OL and IOL that emerge from the literature.

Community of practice. A community of practice (CoP) is comprised of a group of individuals who share professional interests (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This concept appears throughout the higher education literature (Cronin, Cochrane, & Gordon, 2016; Herbert, Joyce, & Hassall, 2014), and is considered to have three constituent parts: "a domain of knowledge, a social experience, and a shared practice that makes work within the domain more effective and efficient" (Harden & Loving, 2015, p. 8). In the present study, the domain of knowledge relates to the QEP process, the social experience is the interaction of institutional stakeholders who may seek to learn from each other in the QEP process (e.g., via institutional websites), and the shared practice is the IOL that occurs between IHEs as they seek to develop and implement efficacious QEPs. Further illustrating the extent to which a CoP relates to IOL, Cronin et al. (2016) found that the interplay of collaboration and cooperation

that a CoP fosters is pivotal to networked learning—or knowledge construction between learners and organizations—in higher education. As Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) illustrated on the basis of Crossan et al.'s (1999) OL model (see Figure 2), collaboration and cooperation are essential to IOL as well. Thus, a CoP provides the setting in which IOL can occur via the communication of mutually beneficial information (Cronin et al., 2016).

Diffusion of innovations theory. As one of the primary intentions of IOL is the cultivation of innovation, it becomes necessary to further explore diffusion of innovations (DoI) theory (Powell et al., 1996; Rogers, 1983). According to Rogers (1983), "*Diffusion* is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (p. 5, emphasis in original). In a study that explored factors leading to policy adoption through diffusion, Sponsler (2011) reinforced the finding that states that are closest geographically may influence each other's policymaking behaviors. Such diffusions occur through the communication of policies between stakeholders (Rogers, 1983). This feature of DoI is an important consideration for how the 11 SACS-accredited states may learn from each other during the implementation of a QEP in part due to their geographical location, which I further address in Chapter Five.

In order for IHEs to learn from the lessons of their peers through IOL during the QEP process and innovate accordingly, DoI may occur through the communication of mutually beneficial information between institutional stakeholders (e.g., via institutional websites). Glenn (2008) found that the assessment of student learning in higher education requires a culture that supports innovation, as programs

41

cannot be resistant to change yet also expect to grow and remain competitive. This

finding applies to the assessment of student learning that occurs during the QEP

process as well. Thus, the innovation that DoI fosters can bolster assessment

practices in the QEP process and lead to positive gains in student learning.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature on accreditation, assessment, the

theoretical framework of IOL, and related theories (i.e., CoP and DoI) as these topics

pertain to postsecondary contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogers, 1983). This

review revealed several gaps in the literature from which the need for the present

study emerged. These gaps include an overall lack of literature that examines the

impact of accreditation requirements on student learning as well as a lack of previous

application of the IOL framework to studies in the field of higher education. The

application of this framework can help to facilitate innovation and continuous

improvement through the regional accreditation process, especially for the purposes

of QEP implementation (Crossan et al., 1999; Powell et al., 1996). In the next

chapter, I will describe the methodology that I employed in the current study for the

purposes of data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the reported impact of Quality Enhancement Plans (QEPs) of various institutional types and topic areas on student learning at Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)-accredited institutions of higher education (IHEs). Additionally, I examined the effective practices that IHEs have identified in the implementation of their QEPs. To reiterate, the following research questions guided the study:

1. According to Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Impact Reports (IRs), what is the reported impact of QEPs on student learning within the first five years of implementation?

    a. How, if at all, does the reported impact of QEPs on student learning vary by institutional type?

    b. How, if at all, does the reported impact of QEPs on student learning vary by QEP topic area?

2. What have institutions identified as effective practices of QEP implementation within the first five years of their plans?

The findings from this study inform the QEP implementation process, as IHEs will have an improved opportunity to learn from each other with a common goal of ensuring that their QEPs are as efficacious as possible in improving student learning.

The findings also enable SACS to gain insight regarding the extent to which the QEP requirement is meeting its intended outcomes.

Research Approach

Given the voluminous and textual nature of the data sources that comprise the sample for this study, I used a qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology. A qualitative approach best fit this study primarily because addressing the research questions relied on the analysis of "data in the form of words" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 248). According to Schreier (2012), QCA is a systematic and flexible method of data analysis that enables the reduction and summarization of large quantities of text. More specifically, this method involves the selection of relevant materials that aid in the construction of a coding frame, which can be concept-driven or data-driven. The latter requires the researcher to inductively build a coding frame, which is comprised of the main categories and subcategories that emerge through the data analysis procedures (Schreier, 2012). In this study, I used a predominantly data-driven design with some a priori codes and sub-codes based on Kuh's (2008) high-impact practices (HIPs)*,* the SACS (n.d.) definition of *student learning*, various assessment practices, Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice (CoP) concept, and Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations (DoI) theory (see Appendix A).

The appropriateness of the data-driven QCA design primarily stemmed from the limited availability of existing theory or research literature related to the topic of the study, as required by a concept-driven design (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Because of the dearth of both theory and literature related to how accreditation requirements in general and the QEP requirement in particular impact student learning, I

44

predominantly followed the data-driven rather than the concept-driven QCA design. As Schreier (2012) indicated, "it is rare in QCA to create a coding frame that is purely concept-driven or purely data-driven" (p. 89). Thus, the use of a priori codes complemented the data-driven design by enabling me as the researcher to apply pre-existing knowledge of the assessment of student learning during data analysis.

Data Collection

I utilized purposive sampling for this study, which resulted in a subset of the total population that served a specific purpose (Schwandt, 2007). Here, that purpose was to enable me to analyze the reported impact of QEPs on student learning across a broad range of institutional types and QEP topic areas within SACS' purview of approximately 800 IHEs located throughout 11 states. The sample consisted exclusively of QEP IRs. Since QCA requires the researcher to reach a point of saturation before completing the data analysis, the exact number of QEP IRs that I needed to analyze in order to answer the research questions remained unknown at the outset of this study (Schreier, 2012). However, I anticipated that it would be necessary to collect QEP IRs from both publicly and privately controlled IHEs of each Carnegie Classification (i.e., associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral) across the 11 states in the SACS region in order to reach saturation (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2015).

In order to achieve some degree of representativeness in the sample, I collected QEP IRs from IHEs based on the percentage of the total population of 800 SACS-reviewed IHEs that each criterion of institutional type (i.e., public or private control and Carnegie Classification) represents. The most recent data from the

45

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (2016) indicate that the

population of SACS-reviewed IHEs is comprised of approximately 16% doctoral,

26% master's, 24% baccalaureate, and 34% associate degree-granting IHEs. Of these

IHEs, approximately 76% and 24% of doctoral, 46% and 54% of master's, 23% and

77% of baccalaureate, and 99% and 1% of associate degree-granting IHEs are

publicly and privately controlled, respectively (Indiana University Center for

Postsecondary Research, 2016). Thus, I purposively selected and collected QEP IRs

to add to the sample that approximately mirrored these percentages as the data

analysis progressed. Although institutional type primarily guided the data collection,

I also ensured the inclusion of an array of QEP topic areas in the final sample by

purposively selecting QEP IRs from different topic areas.

I started the data collection by conducting an Internet search using the terms

"QEP Impact Report." Next, I downloaded and saved each QEP IR that the search

yielded if the IHE from which the QEP IR originated met the criteria of institutional

types needed for the initial sample. Of note, since SACS does not require IHEs to

make their QEP IRs publicly available, a potential for response bias existed with the

use of this sampling methodology. It is possible that only institutions with reportedly

positive QEP IRs make their final reports public. Such response bias further

necessitated the purposeful inclusion of different institutional types in the data sample

to ensure the representation of all types. The initial sample size was 20, as this

threshold enabled the initial analysis of at least three QEP IRs per Carnegie

Classification. Table 2 (see Chapter Four) summarizes the composition of the data

sample. As the data collection continued throughout data analysis, I noted the

institutional type and state of the IHE in Table 2 in order to keep track of the sample and ensure that states across the SACS region were represented (see Table 2). The final sample size for the study was 40, as this was the point at which data saturation occurred.

Data Analysis

Many different approaches to QCA are acceptable, and no one correct way exists for conducting this methodology (Weber, 1990). With regard to the use of the previously mentioned coding frame, QCA allowed me to systematically reduce and describe the content of various materials. According to Schreier (2012), "The coding frame is therefore at the heart of the method" (p. 58). Schreier (2012) identified the following three requirements for the development of a coding frame:

- Unidimensionality: "each dimension in your coding frame should capture only one aspect of your material" (p. 72)

- Mutual exclusiveness: "the subcategories in your coding frame mutually exclude each other" (p. 75)

- Exhaustiveness: "all that is relevant in your material must be captured by one of the subcategories in your coding frame" (p. 76)

In order to develop a coding frame, I first identified the main categories and subcategories on which to focus the data analysis. The process by which a researcher becomes immersed in data to the extent that categories emerge is known as data-driven category development (Mayring, 2000). I approached the category development by adapting the steps of grounded theory methodology. This approach required me to engage in open coding followed by selective coding procedures

(Schreier, 2012). Grounded theory assumes that data analysis is an iterative process.

Thus, coding in grounded theory requires moving back and forth between the data as

open and selective coding procedures progress (Corbin & Strauss, 1997). Although I

did not use grounded theory in this study, researchers using a QCA methodology

must also ensure consistency between each data set through a pilot coding phase, peer

debriefing, and constant comparisons of the data as he or she follows the steps of

open and selective coding. I further explain the steps of the QCA methodology in the

following sections.

After accessing, downloading, and saving each QEP IR, I imported it as a

.docx file to MAXQDA in order to begin the coding process. MAXQDA (2016) is a

web-based application that enables the organization of data sources as well as

qualitative data analysis. Starting with the first, randomly selected QEP IR, I read

through the entire document in order to familiarize myself with the data. Next, I

engaged in the open and selective coding of this first QEP IR at least twice as part of

the pilot coding phase. Open coding involves the identification and highlighting of

relevant concepts that address the research question(s) posed in the study (Schreier,

2012). I coded the QEP IRs using a line-by-line technique while concurrently

applying the a priori codes listed in Appendix A as necessary. I then used selective

coding to determine whether the a priori and emergent codes from the open coding

became main categories or subcategories of the coding frames (Morse & Field, 1995).

As I developed the coding frames, it was necessary to define each of the main and

subcategories within the frames. Boyatzis (1998) identified the following three parts

that comprise the definition of a category: name, description, and examples.

Of note, it was necessary to conduct a second level of coding on student

learning in order to be able to analyze and potentially make connections between the

themes that emerged from this a priori code. This second level of coding involved the

application of a priori sub-codes listed below the student learning code in Appendix

A, as well as the identification of emergent codes. This procedure informed my

analysis of how IHEs determined that they met or did not meet the SLOs defined in

their QEPs. Further, this procedure also enabled me to identify the different areas in

which student learning reportedly occurred.

After completing the above steps of the pilot coding phase, I individually

consulted with two peer reviewers, each of whom hold a Ph.D. in a social science

discipline and have a minimum of five years of experience with assessment and

accreditation. The purpose of this peer review was for each qualified reviewer to

evaluate the coding frames that resulted from my pilot coding in order to determine

the extent to which they found these frames to be both accurate and consistent. I held

individual debriefing sessions with each peer reviewer. This procedure enabled a

determination of whether the coding frames needed to be adjusted based on the

accuracy and consistency of the frames (Schreier, 2012).

When disagreement occurred during the peer review process, I arranged for a

conversation between the individuals who were in disagreement in order to determine

how best to address the matter. Ongoing conversation occurred until we reached a

consensus. In cases where we were unable to reach a consensus, we defaulted to

majority rule whereas at least two out of three of us had to agree on how best to

address the disagreement. I repeated this peer review process when approaching the

end of my data analysis as well in order to ensure the continued accuracy and consistency of the coding frames. Upon completion of the pilot coding phase, I continued to code subsequent QEP IRs using the same open and selective coding procedures as described above.

        To address RQ1, the impact that QEPs have on student learning, I first coded the QEP IRs across institutional types and topic areas. I then sorted the QEP IRs, first by institutional type and then by topic area in order to examine this impact in response to SRQ1 and SRQ2. Finally, I again coded the QEP IRs across institutional types and topic areas in search of codes that addressed RQ2, effective practices that IHEs have identified in the QEP implementation process. Each coding procedure continued to a point of saturation, the point at which no new codes emerged from the data sources (Schreier, 2012).

        As indicated in Figure 3, the final steps of QCA involve the presentation and interpretation of the findings. To reiterate, I took the content of each QEP IR at face value rather than evaluating its accuracy. Thus, the findings were representative of how the IHEs reported the data contained within the QEP IRs. Schreier (2012) found that coding frames are likely to be a researcher's most important findings with the use of data-driven QCA. The steps required by the QCA methodology are summarized in Figure 3.

```
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │ Research question(s)│
                    └─────────────────────┘
                               │
                               ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │   Data collection   │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                               │
                               ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │    Pilot phase:     │
                    │   development of    │
                    │    coding frames    │
                    │  through open and   │
                    │   selective coding  │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                               │
                               ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Peer debriefing and│
                    │  revision of coding │
                    │        frames       │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                               │
                               ▼
┌──────────────────┐          ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Open and selective│◄───────►│ Ongoing development  │
│ coding to point of│         │ of coding frames and │
│    saturation     │         │  definitions for each│
│                   │         │   main and sub-      │
│                   │         │     category         │
└──────────────────┘          └──────────────────────┘
                               │
                               ▼
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Presentation of    │
                    │ findings with figures│
                    │  and rich description│
                    └─────────────────────┘
```
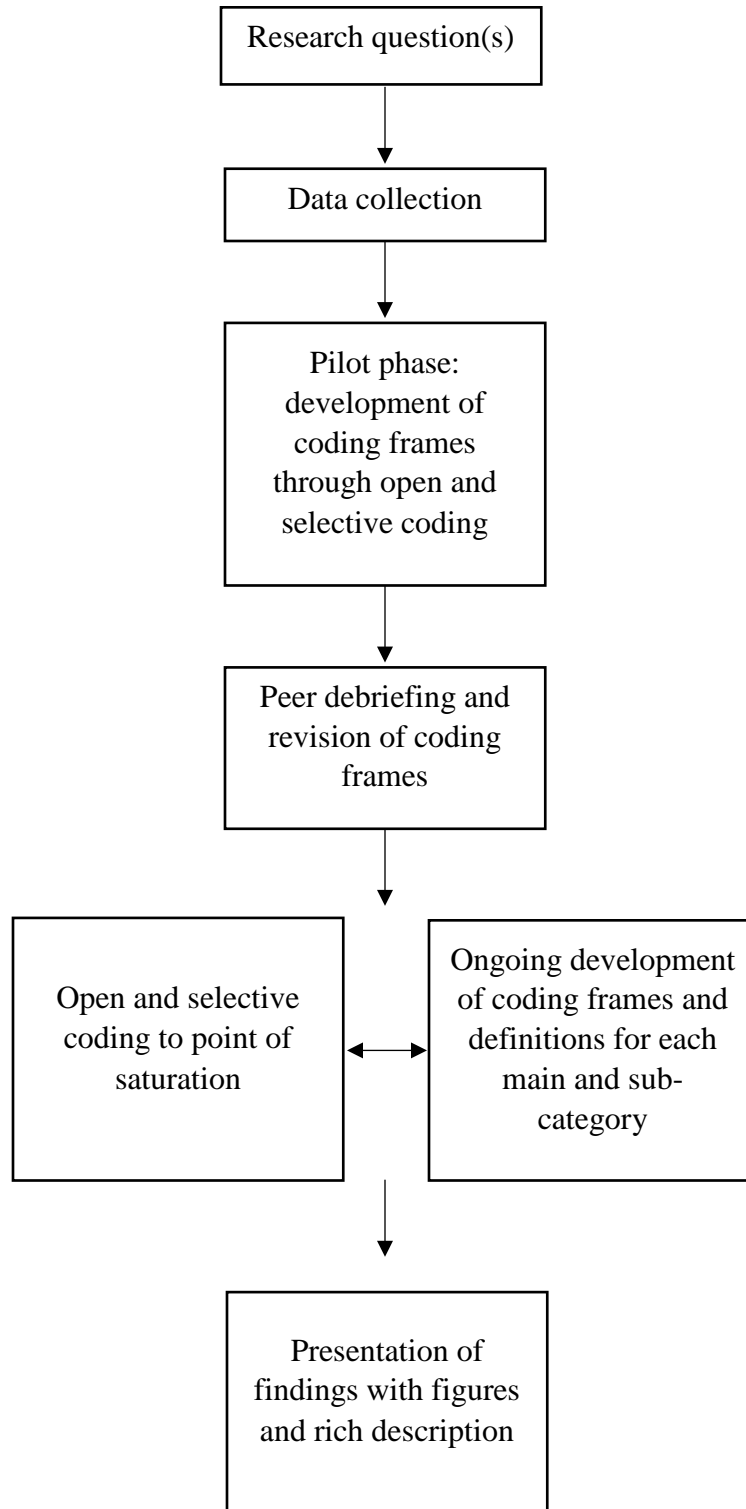
Figure 3. Model of inductive qualitative content analysis. Adapted from "Qualitative Content Analysis" by P. Mayring, 2000, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1*(2), para. 11. Copyright 2000 by P. Mayring.

Trustworthiness

In accordance with the use of a qualitative research design, I evaluated the quality of this study through trustworthiness as opposed to the more positivistic constructs of validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness through the use of four criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Below are descriptions of these criteria, as well as strategies that I used to address them. In addition, Table 1 provides a mapping of the methodologies that I used to address the criteria of trustworthiness.

- Credibility: the extent to which the findings of a study are perceived as realistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004)
  - addressing researcher biases in a researcher as instrument statement (see Appendix B)
  - peer debriefing
  - rich description of findings (Shenton, 2004)
- Transferability: the extent to which the findings of a study can be generalized to other contexts (Shenton, 2004)
  - rich description of the context of the study
  - identification of assumptions made in a study (Shenton, 2004)
- Dependability: the ability of a future researcher to repeat a given study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
  - rich description of the methodology used in the study
  - peer debriefing (Shenton, 2004)

- Confirmability: the extent to which the findings of a study represent the data

  sources rather than researcher bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994)

  - rich description of the methodology used in the study

  - researcher as instrument statement can address this criterion as well

    (Shenton, 2004)

Table 1

Mapping of Methodologies Used to Address Criteria of Trustworthiness

	Researcher as Instrument	Peer Debriefing	Rich Description	Identification of Assumptions
Credibility	X	X	X	
Transferability			X	X
Dependability		X	X	
Confirmability	X		X	

Note. Adapted from *Naturalistic Inquiry* (pp. 289-331), by Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, 1985, Newbury, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Copyright 1985 by SAGE Publications, Inc. Also adapted from *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (2nd ed.) (p. 278), by M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, 1994, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Copyright 1994 by M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman. Also from "Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research," by A. K. Shenton, 2004, *Education for Information, 22,* pp. 63-75. Copyright 2004 by IOS Press.

With regard to ethical considerations, I ensured the anonymity of the IHEs

that were included in the sample for the study through the use of identifier codes.

Since the data collection and analysis procedures included the use of secondary data

only, this study was exempted from IRB review.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

In the following sections, I address the assumptions, limitations, and

delimitations of this study in order to help further guide the reader's understanding

the study design.

Assumptions. I made a few key assumptions in this study. Perhaps the most

salient among these was that IHEs have an interest in interorganizational learning as

it pertains to the QEP implementation process. If an IHE is not interested in sharing

knowledge with other IHEs for the purposes of the QEP, then that IHE is not likely to

engage in interorganizational learning for these purposes, either. I also assumed that

the QEP process has the potential for high merit, as demonstrated by its ability to

facilitate improved student learning outcomes (SLOs). Patton (2008) defines *merit* as

"the intrinsic value of a program…how effective it is in meeting the needs of those it

is intended to help" (p. 6). The impact of the QEP on student learning is largely

dependent on the merit of this process. Additionally, I assumed that the QEP IRs

which colleges and universities submit to SACS are representative of the impact that

the QEPs have had on student learning during the first five years of implementation.

Thus, any misrepresentation by IHEs related to the impact of their QEPs on student

learning could have resulted in inaccurate findings. Finally, I made the assumption

that because SACS requires IHEs to develop their QEPs in alignment with

institutional mission, and QEP topics tend to vary based on such missions, it was

necessary to disaggregate the data from the QEP IRs by institutional type and topic

area (SACS, 2016a).

Limitations. One of the primary limitations of this study was that it remains

difficult, if not impossible, to fully determine the extent to which a QEP has impacted

student learning. Thus, this study was largely reliant on how IHEs report such an

impact in their QEP IRs. A related limitation was that this study did not control for

factors outside of the QEP implementation process that have impacted student

learning. For example, fluctuations in funding unrelated to the QEP could significantly impact the resources available to benefit student learning, although this level of analysis was beyond the scope of the study. Additionally, in part because the study was bounded by SACS accreditation requirements, the findings were not generalizable to other accrediting organizations. However, they may still be informative for accreditors in other regions, as each of these organizations has its own requirements for IHEs to demonstrate continuous improvement.

With regard to the data sample, if the QEP IR of a randomly selected IHE was not available, this became another limitation of the study. In Chapter Five, I discuss the implications of SACS' policy not to require IHEs to make their QEP IRs publicly available. Of note, this policy has immediate implications for the application of interorganizational learning (IOL) theory, as IHEs that do not disseminate their QEP IRs are not as well-positioned to contribute to the collaborative aspect of this framework as their peers who do disseminate (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). A final limitation pertained to the use of QCA, as this methodology does not fully capture the context in which a text occurs (Manning & Cullam-Swan, 1994). Thus, time and space may significantly contribute to how a QEP IR is interpreted, and yet the usage of QCA does not necessarily account for this. Thus, an implication of this limitation is that I, as the researcher, may have interpreted the meaning of a QEP differently than its developers in part due to differences in context.

Delimitations. The main delimitation for this study was the selection of SACS as the regional accreditor of focus. Although other accreditors have requirements that are similar to the QEP, the rationale for selecting SACS was two-

fold. SACS accredits one of the largest geographic regions of any regional accreditor, and therefore the IHEs that comprise this region are diverse in institutional type and mission. Thus, such diversity positioned this study to yield findings from which many other IHEs across the country could learn as they embark on the fulfillment of their own accreditation requirements. The second part of the rationale for the selection of the SACS region, as I addressed in my researcher as instrument statement, is that I currently work within this region and serve on my IHE's QEP committee. Therefore, I have a vested interest in this topic and the implications that it holds for my profession.

Summary

In this chapter, I summarized the purpose of the study and reiterated the research questions. The purpose of this study was to examine the reported impact of QEPs of various institutional types and topic areas on student learning at SACS-accredited IHEs. Additionally, this study also sought to examine the effective practices that IHEs have identified in the implementation of their QEPs. I also presented the rationale for the use of the QCA methodology and QEP IRs as data sources. Further, I provided an overview of how I evaluated the study through the construct of trustworthiness and the associated strategies for addressing this construct, which include peer debriefing, a researcher as instrument statement, and rich description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Finally, I delineated the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that I held as the researcher. In the next chapter, I will present the findings of the analysis of the QEP IRs through the use of the QCA methodology.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Institutions submit Quality Enhancement Plan Impact Reports (QEP IRs) primarily to provide the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) with an update on the implementation of their QEPs, including an overall assessment of impact on student learning (SACS, 2016b). The purpose of this study was to examine the reported impact of QEPs of various institutional types and topic areas on student learning. Additionally, I examined the effective practices that institutions of higher education (IHEs) have identified in the implementation of their QEPs. In the following sections, I address each research and sub-research question (RQ and SRQ) of this study with the findings from the qualitative content analysis procedures. I present the findings through the use of figures that emerged from the coding frames as well as through narrative to explain the figures.

QEP Impact on Student Learning

In this study, RQ1 examined the reported impact of QEPs on student learning within the first five years of implementation. In general, each QEP IR first defined the topic area and then provided a discussion of the initiatives that an IHE implemented as a result of its QEP. These initiatives may have taken place in curricular, co-curricular, and/or extracurricular settings and involved an array of institutional stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, and staff). Each QEP IR also listed the program goals and/or student learning outcomes (SLOs) that an IHE sought to

meet through its QEP initiatives. The use of various assessment tools enabled IHEs

to determine whether these program goals and/or SLOs were met, and in turn whether

student learning occurred (SACS, 2016b). The results of these assessments were also

included in the reports. I analyzed a total of 40 QEP IRs in this study, each of which

reported changes in student learning across different areas during the QEP

implementation process. Table 2 summarizes the data sample for the study.

Throughout the narrative, I have linked the findings with the corresponding QEP IRs

by inserting the report numbers in parentheses. For the purposes of readability, I will

refer to QEP IRs as IRs in the remaining sections of Chapters Four and Five.

Table 2

Summary of Data Sample

QEP IR #	Institutional Type	State	QEP Topic Area
1	Public Associate	KY	Student Engagement
2	Public Associate	SC	Instruction
3	Public Associate	VA	Instruction
4	Public Associate	FL	Student Success
5	Public Associate	NC	Instruction
6	Public Associate	TX	Critical Thinking
7	Public Associate	AL	Writing
8	Public Associate	LA	Information Literacy
9	Public Associate	TX	Instruction
10	Public Associate	MS	Instruction
11	Public Associate	TN	Student Success
12	Public Associate	VA	Critical Thinking
13	Public Associate	NC	Writing
14	Public Associate	VA	Student Success
15	Private Baccalaureate	LA	Student Success
16	Private Baccalaureate	VA	Student Success
17	Private Baccalaureate	NC	Information Literacy
18	Private Baccalaureate	SC	Writing
19	Private Baccalaureate	GA	Student Success
20	Private Baccalaureate	KY	Student Success
21	Private Baccalaureate	VA	Critical Thinking
22	Private Baccalaureate	NC	Writing
23	Public Baccalaureate	SC	Reading
24	Public Baccalaureate	FL	Student Success
25	Private Master's	TX	Critical Thinking
26	Private Master's	MS	Reading
27	Private Master's	KY	Student Engagement
28	Private Master's	NC	Reading
29	Private Master's	NC	Student Success
30	Public Master's	AL	Reading
31	Public Master's	GA	Instruction
32	Public Master's	VA	Critical Thinking
33	Public Master's	KY	Student Success
34	Public Master's	LA	Writing
35	Private Doctoral	GA	Student Engagement
36	Public Doctoral	KY	Critical Thinking
37	Public Doctoral	TN	Critical Thinking
38	Public Doctoral	FL	Student Engagement
39	Public Doctoral	MS	Writing
40	Public Doctoral	TX	Student Success

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

To reiterate, for the purposes of this study I defined student learning as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students should be able to demonstrate as an outcome of competency-based educational programs (SACS, n.d.). Figure 4 features the following categories that emerged during my analysis of the reported impact of QEPs on student learning: critical thinking, global competence, information literacy, and reading and writing mastery. Two IRs reported gains in student learning in more than one of these areas (IRs #19, 22). The findings are not intended to suggest that the QEP has only impacted these four areas of student learning, yet these are the areas that emerged across the data sample. Further, the purpose of this study was not to determine or make an argument for which QEP initiatives have the greatest or the least amount of impact on student learning. Rather, the findings were intended to provide examples of how such initiatives that focus on student learning may impact outcomes across different institutional types and QEP topic areas.
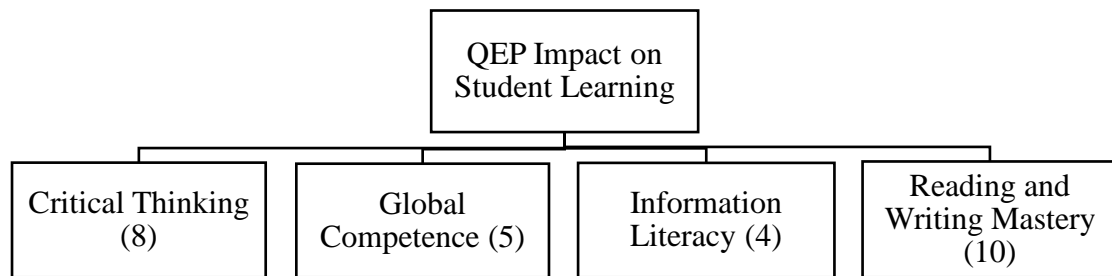
Figure 4. Reported impact of Quality Enhancement Plans on student learning. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of Quality Enhancement Plan Impact Reports that indicated the occurrence of student learning in each area across the sample. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan.

The data analysis procedures first required the use of an open coding technique to code the entire sample of IRs for impact on student learning. Through the use of this technique, I applied a priori codes as well as identified emergent codes

such as *cultural competency* and *research skills*. Both a priori and new codes

emerged from the analysis of QEP impact on student learning. I then used a selective

coding technique to place the codes into categories of the coding frame, which in turn

informed the development of Figure 4. The numbers in parentheses in this figure

each represent the number of IRs that reported an impact on student learning in the

respective areas across the sample.

Although 25 IHEs represented in the data sample reported gains in student

learning due to the QEP, 15 did not demonstrate an impact of the QEP on student

learning (IRs #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 20, 24, 29, 31, and 40). In the remaining

chapters, I refer to these 15 as missing cases. Of these missing cases, five did not

report enough assessment data to enable me to determine the impact. The other 10

reported an impact on the student learning environment rather than on student

learning. Notably, 9 of the 15 missing cases were associate degree-granting

institutions. I further discuss the missing cases in Chapter Five. Table 3 summarizes

the institutional type, QEP topic area, and reported impact of the QEP (i.e., on the

student learning environment or indeterminable due to insufficient assessment data)

that each missing case represents.

Table 3

Summary of Missing Cases

QEP IR#	Institutional Type	QEP Topic Area	Reported Impact
1	Public Associate	Student Engagement	Insufficient Data
2	Public Associate	Instruction	Learning Environment
3	Public Associate	Instruction	Learning Environment
4	Public Associate	Student Success	Learning Environment
5	Public Associate	Instruction	Learning Environment
9	Public Associate	Instruction	Learning Environment

10	Public Associate	Instruction	Learning Environment
11	Public Associate	Student Success	Learning Environment
14	Public Associate	Student Success	Insufficient Data
15	Private Baccalaureate	Student Success	Learning Environment
20	Private Baccalaureate	Student Success	Learning Environment
24	Public Baccalaureate	Student Success	Insufficient Data
29	Private Master's	Student Success	Insufficient Data
31	Public Master's	Instruction	Learning Environment
40	Public Doctoral	Student Success	Insufficient Data

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

The following sections provide a detailed review of the areas of student learning that emerged from the data analysis to inform Figure 4. Under each area of student learning, I also explain how the reported QEP impact varied by institutional type and topic area in order to address SRQ1 and SRQ2 of the present study.

Critical thinking. As reflected in the data sample, IHEs define the topic of critical thinking in a myriad of ways. Paul and Elder's (2006) critical thinking framework, which is discipline neutral and includes several elements of thought (i.e., point of view, purpose, question at issue, information, interpretation and inference, concepts, assumptions, and implications and consequences) was one source used on campuses to improve student learning (IRs #25, 36). Similarly, an IHE also used a "pure" definition of critical thinking "grounded in the origins of thought" that requires a disciplined and reflective effort to distinguish between true and false propositions (IR #21). IR #6 defined critical thinking as thinking purposefully, skillfully, and with confidence. A focus on specificity in definitions was evident; for example, several reports framed critical thinking as an ability to synthesize, analyze, and evaluate (IRs #19, 31, and 32). Relatedly, the synthesis of information was also noted in another report that defined critical thinking as an ability to engage in deductive and inductive reasoning to evaluate issues (IR #12).

62

The QEP initiatives that impacted critical thinking primarily accomplished this through an integration of initiatives across the undergraduate curriculum. For example, one IHE implemented a culminating undergraduate experience requirement in which faculty designed discipline-specific capstone assignments (IR #36). These assignments were tied to at least one SLO related to critical thinking. The IHE used the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiencies (CAAP) Critical Thinking test, a standardized assessment program designed to help IHEs improve student learning (American College Test, 2017), as a measure of students' progress. Students' scores on the CAAP increased between the pre- and post-test during the QEP implementation period. The IHE also used several items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an instrument that gauges first-year and senior students' participation on campus (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017), to measure changes in students' critical thinking skills. Students' scores improved across the majority of these items from the pre- to the post-test during the QEP implementation period (IR #36).

Another IHE reported a similar approach to QEP implementation as that highlighted above with the integration of its QEP initiatives throughout the undergraduate curriculum (IR #12). Initially, the IHE intended to integrate critical thinking pedagogy and activities into eight pilot classes, but decided to take a campus-wide approach instead. Thus, faculty across campus participated in two-day workshops that introduced them to cooperative learning techniques designed to increase critical thinking skills. The IHE noted that the extant literature links cooperative learning to gains in critical thinking. All full-time and the vast majority

63

of adjunct faculty attended this training and subsequently implemented the learning techniques in their classrooms. The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), a discipline-neutral measure of students' reasoning skills (Insight Assessment, 2017), was used to measure students' progress in the area of critical thinking. The target was for all graduates to score at or above the national and state averages in all sub-categories. Graduates met this target within one year of QEP implementation (IR #12).

An additional IHE integrated critical thinking initiatives across the undergraduate curriculum, yet did so with a specific focus on writing (IR #25). Like the faculty development initiative reported in the preceding paragraph, this QEP included a similar initiative that brought all disciplines together to develop critical thinking pedagogical strategies. Further, the IHE provided access to expert consultants and speakers outside of the campus community. Some faculty also participated in a faculty fellows program that offered additional training on the implementation of critical thinking pedagogical strategies in upper-division courses. Upon acceptance to the program, the faculty selected one upper-division course to redesign using elements of Paul and Elder's (2006) critical thinking framework. This framework guided the development of discipline-specific writing assignments that were designed to bolster critical thinking skills. The IHE utilized departmentally designed rubrics to evaluate the writing assignments. The Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT), a standardized short answer essay test designed to assess both critical thinking and real world problem solving skills (National Science Foundation, 2016), was an additional assessment tool. The results of the rubric

evaluations indicated that, on average, 85% of students in the redesigned upper-level courses met the standard for being able to apply the components of critical thinking to their writing at the completion of these courses. The report did not provide pre-test data. As for the results of the CAT, these indicated that, on average, 73% of students demonstrated growth in critical thinking skills through their writing upon completion of the courses (IR #25).

Although some IHEs utilized the QEP to address critical thinking across the undergraduate curriculum, others focused on specific disciplines. For example, IR #6 reported that teams of English, math, and science faculty received training on critical thinking activities that they could implement in their classrooms. The IHE focused on English, math, and science because the majority of students across the IHE's four campuses take a course in one or more of these disciplines. Faculty development offered during the first year of the QEP included sessions on the design and implementation of a common critical thinking rubric (IR #6). The report discussed the use of the CAAP to assess changes in students' critical thinking skills. The results of the CAAP revealed that students did not score above the national average. However, the results also indicated an overall increase in critical thinking skills between the pre- and post-test for students who completed coursework in the English, math, and/or science disciplines (IR #6).

Rather than focusing on integrating QEP critical thinking initiatives into certain disciplines or across the curriculum, other IHEs focused on specific student populations. First-year students served as the target population in the cases of IRs #19, #21, and #32. More specifically, these IHEs addressed critical thinking through

the use of first-year seminars. A major part of these initiatives was to provide workshops for faculty on various forms of critical thinking pedagogy. One report discussed a redesign of first-year seminars to incorporate the use of higher-order thinking skills into the curriculum via web-based modules (IR #21). This IHE also employed the use of peer mentors in the first-year seminars who were trained by faculty to support the development of students' critical thinking skills (IR #21). Another report discussed the establishment of a library collection on the topic of critical thinking (IR #32). Regarding the use of assessment tools, IR #32 reported that cohorts of junior students scored significantly higher than freshman cohorts on the CAAP during the QEP implementation period (IR #32). As for IR #21, the IHE reported higher scores on the CCTST among seniors than freshmen by the end of the first five years of implementation (IR #21).

Summary. Themes related to faculty development and assessment emerged from the IRs that provided evidence of student learning in the area of critical thinking. In almost every case in which critical thinking was a focus of the QEP, the IHEs facilitated faculty development opportunities (IRs #6, 12, 21, 25, 32, and 37). The intentional involvement of multiple disciplines in these training opportunities was also a common practice throughout the sample, as faculty reportedly benefitted from the diverse perspectives of their colleagues across campus. Additionally, some of the faculty development included training on the design of rubrics to assess changes in students' critical thinking skills (IRs #6, 25). The other commonly reported QEP initiative was the use of first-year seminars (IRs #19, 21, and 32). Although each IHE's approach to the design of these seminars varied, all sought to

impact students' critical thinking skills from the start of their undergraduate experience.

Regarding the use of external assessment tools, the CAAP, CAT, and CCTST were all reported as being used in more than one instance (IRs #6, 12, 21, 25, 32, 36, and 37). It was evident that the use of external assessment tools was more common than the use of internal for the measurement of critical thinking skills. Also, IHEs used direct measures of assessment more commonly than indirect to demonstrate changes in critical thinking skills. Additionally, IRs often reported the use of a pre- and post-test design to demonstrate changes in student learning that occurred over the course of the QEP implementation period. Table 4 provides a summary of the QEP initiatives and assessment tools that IHEs used to achieve gains in the area of critical thinking.

Table 4

Summary of QEP Impact on Critical Thinking

QEP IR #	QEP Initiative(s)	Assessment	Outcome
6	Faculty development workshops	CAAP	Increase in scores between pre- and post-test during QEP implementation
12	Faculty development workshops	CCTST	All graduates scored at or above national and state averages within one year of QEP implementation
19	First-year seminar	Internally-designed rubric	82% (target 80%) of students met standard by end of QEP implementation (no pre-test data indicated)
21	Faculty development workshops First-year seminars Peer mentors	CCTST	Higher scores reported among seniors than freshmen after first five years of QEP implementation
25	Faculty development workshops Faculty fellows writing assignments	Internally-designed rubric	85% of students met standard (no target or pre-test data indicated)
		CAT	73% of students demonstrated growth in critical thinking (10% increase from pre-test)
32	Faculty development workshops First-year seminars Library collection	CAAP	Significant increase in scores from freshman to junior cohorts during QEP implementation
36	Undergraduate capstone	CAAP	Increase in scores between pre- and post-test during QEP implementation
		NSSE	Increase in scores across most items between pre- and post-test during QEP implementation
37	Faculty development workshops General education curricular enhancements	CAT	15% increase over baseline from year one to year five of QEP implementation
		CCTST	15% increase over baseline from year one to year five of QEP implementation

Note. Unless otherwise indicated, the assessment(s) were administered across the student population. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report; CAAP = Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency; CCTST = California Critical Thinking Skills Test; CAT = Critical Thinking Assessment Test; NSSE = National Survey of Student Engagement.

Variance by institutional type. The QEP reportedly impacted students'

critical thinking skills across all institutional types in the sample except for public

baccalaureate and private doctoral types. However, the sample only included two of

the former and one of the latter, which could have impacted these findings. More

public IHEs than private reported gains in critical thinking. Two reports from both

the states of Texas and Virginia indicated gains in critical thinking skills. Table 5

summarizes the QEP impact on critical thinking by institutional type.

Table 5

Summary of QEP Impact on Critical Thinking by Institutional Type

QEP IR#	Institutional Type	State
6	Public Associate	TX
12	Public Associate	VA
19	Private Baccalaureate	GA
21	Private Baccalaureate	VA
25	Private Master's	TX
32	Public Master's	VA
36	Public Doctoral	KY
37	Public Doctoral	TN

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

Associate. In the area of critical thinking, the associate institutional type was

the only type to use the term *confidence* in a definition of critical thinking (IR #6).

The use of this term was seemingly indicative of the IHE's goal to use critical

thinking as a mechanism to build students' confidence in their academic and

professional abilities. The reports related to critical thinking alluded to the long-term

impact of this skill on students' personal and professional development (IRs #6, 12).

The QEP initiatives used to achieve this skill tended to focus on preparing instructors

in foundational courses to improve their knowledge of critical thinking pedagogy.

External assessments were commonly used to measure changes in critical thinking

69

skills, including the CAAP and the CCTST. The IRs that reported gains in critical thinking also reported the use of external assessments more frequently than the IRs that reported gains in any other area of student learning.

Baccalaureate. Both reports from baccalaureate institutional types were from private IHEs (IRs #19, 21). In IR #19, the first-year seminars that the IHE used as an initiative to develop critical thinking skills were primarily intended to help students transition to college. Alternatively, IR #21 defined critical thinking in a manner that indicated its intention to prepare students for research and higher-order thinking by emphasizing the reflective nature of this skillset. Whereas IR #19 aligned with the associate institutional types in that these IHEs focused on developing critical thinking skills in foundational courses, IR #21 indicated that students at all course levels were impacted by the QEP in the area of critical thinking. The associate and baccalaureate institutional types all used external measures of assessment to gauge changes in critical thinking, with the exception of the IHE represented in IR #19.

Master's. Both a private and a public master's institution demonstrated gains in critical thinking skills through various QEP initiatives. Interestingly, the private institution tended to focus more on upperclassmen while the public focused on first-year student populations. For example, IR #25 (private) reported gains in critical thinking through the use of writing initiatives in upper-level coursework, while IR #32 (public) reported similar gains through the use of first-year writing seminars. IR #25 reported the use of Paul and Elder's (2006) critical thinking framework, while IR #32 did not report the use of a framework to support the IHE's definition of student learning. The use of external assessments (e.g., CAAP and CAT) was a common

practice in the measurement of critical thinking skills across the master's institutional type (IRs #25, 32).

      Doctoral. Two reports from public doctoral institutions reported changes in students' critical thinking skills (IR #36, 37). Paul and Elder's (2006) critical thinking framework was used in IR #36, while neither a framework nor a definition was provided in IR #37. One IHE approached the improvement of students' critical thinking skills holistically with a focus on community engagement (IR #36). Thus, the institution sought to integrate community learning experiences into students' undergraduate careers in order to prepare students to solve complex problems in real-world settings. To assess the impact of these initiatives, the IHE used the CAAP and the NSSE, both of which demonstrated increases in students' critical thinking skills and level of engagement in activities that cultivate these skills over the course of the QEP implementation period. Alternatively, IR #37 reported a focus on developing students' critical thinking skills through the general education curriculum and faculty development initiatives. To assess the impact of the QEP initiatives, this IHE also used external measures, in this case the CAT and the CCTST. Students' scores on both exams increased from year one to year five of the QEP implementation period (IR #37).

      Variance by QEP topic area. The majority of IRs that reported gains in critical thinking skills also reported the use of QEP topics related to critical thinking, which indicated some degree of intentionality in the QEP process. Several of these reports indicated the use of external assessments to measure changes in students' critical thinking skills. For example, the CAAP was commonly used to measure

students' gains in critical thinking skills due to the implementation of QEP initiatives

(IRs #21, 25, 32, 36, and 37). Another commonly used external assessment was the

CCTST, which was a summative measures of students' critical thinking skills (IR #6,

12, and 21). Some reports also alluded to the interrelationship between critical

thinking and information literacy skills (IRs #32, 36, and 37). For example, IR #32

reported a focus on the extent to which the information literacy skills that students

were exposed to during first-year seminars impacted gains in critical thinking skills.

The QEP topic reported in IR #19 was not directly related to critical thinking, but

rather to student success. In this case, gains in critical thinking skills were a by-

product of the first-year experience that the IHE developed to help students during

their transition to college. Table 6 summarizes the QEP impact on critical thinking

by topic area.

Table 6

Summary of QEP Impact on Critical Thinking by Topic Area

QEP IR#	Topic Area	State
6	Critical Thinking	TX
12	Critical Thinking	VA
19	Student Success	GA
21	Critical Thinking	VA
25	Critical Thinking	TX
32	Critical Thinking	VA
36	Critical Thinking	KY
37	Critical Thinking	TN

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement; IR = Impact Report.

Global competence. For the purposes of this study, I defined *global*

competence as an understanding and applicable knowledge of perspectives from

different regions and cultures than one's own (DeLoach, Kurt, & Olitsky, 2015;

Kedia & Cornwell, 1994). The IHEs represented in the data sample did not use the

72

term *global competence* in their IRs. However, some IRs reported the implementation of QEP initiatives that ultimately impacted students' global competence (IRs #16, 19, and 35). Additionally, some IHEs selected QEP topics that directly relate to global competence (IRs #27, 33). Several of the QEP initiatives discussed below align with the American Council on Education's Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE) (n.d.) model of comprehensive internationalization, "a strategic, coordinated process that seeks to align and integrate policies, programs, and initiatives to position colleges and universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected institutions" (para. 1). I further examine this alignment in the following sections.

Two IHEs represented in the data sample selected QEP topics that pertain to student success in globally competitive societies (IRs #27, 33). The initiatives listed in IR #27 shared a common goal of internationalizing student learning. Specifically, these initiatives included the addition of globally themed courses that emphasized the study of geography and foreign language to the existing general education curriculum. The CIGE (n.d.) identified the use of such general education requirements as critical to internationalization. Further, the IHE sought to increase student participation in global learning experiences. Resource allocation and improved recruitment efforts were keys to supporting this initiative. Relatedly, the CIGE (n.d.) also discussed the importance of student mobility via study abroad to aid internationalization efforts and maximize student learning. In order to assess the outcomes of these initiatives, the IHE utilized the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a statistically sound measure of intercultural competence. The IDI

fulfills the CIGE's (n.d.) criteria for articulated institutional commitment in the area of assessment to determine the outcomes of internationalization. The IDI was administered to a cohort of students during both their freshman and senior years, which coincided with the QEP implementation period. The average scores across the cohort increased significantly from year one to year four, and the scores tended to be higher for students who studied abroad as undergraduates (IR #27).

Relatedly, IR #33 also addressed global competence through internationalization efforts. Two of the QEP SLOs listed in this report alluded to the importance of global competence. The first pertained to respecting diversity across cultures, and the other to the ability to demonstrate awareness of one's responsibilities in a global society. The QEP initiatives that the IHE implemented in order to meet these SLOs included increasing its promotion of study abroad opportunities, enhancing international service learning programs, and participation in a nationwide program to promote student learning goals that support internationalization. These initiatives also align with the articulated institutional commitment and student mobility aspects of the CIGE's (n.d.) model.

Similar to the curricular additions reported in IR #27, IR #33 reported the addition of courses with international components and foreign language study requirements as part of its promotion of new student learning goals. These additions align with the CIGE's (n.d.) recommendations for internationalizing curriculum. For the purposes of assessment, the IHE reported the tracking of students' engagement in international experiences during the QEP implementation period. Perhaps most notably, students' engagement in cultural, global, and diversity experiences increased

by 60% from year one to year five. However, the IHE did not provide a definition for *engagement*. The IHE also administered a locally designed engagement survey to track changes in students' perceptions of learning following the implementation of the above QEP initiatives. Scores on the items related to understanding responsibilities as a citizen in a global society steadily increased during the implementation period (IR #33).

Although other IHEs did not directly address global competence in the selection of their QEP topics, they embedded initiatives that contributed to global competence into their QEPs. For example, one report discussed the implementation of an intentional first-year experience grounded in the traditions of a liberal arts education (IR #19). The first-year experience program included a two-semester sequence of seminars intended to support students during their transition from secondary to postsecondary education. The second course in the sequence enabled students to explore global communities. Instructors for these courses fostered small group discussions and team-taught sessions in part to expose students to an array of perspectives on the topic of global communities. This initiative also aligned with the CIGE's (n.d.) recommendation for internationalizing curriculum. The course evaluations included an item that asked students to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the course increased their awareness of issues that affect global communities. Instructors administered the evaluations to students in year one and year five of the QEP implementation period. The percentage of agreement with this statement increased from 60% to 90% during this period (IR #19).

Two additional reports addressed the topic of global competence through service learning and living-learning programs (IRs #16, 35). One reported the implementation of a service scholars program that required students to meet strict academic standards. As part of this program, students had the opportunity to participate in international experiences such as the Clinton Global Initiative. The IHE also hosted on-campus conferences that were designed to promote the importance of service in a global society in partnership with entities such as Harvard Medical School's Center for Health and the Global Environment (IR #35). Similarly, the other report discussed the implementation of a living-learning program that also exposed students to global issues (IR #16). In particular, this program included a required global health course that exposed students to issues of health and human rights in developing countries. The report indicated that the course was in high demand with students throughout the QEP implementation period. Although neither report indicated the use of formal measures to assess global competence, both alluded to evidence of gains in global competence as reflected in coursework submitted by students during the QEP implementation period (IRs #16, 35).

Summary. The lack of use of the term *global competence* among IHEs that reported gains in this area of student learning suggests a potential unfamiliarity with either the term or its meaning. Of course, IHEs may also have other terminology that they use in place of this term to convey similar meaning (e.g., internationalization). Pointedly, a common terminology is not used in the field either, and the lack of use of common language around the concept of global competence in the reports may reflect this lack of agreement. The alignment between the CIGE's (n.d.) model of

comprehensive internationalization and several of the QEP initiatives that emerged

from the data was notable. Specifically, the internationalization of curriculum,

promotion of student mobility through study abroad experiences, and articulated

institutional commitment to internationalization through assessment emerged from

both the model and the data analysis conducted in the present study (IRs #19, 27, 33).

Overall, the use of formal assessment was not as commonly reported for global

competence as it was for the other areas of student learning. Table 7 provides a

summary of the QEP initiatives and assessment tools that IHEs used to achieve gains

in the area of global competence.

Table 7

Summary of QEP Impact on Global Competence

QEP IR #	QEP Initiative(s)	Assessment	Outcome
16	Living-learning program with global health course requirement	No formal assessment	Observed increase in global competence
19	First-year experience with a course on global communities	Course evaluation	Increase (from 60% to 90%) in average percentage of agreement with statement that course improved awareness of global issues from year one to year five of QEP implementation
27	Addition of geography and foreign language courses Study abroad	IDI	Significant increase in scores from pre- to post-test; higher scores on average for students who studied abroad
33	Addition of international and foreign language courses International service learning Internationalization program Study abroad	Locally-designed engagement survey	Increase in engagement (by 60%) among students who participated in QEP initiatives from pre- to post-test

Note. Unless otherwise indicated, the assessment(s) were administered across the student population.
QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report; IDI = Intercultural Development Inventory.

Variance by institutional type. The QEP reportedly impacted students' global

competence across all institutional types in the sample except for associate, public

baccalaureate, and public doctoral types. Thus, this area of student learning emerged

more commonly for private than public IHEs. Two reports from both the states of

Georgia and Virginia indicated gains in global competence. Table 8 summarizes the

QEP impact on global competence by institutional type.

Table 8

Summary of QEP Impact on Global Competence by Institutional Type

QEP IR#	Institutional Type	State
16	Private Baccalaureate	VA
19	Private Baccalaureate	GA
27	Private Master's	KY
33	Public Master's	KY
35	Private Doctoral	GA

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

Baccalaureate. Learning experiences that occurred both inside and outside of

the classroom facilitated gains in global competence for two private baccalaureate

institutional types. In particular, IR #16 reported the use of a living-learning

community within which students were exposed to courses related to global issues.

Similarly, IR #19 also addressed global competence through courses on the topic of

global communities. In both cases, this coursework was targeted toward first- and

second-year students. Assessment data to demonstrate changes in global competence

were not provided in IR #16, which may have been due to gains in this area of student

learning being unintentional as the focus of the QEP was not on global competence.

However, the report noted observed changes by the faculty in students' global

competence. In IR #19, first-year students' responses to course evaluations indicated perceived gains in their awareness of global communities and issues.

Master's. Master's institutions that demonstrated gains in global competence noted intention in achieving this goal. Two IRs from this institutional type (one private, one public) approached this area of student learning with QEP topics related to student success in global societies (IRs #27, 33). Both focused on the internationalization of curricula, as well as increasing the promotion of student mobility through study abroad and service learning opportunities (CIGE, n.d.). The use of the research-based IDI as a form of assessment revealed higher gains in student learning in the area of global competence among students who participated in study abroad than those who did not (IR #27). Alternatively, IR #33 reported the use of a locally designed survey to track student engagement in international experiences as an indirect measure of student learning in this area. Longitudinal results demonstrated an increase in perceived engagement among students who became involved in such experiences (IR #33).

Doctoral. The doctoral institution that demonstrated gains in students' global competence was also the only private doctoral institution in the data sample (IR #35). In this case, the implementation of a service learning program enabled students who met strict academic standards to participate in international experiences with organizations such as the Clinton Global Initiative. Although no formal assessments were used to measure changes in students' global competence as a result of the program, IR #35 alluded to the notion that students who participated in the program were more globally competent than their peers. The students reportedly demonstrated

this through their classroom interactions and performance on coursework throughout the disciplines (IR #35).

   Variance by QEP topic area. The IRs that reported gains in global competence did not report QEP topics that were directly related to this area of student learning. Rather, the topics were related to either student engagement or student success. Both reports with topics related to student engagement alluded to the CIGE's (n.d.) concept of student mobility through the facilitation of study abroad or international service learning opportunities (IRs #27 and 35). Alternatively, the reports related to student success tended to focus primarily on the student learning environment (IRs #16, 19, and 33). This was particularly evident in IR #16, which focused on the impact of a living-learning program on students' global competence. Through such a program, students had the opportunity to gain skills in this area both in and out of the classroom. Similarly, IRs #19 and #33 both discussed the implementation of QEP initiatives such as service learning programs that reinforced curricular lessons in co-curricular and extracurricular settings. Table 9 summarizes the QEP impact on global competence by topic area.

Table 9

Summary of QEP Impact on Global Competence by Topic Area

QEP IR#	Topic Area	State
16	Student Success	VA
19	Student Success	GA
27	Student Engagement	KY
33	Student Success	KY
35	Student Engagement	GA

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

Information literacy. Of the IRs that reported an impact on student learning in the area of information literacy, only two included definitions for this term. IR #8 reported that information literacy is the ability of students to ethically and effectively manage, access, evaluate, and use information. Similarly, IR #17 defined information literacy as the extent to which a student is adept at critically and ethically evaluating, organizing, synthesizing, integrating, and applying information. As evidenced by these definitions, information literacy and critical thinking are closely related skillsets. According to Weiner (2011), information literacy provides "tools and techniques in the processing and utilization of knowledge," while critical thinking supplies "the particulars and interpretations associated with a specific discipline" (p. 81). Thus, information literacy relates to students' ability to access and use information, while critical thinking more so relates to how students make sense of the information. Other reports listed information literacy as a QEP objective, yet did not define the term (IRs #22, 38). I further examine the impact of the QEP on this area of student learning in the following sections.

Information literacy was the focus of two QEP topics from the data sample (IRs #8 and #17). Specifically, IR #17 reported the intended outcome of enhancing student learning by improving students' information seeking and use behaviors (e.g., ability to do research). To meet these objectives, the IHE facilitated faculty development opportunities across the disciplines. Following the training, many faculty elected to incorporate a research paper assignment into their upper-level and/or capstone courses to develop and assess students' information literacy skills. Collectively, the faculty also designed a rubric against which they evaluated students'

information literacy skills as demonstrated by performance on written assignments. Additionally, the incorporation of inquiry-based assignments into lower-level courses provided scaffolding for students' opportunities to gain information literacy skills. The QEP director enlisted the help of instructional librarians to facilitate these learning opportunities. The results of the rubric evaluations indicated that, by year five of the QEP implementation period, the target of 80% of students meeting or exceeding the minimum standard of competency for information literacy skills was met (IR #17). However, the IR did not report pre-test data.

IR #8 also reported the facilitation of faculty development opportunities related to information literacy during the QEP implementation process. Subsequently, the faculty created a common rubric for the courses in which they embedded assignments related to information literacy. The library also provided additional materials for both faculty and students to reference on the topic of information literacy. The intention of the QEP was to improve these skills over the course of students' freshman year (IR #8). Campus wide involvement in the implementation of QEP initiatives demonstrates the importance of intrainstitutional communities of practice (CoPs), which I further address in Chapter Five.

According to IR #8, the IHE used both direct and indirect measures to assess the impact of QEP initiatives on students' information literacy skills. As a direct measure, the IHE used the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS), an instrument designed to measure general education outcomes. The SAILS scores increased significantly across cohorts over the course of students' freshman year. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)

and library statistics from the college served as the indirect measures. These measures revealed an increase in students' accessing of online resources, which IR #8 reported to be indicative of potential gains in information literacy skills.

Two additional reports indicated the use of QEP initiatives to improve students' information literacy skills as main objectives of their QEPs (IRs #22, 38). Specifically, IR #22 reported that the improvement of information literacy skills was necessary to meeting the overarching QEP goal of enhancing student writing. The library staff provided students with bibliographic resources and discipline-specific instruction on the topic of information literacy. Approximately 1,400 students received this instruction during the QEP implementation period. Although the IHE reported that these initiatives enhanced students' information literacy skills, no formal assessment data were provided (IR #22). Thus, the conclusion that student learning occurred in the area of information literacy as a result of the librarians' instruction appeared to be based on students' seat time. The other report discussed a collaborative effort between the IHE's Center for Teaching and Learning and research librarians to host workshops designed for faculty to gain knowledge on the assessment of students' information literacy skills. Such collaboration further supports the importance of intrainstitutional CoPs. Survey data collected during the QEP implementation period indicated that the majority of faculty observed gains in students' information literacy skills due in part to these workshops (IR #38).

Summary. Faculty development (e.g., workshops) emerged as critical to the impact of the QEP on both critical thinking and information literacy skills (IRs #6, 8, 12, 17, 25, 32, and 38). Collaboration between faculty and library staff as well as

staff from teaching and learning centers was also a common practice (IRs #8, 17, 22, and 38). Such collaboration demonstrated the importance of utilizing campus-wide resources during the QEP implementation process, which is also a form of engagement in intrainstitutional CoPs. Regarding assessment, each IHE reported the use of different—or a lack of—measures to gauge changes in students' information literacy skills. These measures were both direct (e.g., SAILS and rubrics) and indirect (CCSSE, library statistics, and surveys). I further discuss the potential role of IOL in determining effective practices in the use of assessment in Chapter Five. Table 10 provides a summary of the QEP initiatives and assessment tools that IHEs used to achieve gains in the area of information literacy.

Table 10

Summary of QEP Impact on Information Literacy

QEP IR #	QEP Initiative(s)	Assessment	Outcome
8	Faculty development Library resources	SAILS	Increase in scores across cohorts over course of students' freshman year during QEP implementation
		CCSSE & Library statistics	Increase in accessing of online resources during QEP implementation
17	Faculty development	Rubric to evaluate course-embedded assignments	Approximately 80% (target 80%) of students met or exceeded minimum standard of competency for information literacy skills by year five of QEP implementation
22	Discipline-specific instruction Library resources	No formal assessment	Observed increase in students' information literacy skills by year five of QEP implementation
38	Faculty development workshops	Survey data	Majority of faculty reported an increase in students' information literacy skills by year five of QEP implementation

Note. Unless otherwise indicated, the assessment(s) were administered across the student population. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report; SAILS = Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills; CCSSE = Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

Variance by institutional type. The QEP reportedly impacted students'

information literacy skills across all institutional types in the sample except for

master's, public baccalaureate, and private doctoral types. The frequency at which

this area of student learning emerged from public and private IHEs was similar. Two

reports from the state of North Carolina indicated gains in information literacy skills.

Table 11 summarizes the QEP impact on information literacy by institutional type.

Table 11

Summary of QEP Impact on Information Literacy by Institutional Type

QEP IR#	Institutional Type	State
8	Public Associate	LA
17	Private Baccalaureate	NC
22	Private Baccalaureate	NC
38	Public Doctoral	FL

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

Associate. Although codes related to information literacy were not common across the associate institutional type, evidence of gains in these skills emerged from one report in particular (IR #8). The definition of information literacy provided by this report closely aligned with those of other institutional types with regard to ethically accessing and evaluating information. The QEP initiatives used to increase students' information literacy skills for other institutional types seemed to be focused on preparing students to conduct research (IRs #17, 22, and 28). However, IR #8 indicated that the intention of focusing on these skills was to help students determine which types of information were most valid for use in their daily lives. External assessments, both direct and indirect, were used to measure changes in information literacy skills among this student population. Results of these assessments indicated that the QEP initiatives contributed to gains in students' information literacy skills over the course of their time as undergraduates.

Baccalaureate. Private IHEs of the baccalaureate institutional type reportedly demonstrated gains in information literacy skills due, at least in part, to the QEP. One report indicated that information literacy was the focus of the IHE's QEP topic (IR

#17). This report emphasized advanced information literacy skills, and indicated that such skills would better enable students to conduct independent research. Through the use of internally designed rubrics guided by the Association of College and Research Libraries standards, the IHE determined that the vast majority of students met or exceeded the standards for competency in the area of information literacy (IR #17). Gains in information literacy skills following the implementation of a QEP were also reported in IR #22. These gains were not achieved as intentionally as they reportedly were in IR #17, as information literacy was more of a by-product of the IHE seeking to improve students' writing skills through the use of technology. Although no formal assessment data were provided to demonstrate changes in students' information literacy skills, the IHE noted observed improvements in these skills in both classroom and library settings.

   Doctoral. Of the reports from IHEs of the doctoral institutional type, only one indicated student learning in the area of information literacy. Further, the impact of the QEP on information literacy was seemingly unintentional in this case, as the focus of this QEP in particular was on student engagement. As part of the QEP initiatives to promote student engagement, however, the IHE implemented a series of workshops for faculty that enabled them to become more proficient in the assessment of students' information literacy skills. In turn, the faculty implemented these assessments and observed increases in students' information literacy skills concurrent with increases in classroom engagement over the course of the QEP implementation period.

Variance by QEP topic area. Both IRs that reported topics related to

information literacy indicated the use of similar initiatives including faculty

development to achieve this outcome (IRs #8, 17). However, the two reports differed

in how they each assessed students' skills in this area. IR #8 reported the use of an

external assessment (i.e., SAILS) to measure changes in students' information

literacy skills over the course of their freshman year. Alternatively, IR #17 reported

the use of a rubric to evaluate course-embedded assignments intended to measure

students' information literacy skills. Both reports also alluded to the interrelationship

of critical thinking and information literacy. For example, IR #17 noted that students'

completion of more assignments that required critical thinking skills resulted in

improved information literacy skills. The reported topic areas in IRs #22 and #38

were not directly related to information literacy. In both cases, gains in information

literacy were a by-product of institutional efforts to improve writing skills (IR #22) or

to implement active learning pedagogies for the purpose of increasing student

engagement (IR #38). The latter speaks to Kuh's (2008) assertion that student

engagement often leads to improved learning outcomes. Table 12 summarizes the

QEP impact on global competence by topic area.

Table 12

Summary of QEP Impact on Information Literacy by Topic Area

QEP IR#	Topic Area	State
8	Information Literacy	LA
17	Information Literacy	NC
22	Writing	NC
38	Student Engagement	FL

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

Reading and writing mastery. Several reports from the data sample

indicated the selection of QEP topics related to students' reading and/or writing

mastery. These IRs did not fully operationalize the term *mastery*. However, the

codes related to reading mastery included *reading comprehension* and *efficiency*,

while those related to writing mastery included *grammar, mechanics, rhetoric, and

style*. Since the codes for both skillsets emerged as largely interrelated, they

combined to become one area of student learning. The assumption of IHEs appeared

to be that reading skills are critical to writing skills and vice versa. In general,

though, IRs tended to focus on either reading or writing skills when assessing student

learning for the purposes of the QEP.

Some reports emphasized the importance of critical reading. One such report

defined critical reading as the ability to actively analyze, evaluate, and reflect while

reading (IR #26). The definition of critical reading reported in IR #23 shared the

criteria of students being able to analyze and evaluate, yet also added the ability to

construct arguments. Other reports focused on increasing students' volume of

reading during their undergraduate careers, which indicated an assumption that

reading more improves reading mastery (IRs #28, 30). Similarly, the reports related

to improving students' writing mastery all indicated that IHEs approached this goal

from a volume perspective as well (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39). The reported

QEP initiatives primarily involved increasing the amount of required writing, which

indicated an assumption that writing more improves writing mastery.

On the topic of critical reading, IR #26 reported the facilitation of professional

development opportunities to better equip faculty to apply critical reading to their

instruction. The IHE targeted the core courses required by students' selected degree programs as the courses within which critical reading and reflective writing assignments would be embedded. The IHE implemented a pre-and post-test design that involved testing cohorts of students as freshmen and again as juniors in order to measure the impact of the core courses on their critical reading skills. The Educational Testing Service's (ETS) *Proficiency Profile*—a standardized instrument that assesses reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking skills—was the assessment tool used (ETS, 2017). The results from the first cohort indicated that the number of students that achieved proficiency in advanced reading more than doubled from the pre- to the post-test (IR #26).

Another example of improvements in students' critical reading skills emerged from IR #23. However, the approach taken to address critical reading was somewhat different than that reported in IR #26. Namely, IR #23 reported the adoption of a common reading for all students. The faculty set specific criteria in order to identify this reading, including the ability of the publication to provoke critical reading as well as to challenge students to improve as readers across the disciplines. A key QEP initiative was a series of workshops that emphasized effective critical reading pedagogy. In turn, faculty implemented new pedagogical practices in freshman composition courses where students were assigned the common reading and related writing exercises. The library also became involved in the QEP implementation through an increase in its collection of resources related to critical reading. The IHE administered the CAAP to all juniors to measure changes in critical reading skills. Although the target of 80% proficiency for critical reading was not met (60%

achieved proficiency), the number of students who scored above the national mean more than doubled from pre-test to post-test (IR #23).

Additional reports also indicated the use of QEP initiatives to increase students' volume of reading and writing. One such report discussed a similar common reading initiative to that which was reported in IR #23, whereas all first-year students shared a reading requirement (IR #30). The IHE also partnered with a major national newspaper to supply print copies of this publication to campus on a daily basis. In order to measure changes in students' reading skills, the IHE used the ETS *Proficiency Profile*. The results of this assessment indicated that students' reading scores steadily increased throughout the QEP implementation period (IR #30). IR #28 also reported the use of QEP initiatives that promoted an increased volume of reading. Students were required to complete at least one reading-focused course as part of the general education curriculum. The QEP also provided a mini grant program for faculty, staff, and students to receive up to $500 to support reading-based projects. A locally designed survey measured student perceptions of their reading level over the course of the QEP implementation process. During this period, the percentage of students who reported reading at a college level increased approximately three-fold (IR #28).

The QEP initiatives that promoted an increase in students' volume of writing included the addition of writing-intensive courses to existing curricula as well as the increased use of campus writing centers. The reports that discussed these initiatives also tended to indicate the use of faculty development workshops to further develop learner-centered pedagogical practices related to writing (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and

39). Some reports alluded to the importance of developing reading skills concurrently with writing skills, especially as this pertained to being able to proofread written work (IRs #13, 18). The predominant form of assessment used to measure the impact of QEP initiatives on students' writing skills across institutions was an internally designed common rubric. IR #7 reported the use of such a rubric to assess multiple components of writing skills (e.g., focus, grammar, mechanics, etc.) and found that scores consistently improved across cohorts during the QEP implementation period. Another IHE used a rubric to measure students' progress from their rough drafts to final drafts in a foundational writing course. On average, scores consistently improved between the two drafts (IR #34). Additionally, rubric scores from writing assignments reported in IR #22 indicated that students who had instructors who participated in faculty development workshops tended to outperform their peers who did not have these instructors.

  Summary. The importance of faculty development to a QEP's impact on student learning once again emerged as a theme. As evidenced by the findings from IR #22 in particular, students' performance varies according to instructors' pedagogical practices, which are shaped in part by faculty development opportunities. The use of common readings was also a reported practice related to improving students' reading mastery (IRs #23, 30). Additionally, the interrelatedness of reading and writing mastery was evident across the IRs, as several indicated that a dual focus on both sets of skills was necessary in order to achieve the optimal outcomes for student learning (IRs #13, 18, 23, and 26). For the purposes of assessment, two of the IRs that focused on reading mastery reported the use of the ETS *Proficiency Profile*

(IRs #26, 30). The IRs that focused on writing mastery frequently reported the use of

common rubrics (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39). Table 13 provides a summary of the

QEP initiatives and assessment tools that IHEs used to achieve gains in the areas of

reading and writing.

Table 13

Summary of QEP Impact on Reading and Writing Mastery

QEP IR #	QEP Initiative(s)	Assessment	Outcome
7, 13, 18, 22, 34, 39	Campus writing centers Faculty development workshops Writing-intensive courses	Common rubrics	All rubrics provided some evidence of gains in student learning related to writing mastery by year five of QEP implementation
23	Common reading Faculty development workshops Library resources	CAAP	Target of 80% proficiency for critical reading not met; number of students who scored above national mean more than doubled during QEP implementation
26	Faculty development	ETS *Proficiency Profile*	Number of students proficient in advanced reading more than doubled from pre- to post-test
28	General education course requirement Mini grant	Locally-designed survey	Increase in percentage of students who reported reading at a college level by approximately three-fold by year five of QEP implementation
30	Common reading National newspaper partnership	ETS *Proficiency Profile*	Increase in scores from pre- to post-test during QEP implementation

Note. Unless otherwise indicated, the assessment(s) were administered across the student population.
QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report; CAAP = Collegiate Assessment of Academic
Proficiency; ETS = Educational Testing Service.

Variance by institutional type. The QEP reportedly impacted students'

reading and writing mastery across all institutional types in the sample except for

private doctoral types. However, the sample only included one of this type, which

could have impacted this finding. Private and public IHEs reported gains in reading

and writing mastery at a similar frequency. More than one report from the states of

Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina indicated gains in reading

and writing mastery. Table 14 summarizes the QEP impact on reading and writing

mastery by institutional type.

Table 14

Summary of QEP Impact on Reading and Writing Mastery by Institutional Type

QEP IR#	Institutional Type	State
7	Public Associate	AL
13	Public Associate	NC
18	Private Baccalaureate	SC
22	Private Baccalaureate	NC
23	Public Baccalaureate	SC
26	Private Master's	MS
28	Private Master's	NC
30	Public Master's	AL
34	Public Master's	LA
39	Public Doctoral	MS

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

Associate. Although gains in reading skills were evident among the associate

institutional type, the primary focus was clearly on writing skills (IRs #7, 13). A

main emergent theme across IRs related to the improvement of students' writing

skills was to increase the volume of writing completed by students with the goal that

this would, in turn, improve students' skills. The IRs reported the use of

developmental English courses to reinforce these skills. The IHEs also focused on

improving students' writing through faculty development workshops that focused on

writing pedagogy. Alternatively, other institutional types also provided for such initiatives yet tended to focus more so on the campus writing culture. The use of internally designed rubrics was common across institutional types as a form of assessment to measure changes in writing skills. Gains in such skills were evident from the results of the rubric evaluations.

Baccalaureate. The focus on reading and writing mastery through QEP initiatives was fairly evenly distributed across the reports from the baccalaureate institutional type (IRs #18, 22, and 23). Both private and public IHEs demonstrated gains in these areas of student learning. Notably, IR #22 indicated gains in both information literacy and writing skills, which speaks to the interrelatedness of the two. All three reports emphasized the culture of reading and writing mastery, and many of the QEP initiatives (e.g., contests, increased resources, etc.) were intended to contribute to this culture. As was the case across institutional types, the impact of the QEP on reading and writing mastery became evident from the results of rubric evaluations.

Master's. The impact of the QEP on reading mastery was more evident in reports from private master's institutions than in those from their public counterparts. Interestingly, the opposite was true for writing skills. The QEP goals listed in reports from the master's institutions focused on the development of critical reading skills and a culture of reading (IRs #26, 28, and 34). Faculty development initiatives seemed to be key to the improvement of critical reading skills, while the engagement of campus stakeholders (e.g., faculty, librarians, and student organizations) was vital to the improvement of the reading culture. Regarding writing mastery, IR #34

95

indicated the use of faculty development and campus writing centers to achieve this

objective, as well as the use of common rubrics for the purposes of assessment.

These findings closely align with those from IRs of other institutional types that

reported an impact on writing mastery. The collaboration between faculty and

campus writing center staff further speaks to the potential value of intraorganizational

learning (IOL).

Doctoral. Evidence of the QEP's impact on writing mastery emerged from

one public doctoral institution (IR #39). The IR from this institution indicated a

similar usage of QEP initiatives (e.g., campus writing centers, faculty development

workshops, and writing-intensive courses) and assessment tools (e.g., common

rubrics) to many of the other IRs across the sample that indicated gains in students'

writing skills. Perhaps the most salient difference between IR #39 and the other

reports was the former's focus on oral and written communication skills. The IHE

found the concurrent development of these skillsets to be mutually beneficial to

student learning in both areas (IR #39).

Variance by QEP topic area. The IRs that reported gains in reading and

writing mastery all reported topics related to these areas as well. To reiterate, the

CAAP and the ETS *Proficiency Profile* were the most commonly used forms of

assessment to measure changes in students' reading skills (IRs #23, 28, and 30), while

rubrics were the most commonly reported as used to measure changes in students'

writing skills (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39). The interrelationship between reading

and writing mastery was also evident in these reports. For example, IR #18 reported

that, as students' reading skills increased, their writing skills tended to increase as

well. Additionally, IR #23 reported that the QEP encouraged faculty to increasingly

implement both reading- and writing-intensive activities into their courses in order to

improve students' skills in both areas. Table 15 summarizes the impact of the QEP

on reading and writing mastery by topic area.

Table 15

Summary of QEP Impact on Reading and Writing Mastery by Topic Area

QEP IR#	Institutional Type	State
7	Writing	AL
13	Writing	NC
18	Writing	SC
22	Writing	NC
23	Reading	SC
26	Reading	MS
28	Reading	NC
30	Reading	AL
34	Writing	LA
39	Writing	MS

Note. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; IR = Impact Report.

In the following sections, I discuss the practices that IRs from the sample

reported as effective for use during the QEP implementation period. The IHEs

deemed practices to be effective when they contributed to student learning.

Effective Practices of QEP Implementation

Research question two (RQ2) asked: What have institutions identified as

effective practices of QEP implementation within the first five years of their plans?

Institutions tended to identify practices as effective based on the contribution of these

practices to gains in student learning. To reiterate, I intentionally used the term

effective rather than *best* practices in this study in order to underscore the importance

of context in the QEP implementation process, and to acknowledge that practices

serve the diverse needs of IHEs in different ways. Figure 5 features the effective

practices of QEP implementation that emerged using the same QCA procedures used to develop Figure 4. The main categories include assessment, communities of practice (CoP), and high-impact practices (HIPs) (Kuh, 2008). Additionally, the sub-categories include the following: direct, indirect, and mixed measures of assessment; interinstitutional and intrainstitutional CoPs; and capstone courses and projects, diversity and global learning, first-year seminars and experiences, service learning, and writing-intensive courses (Kuh, 2008).

Not all 40 IRs were represented in the findings for RQ2, as several IHEs did not explicitly or implicitly identify effective practices for use during QEP implementation. The numbers in parentheses next to the main categories in Figure 5 indicate the number of IRs that identified and reported the use of each effective practice. Of note, the magnitude of these counts was not indicative of effectiveness. Clear trends emerged in the use of the effective practices shown in Figure 5. Across the data sample, IRs of all institutional types frequently reported the use of either direct or indirect measures of assessment, yet very few reported the use of mixed measures (e.g., IR #8). On the topic of interinstitutional CoPs, master's and doctoral IHEs reportedly engaged in this practice more commonly than the associate and baccalaureate institutional types. Another trend was that the use of HIPs emerged more commonly from the IRs of the baccalaureate and master's IHEs than from those of the associate and doctoral institutional types. I further discuss these trends in Chapter Five. No clear trends emerged between QEP topic areas and the identification of certain types of effective practices of QEP implementation.

```
                    Effective
                 Practices of QEP
                 Implementation
        ┌────────────────┼────────────────────┐
  ┌───────────────┐  ┌───────────────┐  ┌───────────────┐
  │ Assessment (35)│  │ Communities of│  │  High-Impact  │
  │               │  │  Practice (9) │  │ Practices (15)│
  └───────────────┘  └───────────────┘  │  (Kuh, 2008)  │
         │                  │           └───────────────┘
    ┌─────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
    │Direct Measures│  │Interinstitutional│  │ Capstone Courses │
    └─────────────┘    └──────────────┘      │   & Projects     │
         │                  │                └──────────────────┘
    ┌─────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
    │  Indirect   │    │Intrainstitutional│  │   Diversity &    │
    │  Measures   │    └──────────────┘      │ Global Learning  │
    └─────────────┘                          └──────────────────┘
         │                                   ┌──────────────────┐
    ┌─────────────┐                          │   First-Year     │
    │   Mixed     │                          │   Seminars &     │
    │  Measures   │                          │  Experiences     │
    └─────────────┘                          └──────────────────┘
                                             ┌──────────────────┐
                                             │ Service Learning │
                                             └──────────────────┘
                                             ┌──────────────────┐
                                             │ Writing-Intensive│
                                             │     Courses      │
                                             └──────────────────┘
```
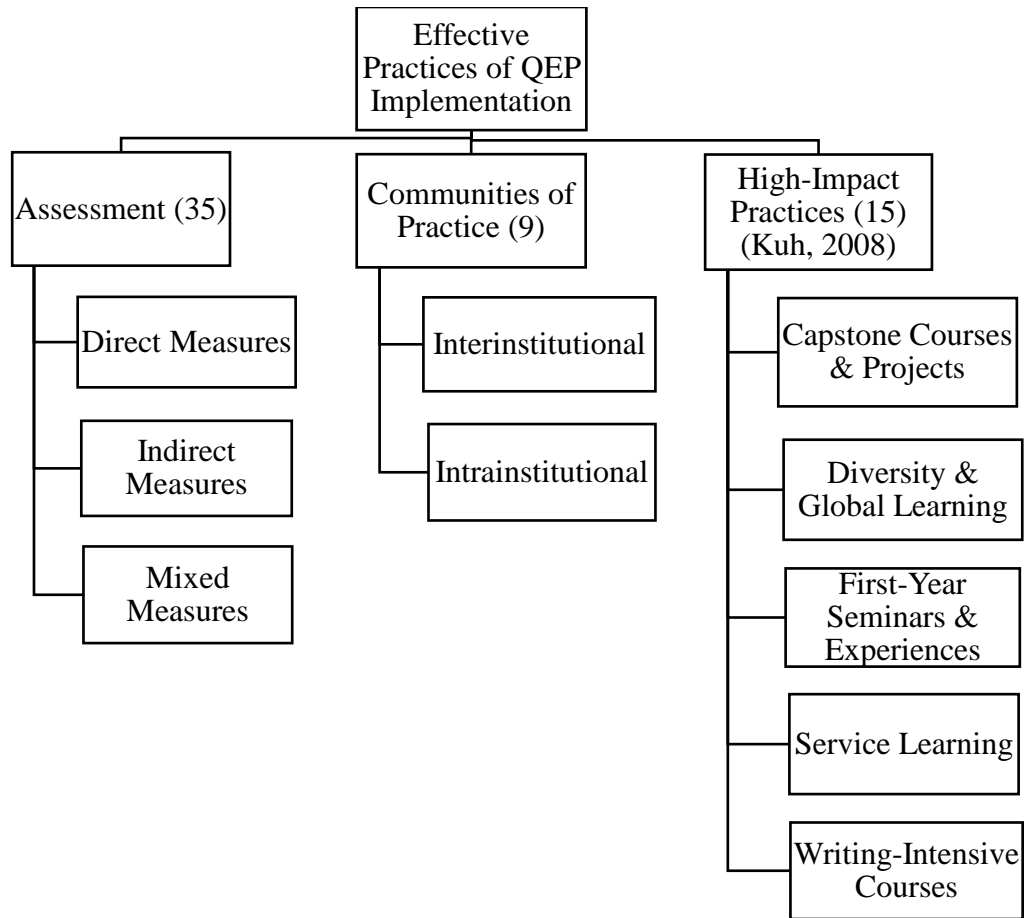
Figure 5. Effective practices of Quality Enhancement Plan implementation. QEP = Quality Enhancment Plan.

Assessment. The IRs that comprised the data sample for this study reported the use of a variety of assessments to measure changes in student learning. These included both external and locally designed assessments, both formative and summative. The most effective practice in the use of assessment that emerged from the data sample, though, was the mixed use of direct and indirect measures. Direct measures yield direct evidence of student learning, while indirect measures yield indirect evidence (Suskie, 2009). According to Suskie (2009), "*Direct* evidence of student learning is tangible, visible, self-explanatory evidence of exactly what students have and have not learned…*Indirect* evidence consists of proxy signs that

99

students are probably learning" (p. 20, emphasis in original). Examples of direct

evidence include rubric scores from student artifacts (e.g., essays) or performances.

Examples of indirect evidence include survey responses that indicate students'

perceptions of their learning (Suskie, 2009).

     Direct measures. Many examples of direct measures emerged from the data

sample. One type of direct measure that was reported to be particularly effective in

gauging changes in student learning was standardized testing. In the area of critical

thinking, for example, the CAAP, CAT, and CCTST all yielded assessment data that

enabled IHEs to measure students' critical thinking skills and make informed

decisions about how to proceed with QEP initiatives (IRs #6, 12, 21, 25, 32, and 36).

In the areas of reading and writing, the use of the ETS *Proficiency Profile* for the

former and common rubrics for the latter were also reported as effective direct

measures to guide institutional decision-making (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 26, 30, 34, and

39). Alternatively, the IRs that reported gains in students' global competence and

information literacy skills did not commonly employ the use of direct measures. In

turn, the IHEs seemed to rely largely on observations of student learning rather than

direct evidence, which resulted in less evidence overall that student learning had

occurred. An exception to this in the area of global competence was the use of the

research-based IDI as a direct measure (IR #27).

     Indirect measures. The indirect measures that IHEs identified as most

effective included surveys and retention rates. Some reports indicated the use of exit

surveys as a summative measure of what students learned in a particular course or

program of study. Reportedly, the use of exit surveys enabled IHEs to measure

students' perceptions of their learning as well as to make curricular revisions for future iterations of courses (IRs #1, 14, 39). Other reports indicated the use of internally designed surveys as formative measures of student learning (IRs #2, 6, 8, 14, and 17). For example, IR #2 reported the use of such a survey to measure students' perceptions of how the use of technology impacted their learning. Instructors then implemented strategies to increase students' usage of computers in such a manner that would continue to bolster their learning. Regarding the use of retention rates as an indirect, summative measure of student learning, several IRs reported the use of this metric (IRs #4, 9, 14, 20, and 34). These reports noted that retention rates enabled IHEs to determine whether students were making sufficient gains in their learning, although the reports typically did not specify the area of student learning in which such gains occurred.

Mixed measures. As evidenced above, the use of direct and indirect measures independently enabled IHEs to assess student learning in different ways. However, the data analysis also revealed that perhaps the most effective approach to assessment was through the use of both direct and indirect measures. The few reports that indicated the use of both types to assess student learning typically presented more evidence to inform decision-making and were also able to provide more evidence of student learning to SACS. For example, IR #8 was able to report robust evidence in support of gains in students' information literacy skills due to the use of both direct (i.e., SAILS) and indirect (i.e., CCSSE and library statistics) measures. In comparison, IR #38 only reported the use of data from faculty surveys as evidence of students' gains in information literacy skills. Although these data indicated that

faculty perceived students' skills to increase in part due to QEP initiatives, the evidence of student learning was not as robust as it was in IR #8.

Summary. Although not commonly reported as a practice, the mixed use of direct and indirect measures of assessment enabled IHEs to report the most robust evidence of student learning to SACS. Additionally, the use of both formative and summative measures also reportedly bolstered the evidence that student learning occurred. Notably, course-level assessments were more common than program or institutional-level. Another theme that emerged was the use of external measures of assessment (e.g., CCTST, ETS *Proficiency Profile*). Across the sample, IHEs used external measures more frequently than internal. In the next section, I discuss the use of communities of practice (CoPs) during the QEP implementation process.

Communities of practice. For the purposes of this study, a CoP was defined as a group of individuals who share professional interests, experiences, and a domain of knowledge (Harden & Loving, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The data analysis revealed that CoPs could be either interinstitutional or intrainstitutional. In this context, the former referred to a group of individuals who were involved in the implementation of QEPs at different IHEs. Alternatively, the latter referred to a group of individuals who were involved in the implementation of a QEP at the same IHE. As evidenced across the data sample, both types of groups consisted of stakeholders who had expertise and resources to share based on their unique professional experiences. The IHEs who sought out and utilized the expertise and resources of their CoPs frequently attributed gains in student learning to this practice, which I further examine in the following sections.

Interinstitutional. Two groups of individuals emerged from the data analysis

to form the interinstitutional CoP: administrators and faculty. Although

interinstitutional collaboration was not common across the data sample, the IRs that

reported the use of this practice identified such collaboration as a key source of

success for the QEP (IRs #9, 25, and 36). The primary role of both administrators

and faculty in this type of CoP was to collaborate with and learn from the

professional experiences of colleagues at other IHEs, especially with regard to their

QEP-related experiences. In turn, they could use these lessons during the QEP

implementation process in an effort to positively impact student learning. One report

in particular discussed the college faculty's collaboration with faculty from other

IHEs to develop new courses as a mutually beneficial QEP initiative (IR #9).

Relatedly, another reported the recruitment of faculty from other IHEs to be

consultants during faculty development workshops as a QEP initiative (IR #25). In

IR #36, the IHE discussed the administration's coordination of partnerships with

other universities in the region to increase students' level of community engagement.

Each of these IHEs alluded to the gains in student learning that occurred in part due to

the use of interinstitutional CoPs.

Intrainstitutional. Administrators and faculty also emerged from the data

analysis to form the intrainstitutional CoP sub-category. Several reports indicated

that collaboration among these internal stakeholders throughout the QEP

implementation process positively impacted student learning. Regarding the role of

administrators in intrainstitutional CoPs, these individuals were reportedly critical to

ensuring that QEPs were supported by adequate resources and infrastructure. For

example, IR #14 reported that the IHE approached changes to online learning from both an administrative and a pedagogical perspective. Administratively, such changes entailed increasing student resources and monetary support while also facilitating faculty development opportunities. As another example, IR #36 attributed part of the gains in students' critical thinking skills that resulted from several QEP initiatives to the robust implementation budget provided by the administration. This budget enabled five faculty and staff members to focus full time on QEP implementation. Alternatively, in IR #27, the IHE reported the consequences of a lack of administrative support and infrastructure. Specifically, the report indicated that attempts to implement QEP initiatives such as improving international student recruitment were compromised due to a lack of sufficient administrative infrastructure or funding for a recruitment position.

Although administrators were key to supporting QEP initiatives from a resources and infrastructure perspective, the data analysis revealed that faculty were key to the utilization of such resources and infrastructure to bolster student learning. As evidenced throughout the findings for RQ1, several reports indicated that faculty utilized workshops and other professional development opportunities provided by the administration to implement new pedagogies in their courses (IRs #6, 12, 21, 25, and 38). Further, faculty also collaborated with each other across disciplines in order to improve their pedagogical practices (IRs #4, 8, 17, 21, and 25). Other reports indicated that faculty were critical to the success of committees that were formed to oversee the implementation of QEPs. While administrators provided much of the fiscal and organizational expertise to such committees, faculty contributed the

disciplinary content knowledge and assessment strategies that ultimately led to gains in student learning (IRs #14, 19, 28, 36, and 37). This finding again underscores the importance of collaboration between administrators and faculty as a CoP during the QEP implementation process.

Summary. The themes that emerged from CoPs included the integral role of both administrators and faculty members in the success of the QEP implementation process. At the interinstitutional level, administrators and faculty may benefit from the expertise of their colleagues at other IHEs while also bolstering the success of their QEP initiatives through collaborative opportunities (IR #9, 25, and 36). From an intrainstitutional perspective, although administrators and faculty share the professional responsibility of implementing a QEP, both have unique roles in this process. As evidenced in the data sample, administrators tended to facilitate the resources and infrastructure necessary to the success of QEP initiatives, while faculty ensured that these initiatives led to gains in student learning (IRs #14, 19, 28, 36, and 37). The IRs that provided evidence of IHEs embracing rather than resisting CoPs (e.g., operating in silos) consistently identified this practice as effective to the QEP implementation process, which may also speak to institutional culture.

High-impact practices. As previously discussed, Kuh (2008) defined high-impact practices (HIPs) as widely-tested practices that contribute to cumulative student learning as well as increase retention and engagement across student demographics. Kuh (2008) identified 10 HIPs in total, five of which emerged from the data sample as practices found to be effective during the QEP implementation process. Although several IHEs used the same HIPs as QEP initiatives, the approach

105

that each took varied according to institutional goals and needs. In the following sections, I further discuss these practices and how they bolstered student learning during the QEP implementation process.

   Capstone courses and projects.   Many of the reports from the data sample indicated the use of capstone courses and projects as QEP initiatives. Reports from master's and doctoral institutional types in particular indicated the use of capstone courses to encourage students to get involved in undergraduate research (IRs #22, 35, and 36). Concurrently, students had the opportunity to cultivate their critical thinking and information literacy skills. Other reports from these institutional types indicated the use of capstone projects such as internships through which students could apply and refine their knowledge and skills in real-world settings (IRs #26, 31, and 33). Additionally, some IHEs utilized capstone courses as bookends to first-year seminars and experiences, another type of HIP. For example, IR #21 designed program capstone plans for various majors in order to scaffold critical thinking skills that were introduced in first-year seminars. Relatedly, IR #30 reported the use of common reading assignments both in freshman seminars as well as in capstone courses. This initiative enabled the measurement of changes in students' reading skills over the course of their undergraduate experience.

   Diversity and global learning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the area of student learning that QEP initiatives related to diversity and global learning impacted the most was global competence. As discussed under SRQ1, most of the initiatives that led to changes in students' global competence were implemented by baccalaureate and master's institutional types. Some of these initiatives included the facilitation of

international experiences such as study abroad (IRs #27, 33). Others occurred

domestically through courses that exposed students to global issues (IRs #16, 19, and

35). One example of this was a global health course required as part of a living-

learning community (IR #16). To reiterate, these QEP initiatives aligned closely with

the CIGE's (n.d.) model for comprehensive internationalization. This model

emphasized student mobility and the internationalization of curricula (CIGE, n.d.).

Although the IRs did not specifically reference this model, such alignment indicated a

degree of consensus regarding the experiences that bolster students' global

competence.

First-year seminars and experiences. First-year seminars and experiences

were most commonly reported by baccalaureate and master's institutional types. As

Gardner, Barefoot, and Swing (2001) reported, various aspects of the first-year

experience can impact a student's learning, including faculty pedagogical practices

and co-curricular activities. Notably, all of the IRs that reported the use of first-year

seminars and experiences also reported gains in students' critical thinking skills (IRs

#19, 21, 30, and 32). An innovative activity implemented by one IHE in particular

involved the development and use of web-based critical thinking modules in first-year

seminars to stimulate higher-order thinking skills (IR #21). As mentioned in the

discussion of critical thinking skills, faculty development was key to the gains that

students experienced in this area of student learning. Although the reported structure

of the first-year seminars differed by IHE, some similarities included the seminars

being offered in a yearlong two-course sequence, being team taught using an

interdisciplinary approach, and having a common reading as a major course assignment (IRs #19, 21, 30, and 32).

Service learning. Across the data sample, IHEs of all institutional types reported the use of service learning as QEP initiatives. However, these IHEs were predominantly noted within the private IHEs, and most emphasized service in their respective institutional missions (IRs #15, 16, 27, and 35). The service learning experienced by students was largely community-based, yet some IRs reported international opportunities. For example, one such report discussed the implementation of an international service learning opportunity in upper-division nursing courses (IR #27). Relatedly, IRs #33 and #35 reported that the IHE offered international service learning programs in several nations to students across the disciplines as a QEP initiative. These reports also alluded to gains in students' global competence as a result of the QEP. Although the service learning initiatives reported in IR #37 did not include international components, the IHE emphasized the importance of this HIP to the extent that it created a university service center as part of the QEP. The center included the hiring of a full-time director to oversee all service learning initiatives at the university. Other reports indicated that service learning as a QEP initiative took place in the context of learning communities (IRs #9, 15, and 16).

Writing-intensive courses. Reports from all institutional types indicated the use of writing-intensive courses to improve critical thinking, reading, and writing skills (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39). These courses were not exclusively housed within English departments, but rather offered across the curriculum in several cases.

This finding further speaks to the efficacy of intrainstitutional CoPs. For example, IR #22 reported the addition of writing-intensive courses to multiple majors and programs of study. The IHE also created a writing studio where students could receive discipline-specific instruction to support their learning in these courses. Another report indicated the implementation of writing-intensive courses throughout the general education curriculum (IR #34). As discussed in the findings for the impact of the QEP on writing skills, faculty development was critical to the success of writing-intensive courses. Also, most IRs reported the use of common rubrics to assess changes in these skills. The results of these assessments indicated gains in students' writing skills across IHEs (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39).

Summary. Perhaps the most salient theme that emerged from the analysis of the use of HIPs was the interrelatedness of these high-impact practices and the areas of student learning that the QEP reportedly impacted. To reiterate, capstone courses and projects were found to impact critical thinking and information literacy skills (IRs #22, 35, and 36). First-year seminars also impacted critical thinking skills (IRs #19, 21, 30, and 32). Additionally, diversity and global learning as well as service learning initiatives impacted global competence (IRs #15, 16, 19, 27, 33, and 35). Also, writing-intensive courses naturally impacted writing skills (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39). Another theme that emerged was that similar institutional types tended to use similar HIPs as QEP initiatives. This theme was especially evident in the use of capstone projects and courses by master's and doctoral IHEs, the use of diversity and global learning initiatives by baccalaureate and master's IHEs, and the use of service learning by private IHEs.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reported the findings from the qualitative content analysis procedures. The analysis revealed that the QEP impacted student learning across the data sample in the areas of critical thinking, global competence, information literacy, and reading and writing mastery. Several themes emerged from the IRs with regard to the QEP initiatives and assessment tools that IHEs used to bolster student learning. Faculty development was the most prominent initiative used across the areas of student learning. The majority of this development took the form of workshops to improve pedagogical practices. Another commonly reported initiative was the use of first-year experiences to address student learning, which also served to support students in their transition to postsecondary studies. Such initiatives demonstrated another theme related to the QEP initiatives, which was that IHEs tended to focus on the means to the end (e.g., improved pedagogical practices) rather than the end itself (e.g., improved student learning). As for the use of assessments, IHEs reported the use of external assessments such as standardized tests more commonly than internal. The use of research as a form of assessment (e.g., the IDI to measure gains in global competence) was also a theme (IR #27). Reports across the sample indicated the use of both direct and indirect measures of assessment.

The impact of the QEP on each area of student learning varied both by institutional type and QEP topic. Across institutional types, public IHEs reported the majority of the gains in critical thinking skills, while almost all evidence of gains in global competence emerged from private IHEs. The most frequently occurring codes related to student learning in the areas of critical thinking, global competence, and

reading emerged from IHEs of the master's institutional type. For information

literacy and writing, the most frequently occurring codes related to these areas

emerged from IHEs of the baccalaureate institutional type. Many IHEs focused on

first-year student populations as opposed to upperclassmen in the implementation of

their QEP initiatives, but this was especially evident for the associate institutional

types. External assessments were most commonly used to measure critical thinking,

information literacy, and reading skills. Alternatively, locally designed assessments

were most commonly used to measure global competence and writing skills. Another

theme in response to SRQ1 was that IHEs located in the same state often reported

gains in the same area of student learning. I further discuss this finding in the context

of diffusion of innovations (DoI) in Chapter Five.

As for SRQ2, several IRs reported student learning in areas that mirrored their

QEP topics. Specifically, these areas included critical thinking, information literacy,

and reading and writing mastery. Thus, these IHEs demonstrated intentionality in

how they developed and implemented their QEPs to impact student learning in

predetermined ways. Other IRs reported gains in student learning with QEP topics

that were not directly related to the impacted areas of student learning. These topics

included student engagement and student success. In such cases, learning tended to

occur as a by-product of QEP initiatives that aligned with the QEP topic. For

example, two IRs that reported topics related to student engagement also reported

gains in global competence that resulted from internationalization and service

learning initiatives (IRs #27, 35). The remaining IRs reported topics related to

instruction. Notably, the majority of these reports represented IHEs of the associate

institutional type. This broad topic area tended to focus on faculty development and/or the environment of student learning, which made gains in student learning difficult to interpret from the reports. However, these reports still met the QEP requirement for reaffirmation since SACS (2016a) allows IHEs to focus on student learning or the student learning environment in their QEPs.

Regarding the practices that IHEs have identified to be effective during the QEP implementation process, three broad practices emerged. These included the use of direct, indirect, and mixed measures of assessment; interinstitutional and intrainstitutional CoPs; and HIPs including capstone courses and projects, diversity and global learning, first-year seminars and experiences, service learning, and writing-intensive courses (Kuh, 2008). Across the sample, IRs did not commonly report the use of mixed measures of assessment or engagement in CoPs, yet those that did provided evidence that these practices were particularly beneficial to the QEP implementation process (e.g., IRs #8, 14, 27). In the next chapter, I discuss the findings through the IOL framework. I also discuss the implications of the findings for both practice and research as well as provide a conclusion for the study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although stakeholders within institutions of higher education (IHEs) may critique certain aspects of the regional accreditation process, the findings from this study demonstrated that accreditation requirements could bolster continuous improvement (Dickeson, 2009; D. Eaton, 2010; Wheelan & Elgart, 2015). More specifically, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) has reportedly impacted multiple areas of student learning across institutional types and QEP topic areas. Thus, IHEs have an opportunity to learn from each other with a common goal of improving student learning to the greatest extent possible. Using a qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. According to Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Impact Reports (IRs), what is the reported impact of QEPs on student learning within the first five years of implementation?

    a. How, if at all, does the reported impact of QEPs on student learning vary by institutional type?

    b. How, if at all, does the reported impact of QEPs on student learning vary by QEP topic area?

2. What have institutions identified as effective practices of QEP implementation within the first five years of their plans?

In this chapter, I further discuss the findings that emerged from the data analysis in response to the above research and sub-research questions using interorganizational learning (IOL) as a theoretical framework. Through the application of this framework, it becomes possible to see the opportunities that IHEs have to collaborate and bolster the impact of their QEPs.

Theoretical Framework

As discussed in Chapter One, the development of the IOL framework stemmed from Crossan et al.'s (1999) organizational learning (OL) framework. The OL framework incorporates the elements of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing into a dynamic learning process that organizations may experience (Crossan et al., 1999). Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) added a fifth element to the OL framework, cooperation, in their development of the IOL version. According to Larsson et al. (1998), IOL is distinct from OL in that the former emphasizes the interactions between organizations that cultivate learning, whereas the latter focuses on learning that occurs at the individual organizational level. In the context of the present study, IOL can occur between IHEs that undergo the SACS reaffirmation process in part due to their shared requirement of a QEP submission. These reports, many publicly available, can serve as a source of learning between IHEs about the QEP process. More specifically, these reports can enable IHEs to effectively anticipate and address challenges in the process.

In further examining Mozzato and Bitencourt's (2014) element of cooperation, the reasons become clearer as to why new knowledge creation occurs at this level of the IOL framework. Namely, when organizations collaborate, they

engage in relational strategies to ensure that they benefit to the greatest extent possible when interacting with each other (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). Thus, organizations will share knowledge in order to gain knowledge. Further, the production of new knowledge between organizations also leads to innovation (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). The application of the social constructivist paradigm further demonstrates this concept of innovating through collaboration. As Schwandt (2007) articulated, the process of constructing interpretations and gaining insights from these interpretations does not occur in a vacuum. Social constructivism is therefore essential to the QEP process as institutions with similar and different missions alike come together to construct and implement initiatives that are intended to bolster student learning.

Although it remains unclear as to whether IHEs are currently collaborating to create new knowledge through the QEP process, the potential for this exists. Institutions are not competing against each other with their respective QEPs, but rather each seeking to gain SACS reaffirmation. Engaging in cooperative environments with other IHEs therefore holds the potential to bolster rather than hinder the QEP process, and by extension, student learning. The OL that has occurred during the QEP process, as evidenced by the findings from the use of intrainstitutional CoPs, further demonstrates the potential for IOL to occur. The potential for IOL also indicates the potential for the diffusion of innovations (DoI) (Rogers, 1983), which I further address in the following sections.

Discussion

As evidenced by the findings from this study, the QEP has reportedly

115

impacted student learning in several areas across institutional types. The areas of impact identified across IRs included critical thinking, global competence, information literacy, and reading and writing mastery. Further, several IRs reported the use of effective practices during the QEP implementation process that led to gains in student learning. These practices included the use of mixed measures of direct and indirect assessment; interinstitutional and intrainstitutional communities of practice (CoPs); and high-impact practices (HIPs) including capstone courses and projects, diversity and global learning, first-year seminars and experiences, service learning, and writing-intensive courses (Kuh, 2008). Although most of these findings align with the existing literature, some offer new perspectives for consideration. In the following sections, I further discuss the findings in the context of the existing literature using the IOL framework.

QEP impact on student learning. Recall S. Brown's (2015) finding that IHEs have a tendency to assess what is easy to assess rather than student learning itself. Many of the IHEs represented in the data sample reported perceived gains in student learning due, at least in part, to QEP initiatives. SACS accepted every IR from this sample in partial fulfillment of the Fifth-Year Interim Report requirement. However, several of the IRs did not fully operationalize their definitions of student learning, did not implement the use of any formal assessment tools, or failed to indicate benchmarks and targets that may contribute to the meaning of assessment data (Banta, 2008). Thus, reported student learning may not be indicative of actual student learning, but making this determination remains beyond the scope of the present study. Still, the fact that IHEs have reported gains in student learning in

many of the same areas due in part to the QEP supports the notion that these IHEs

have the potential to learn from each other through IOL. In turn, they may use these

lessons to further bolster student learning through the QEP process during current and

future SACS reaffirmation cycles.

Although the 15 missing cases did not report an impact of the QEP on student

learning, potential for IOL still exists among these cases. As noted in the findings,

nine of these 15 cases originated from associate-degree granting IHEs. The majority

of the nine reported an impact of the QEP on the student learning environment.

These cases tended to focus on instruction as a QEP topic area, which was likely

attributable to the teaching and learning mission that many IRs of the associate

institutional type articulated. As an example of IHEs demonstrating an impact on the

student learning environment, IR #2 reported the establishment of a learning lab on

campus as a QEP initiative. Relatedly, IR #5 reported the increased use of the IHE's

center for teaching and learning by faculty in an effort to improve their instructional

practices. Thus, it became evident that IHEs of similar institutional types have

approached the QEP in similar ways for the missing cases as well.

Across the missing cases, all but one reported a QEP topic that focused either

on instruction or student success. This finding further supports the application of the

IOL framework in the context of QEP implementation, as IHEs that are already

implementing similar topics may have knowledge about these topics that is readily

available for exchange. Additionally, the IHEs that did not report sufficient

assessment data to enable a determination of QEP impact on student learning could

still learn from other IHEs, especially in the area of assessment practices. The

following sections focus on the areas of student learning that emerged for the IHEs that did report an impact on student learning due to the QEP.

Critical thinking. Although limited literature exists on the impact of the QEP on student learning, one prior study examined this impact specifically in the area of critical thinking. Rodriguez (2015) found that the QEP had an overall positive impact on critical thinking when implemented at two community colleges. One of the community colleges defined critical thinking as analyzing and synthesizing knowledge. The other defined this area of student learning as analyzing, evaluating, inferencing, interpreting, and explaining knowledge (Rodriguez, 2015). The study found that, of all the QEP initiatives, faculty development was most vital to the QEP's impact on critical thinking. The determination was made that the QEPs of both IHEs positively impacted critical thinking primarily on the basis of increases in Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT) and California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) scores. The findings from Rodriguez's (2015) study closely aligned with the findings from the present study in several key areas.

In the present study, critical thinking also emerged as an area of student learning that the QEP has impacted, and faculty development across disciplines played a key role in this impact. Also, IHEs in both studies used either the CAT or the CCTST as a form of assessment to measure changes in students' critical thinking skills (IRs #12, 21, 25, 32, 36, and 37). Further, a few key terms emerged in the institutional definitions of critical thinking across IHEs, including *analysis, evaluation,* and *synthesis* (IRs #12, 31, 36, and 37). Finally, the findings from the present study confirmed Rodriguez's findings regarding the positive impact of the

118

QEP on critical thinking in the context of community colleges. However, the former also demonstrated this impact across other institutional types.

A new finding that emerged from the present study that was not reflected in Rodriguez's (2015) findings pertained to the timing of faculty development for the purpose of impacting students' critical thinking. Although Rodriguez (2015) reported that such development took place largely in the early stages of faculty careers, the findings from the present study suggested that development can and should occur at all stages of their careers. Despite this discrepancy, it was evident from both studies that IHEs across institutional types have experienced gains in critical thinking due at least in part to the QEP. Thus, the application of IOL suggests that IHEs may have knowledge to share with each other in order to further bolster student learning in this area (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014).

Global competence. A focus on global competence as an outcome of student learning from the QEP is largely absent in the existing literature. However, the Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE, n.d.) has developed a model for comprehensive internationalization that suggests that students may experience gains in global competence from initiatives that closely align with reported QEP initiatives. Specifically, the CIGE (n.d.) and several IRs (#16, 19, 27, and 33) from the data sample reported the following as having the potential to impact global competence: the use of assessment to measure the outcomes of internationalization efforts, the addition of foreign language and global issues courses to the general education curriculum, and student mobility through study abroad. The CIGE's (n.d.) recommendations in each of these areas emerged from the participation

of IHEs across the nation in the American Council on Education's (ACE) Internationalization Laboratory. This experience involves collaboration between IHEs and ACE staff during campus visits, workshops, and annual meetings in order to develop and implement internationalization initiatives (ACE, 2017). The collaboration demonstrated in ACE's Internationalization Laboratory further speaks to the potential value of IOL during the QEP implementation process.

The IRs from the present study also reported the use of QEP initiatives that were not reflected in the CIGE's (n.d.) model for comprehensive internationalization, but reportedly contribute to increased global competence for students. Such initiatives included living-learning and service learning programs (IRs #16, 35). Although the IRs that discussed the implementation of these initiatives indicated that faculty and staff observed gains in students' global competence as a result, the use of formal assessments was not reported. Alternatively, the IRs that discussed the implementation of general education courses and study abroad experiences as QEP initiatives reported the use of assessment tools including course evaluations and surveys (IRs #19, 27, and 33). Thus, more evidence of impact on student learning in the area of global competence was available for these initiatives than for the living-learning and service learning initiatives. This disparity in evidence could hold implications for IOL, as IHEs are likely to adopt initiatives from each other for which formal assessment data exist and demonstrate gains in student learning.

Information literacy. The Association of College and Research Libraries (2016) discussed the importance of information literacy among college graduates, finding that competency in this area "extends learning beyond formal classroom

settings" and enables students to "move into internships, first professional positions, and increasing responsibilities in all arenas of life" (para. 6). Few studies have explored the impact of accreditation requirements in general or the QEP in particular on students' information literacy skills. Rodriguez (2015) acknowledged that several IRs reported topic areas related to information literacy; however, an analysis of the impact of the QEP on this area of student learning was beyond the scope of the study. In another study, Thompson (2002) examined the extent to which regional accreditation mandates for the implementation of information literacy programs enabled IHEs to assess student learning outcomes (SLOs) related to information literacy. This study, though, focused more so on the assessment process than on outcomes. Yet, the findings from the present study indicated that the QEP impacted students' information literacy skills across institutional types (IRs #8, 17, 22, and 38).

Of the IRs that reported definitions for information literacy, the commonalities among these definitions included the ability to ethically evaluate and use or apply information (IRs #8, 17). The evaluative piece of these definitions was also present in the definitions for critical thinking. Although critical thinking and information literacy are related skillsets (Weiner, 2011), the IRs that indicated gains in critical thinking skills tended not to indicate gains in information literacy skills and vice versa. The IOL framework suggests that collaboration could enable IHEs to innovate in such a way that it becomes increasingly possible to impact both areas of student learning through the QEP (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). While the findings of the present study indicated a degree of consensus on the initiatives that can impact students' information literacy (e.g., faculty development and library resources), a lack

121

of consensus emerged on how to assess student learning in this area (IRs #8, 17, 22, and 38). Institutional collaboration could better enable IHEs to determine which types of assessments are effective based on each other's experiences.

   Reading and writing mastery. The impact of accreditation requirements on students' reading and writing mastery is unclear in the existing literature. However, two of Kuh's (2008) HIPs directly address these skills. Learning communities address the utility of common readings for the purpose of developing students' reading skills (Kuh, 2008). Although the use of common readings was evident in the data sample, these instances emerged more commonly under the category of first-year seminars and experiences than learning communities (IRs #23, 30). As for writing skills, Kuh (2008) identified the implementation of writing-intensive courses across the curriculum as a practice that can significantly impact these skills. This aligns with the findings from the present study, as several IRs indicated that the QEP impacted students' writing skills in part through the use of writing-intensive courses (IRs #7, 13, 18, 22, 34, and 39). Although the interrelationship between reading and writing mastery was evident in the data sample, IHEs could benefit moving forward from collaborative efforts to determine which QEP initiatives may lead to gains in both areas.

   Variance in QEP impact by institutional type. The findings of the present study indicated that most institutional types experienced gains in student learning across the four emergent categories featured in Figure 4. However, certain areas of student learning were noticeably absent from some institutional types, which could be largely attributable to differences in institutional mission. Namely, these areas

included global competence for associate, information literacy for master's, and reading mastery for doctoral institutional types. The findings further revealed that the QEP tended to impact global competence in the context of private IHEs more commonly than in that of public IHEs. Although the existing literature does not offer much by the way of rationale to support or refute these findings, previous studies have examined the impact of the QEP on student learning in the context of associate degree granting IHEs. Interestingly, these studies did not report that the QEP impacted student learning in the areas of critical thinking or information literacy. They did report, though, that gains in reading, writing, and mathematics skills occurred in part due to QEP initiatives (Chaffin, 2015; Cruise, 2007; Davis, 2009). Across institutional types, IRs also reported the use of research (e.g., HIPs) to inform QEP initiatives and practices. Since research is accessible to the field, this presents an opportunity to engage in IOL that IHEs may pursue more intentionally in the future. The use of IOL may enable IHEs to better understand how the QEP impacts different areas of student learning for similar institutional types.

   Variance in QEP impact by topic area. The findings from the present study demonstrated that a QEP's impact on student learning often reflected its topic area (e.g., IRs #6, 8, 12, 17, 21, 23, 25, 30, 37, and 39). For example, a QEP with a topic that focused on critical thinking tended to impact students' critical thinking skills. This linkage is to be expected, as IHEs that select topics related to specific areas of student learning tend to align their QEP initiatives with these topics in order to achieve specific SLOs (Cruise, 2007). However, other QEP topics represented in the data sample were not directly related to the areas of student learning that emerged

123

from the analysis. These topics included student engagement and student success.

The existing literature does not offer much insight into this phenomenon in the

context of the QEP. Yet, previous studies have suggested that the impact of a QEP on

student learning could be a by-product of initiatives that were originally intended to

produce outcomes related to the QEP topic area (Chaffin, 2015; Cruise, 2007; Gordin,

2006). Additionally, both Astin (1984) and Kuh (2008) demonstrated that increased

student engagement could positively impact student learning. Thus, IHEs should be

aware that opportunities might arise during the QEP implementation period for

students to achieve learning outcomes in addition to or in place of the intended

learning outcomes.

Effective practices of QEP implementation. The practices that emerged

from the data as effective for use during the QEP implementation process are all

supported by existing literature. One such practice, the mixed use of direct and

indirect measures to assess changes in student learning, is prevalent throughout the

literature. As D. Jenkins et al. (2009) found, effective assessment is vital to

institutional improvement. Thus, in order for a QEP to impact student learning in a

way that is meaningful for learners, the implementation process must include an

assessment plan that fits the institutional culture and enables IHEs to collect and

analyze robust evidence of student learning (Banta, 2008; Gallagher, 2007; D. Jenkins

et al., 2009). A commonly noted best practice in the field of assessment is the use of

direct measures (S. Brown, 2015; Chun, 2010; Suskie, 2009). Recall that examples of

direct measures include standardized tests and student artifacts or performances

evaluated by a rubric (Suskie, 2009).

Various IRs from the data sample reported the use of direct measures. The areas of student learning that were most commonly associated with this practice included critical thinking (e.g., CAT, CCTST) as well as reading (e.g., ETS *Proficiency Profile*) and writing (e.g., common rubric). The benefits to using normed and tested external measures include familiarity, as SACS and other stakeholders are likely to be aware of these measures. Another benefit is that an IHE does not have to commit time and resources to developing and validating these measures. Additionally, comparisons of assessment results between peer and peer aspirant IHEs can inform assessment targets, and such comparisons are more easily made when IHEs use the same or similar standardized measures (Banta, 2008). Such measures are also readily available for institutional adoption if, through IOL or otherwise, IHEs determine them to have been useful for other institutions. A potential drawback for the use of external measures is that they may not enable IHEs to gauge the scope of student learning that meets their unique institutional needs. With the use of internally designed measures, rather, IHEs may have more control over this scope and how the assessment results inform changes to continuous improvement. Either way, in using direct measures, IHEs were able to provide comparatively more robust evidence of QEP impact on student learning than the IHEs that indicated the use of indirect measures only. In turn, IHEs were better able to use the assessment results to inform changes to the QEP.

Although the field of assessment tends to prioritize the use of direct measures before indirect measures, the use of the latter still brings value to the assessment process (S. Brown, 2015; Chun, 2010; Suskie, 2009). The most commonly reported

125

types of indirect measures that emerged from the data included course evaluations

and surveys. The data collected from these measures were primarily indicative of

how faculty and/or students perceived student learning to have occurred rather than

how student learning actually occurred. However, it was evident that this information

still informed changes to the QEP that impacted student learning. For example, one

report indicated that the IHE used the Community College Survey of Student

Engagement (CCSSE) to track how often students accessed library resources (IR #8).

The report noted that the results of this assessment were indicative of students'

information literacy skills, as this area of student learning requires students to be able

to access and discern the quality of resources. With these results, the IHE was able to

implement additional QEP initiatives that increased students' access to and use of

library resources (IR #8).

As evidenced above, the individual use of both direct and indirect measures

can enhance the assessment process and ultimately lead to gains in student learning.

However, the literature as well as the results of the present study indicate that the

mixed use of direct and indirect measures tends to yield the most useful results

(Banta, 2008; Chun, 2010; Sambell et al., 2012). The effectiveness of this strategy

was particularly evident in IR #8. Along with the aforementioned use of the CCSSE

as an indirect measure, this IHE also used the Standardized Assessment of

Information Literacy Skills (SAILS) as a direct measure. As a result, IR #8 was the

only report from the data sample that was able to provide longitudinal evidence of

changes in students' information literacy skills due in part to the QEP as well as

evidence of students' perceptions of these changes. Despite best practice, however,

the findings from the present study revealed that many IHEs did not use both types of measures—or even one type of measure (e.g., relied on observations)—in order to assess changes in student learning. I further discuss these instances in the implications for practice section below.

Another effective practice that emerged was engagement in both interinstitutional and intrainstitutional communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The existing literature does not delineate these two types of CoPs specifically in the context of higher education. Yet, the IRs from the data sample reported engagement in CoPs during the QEP implementation process both within an IHE (i.e., intrainstitutional CoP) and among two or more IHEs (i.e., interinstitutional CoP). As discussed in the review of the literature, a CoP provides the setting in which IOL can occur (Cronin et al., 2016; Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). For example, the IRs that reported collaboration between administrators and faculty on an interinstitutional level experienced IOL that bolstered both faculty development and student engagement for all IHEs involved during their respective QEP processes (IRs #9, 25, 36). On an intrainstitutional level, several IRs reported that both administrators and faculty were able to take lessons from colleagues within their IHEs in order to apply new knowledge to the execution of their QEP-related duties (e.g., IRs #6, 12, 14, 21, 27, and 36).

The potential for IOL that I have highlighted throughout the discussion of the findings indicates a potential for DoI as well. As Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) explained, innovation is an intended outcome of IOL. The theory of DoI holds that diffusion is a process that requires channels in order for innovation to be

communicated among stakeholders (Rogers, 1983). Currently, the QEP

implementation process lacks such channels as mechanisms for communication

between IHEs, which I further discuss in the implications for future study section

below. To reiterate, IHEs are not in competition with each other with regard to the

QEP requirement. Thus, interinstitutional cooperation may work to the advantage of

each participant that seeks to implement innovative approaches to the QEP in order to

maximize student learning. Recall, as well, Sponsler's (2011) finding that geographic

proximity may influence policymaking behaviors. Thus, IHEs that are in close

proximity have an opportunity to engage in IOL using different and perhaps more

convenient mechanisms than those that are not as proximate. Further, as the findings

from SRQ1 and SRQ2 indicated, IHEs from the same states or neighboring states

often reported the use of similar QEP topics as well as gains in student learning in the

same areas. It remains unclear as to whether DoI contributed to these patterns.

However, the fact that IHEs in close proximity are developing and implementing

similar QEPs demonstrates great potential for IOL.

The third type of effective practice that emerged from the data was the use of

HIPs, or practices that contribute to student learning as well as increase retention and

engagement (Kuh, 2008). Although Kuh (2008) identified a total of 10 HIPs, only

five emerged as themes from the data. Two of these five—diversity/global learning

and writing-intensive courses—were directly related to the areas of student learning

that they ultimately impacted (i.e., global competence and writing, respectively). The

three additional HIPs that emerged were not necessarily associated with specific areas

of student learning. However, the IRs that reported the use of HIPs commonly

reported gains in student learning as a result (e.g., IRs #7, 15, 19, 21, 22, 27, 33, and 35). Kuh recommended that IHEs facilitate students' exposure to at least two of these practices during their time as undergraduates in order to bolster their learning. Although some of the IRs reported the use of two or more HIPs, the majority did not. However, students could be exposed to HIPs outside of the context of QEP initiatives, and this would not necessarily be reflected in the IRs.

The following HIPs did not emerge from the data: collaborative assignments and projects, common intellectual experiences, internships, learning communities, and undergraduate research (Kuh, 2008). Interestingly, the previously mentioned findings from Kilgo et al.'s (2014) study indicated that collaborative assignments and projects as well as undergraduate research were the only HIPs to significantly and positively impact student learning in the context of that study's setting. To reiterate, though, Kilgo et al.'s study only examined the impact of HIPs in one liberal arts setting and the researchers did not intend for the results to be generalizable. Notably, four of the five HIPs that did not emerge from the data (i.e., all except for collaborative assignments and projects) can be viewed as cocurricular or extracurricular in nature. Thus, their lack of presence across the IRs could be partially attributable to the tendency to focus on classroom learning experiences that IHEs demonstrated across the data sample.

The findings from the present study demonstrated that HIPs tend to be effective for the purposes of QEP implementation when they align with the focus of the QEP. Yet, this does not necessarily preclude the use of HIPs that may not be as aligned with the focus. Engagement in IOL moving forward could inform new ways

129

of incorporating the least commonly used HIPs into QEP initiatives. As different IHEs engage in self-study during the QEP implementation process and learn from internal stakeholders (i.e., OL), this presents an opportunity to share knowledge and learn from external stakeholders as well (i.e., IOL). Further, this process could also yield the DoI that perpetuates OL and IOL (Rogers, 1983).

Summary. Throughout the discussion of the study's findings, I focused on how the existing literature supports or refutes these findings as well as how institutional engagement in IOL has the potential to foster innovation in the QEP process. I intentionally use the term *potential* here, as the findings did not provide evidence that formal and/or intentional IOL has occurred to any great extent. Rather, the findings reflected OL through the self-study process, including engagement in intrainstitutional CoPs. The IRs that reported the use of these CoPs did not explicitly acknowledge the OL that occurred through such collaboration, yet the gains in student learning that resulted were still apparent. The informal IOL that may or may not have occurred remains unknown.

As previously mentioned, the success of IOL moving forward is largely dependent on the element of cooperation (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). The findings indicated that IHEs have much to gain in sharing knowledge of and lessons learned from the QEP process in order to improve their implementation practices. It is evident that the use of effective practices during QEP implementation can be mission-dependent; however, IHEs with missions of all types can learn from each other through IOL. The need for knowledge exchanges related to QEP implementation is especially evident in the area of assessment. Such knowledge

exchanges may occur at the annual SACS conference, for example. Figure 6 depicts

the potential outcome of IHEs' engagement in OL and IOL as they progress through

the stages of the QEP and exchange knowledge as well as create new knowledge

(Crossan et al., 1999; Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). Namely, such engagement can

lead to DoI (Rogers, 1983), which in turn can positively impact student learning. In

the remaining sections of this chapter, I discuss the implications that the findings hold

for practice and future study as well as provide a conclusion for the present study.
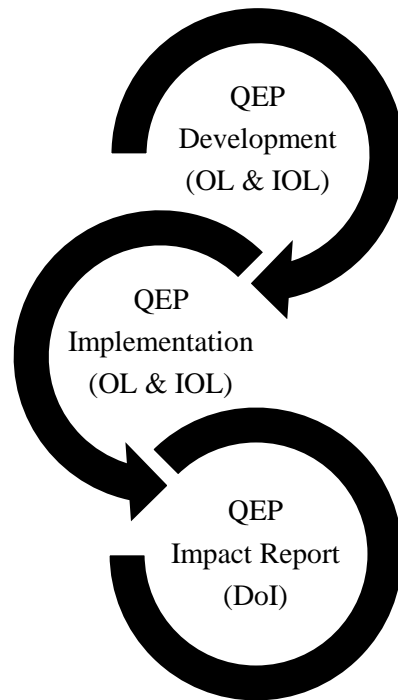
Figure 6. Occurrence of organizational learning, interorganizational learning, and Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations within and between institutions involved in the Quality Enhancement Plan process. QEP = Quality Enhancement Plan; OL = Organizational Learning; IOL = Interorganizational Learning; DoI = Diffusion of Innovations. Adapted from *Diffusion of Innovations* (3rd ed.) (pp. 347-370), by E. M. Rogers, 1983, New York, NY: The Free Press. Copyright 1983 by The Free Press.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the present study hold implications for campus administrators,

faculty, and SACS. Although these findings provide examples of how the QEP may

impact student learning, they should not be used to homogenize student learning or to reduce the QEP process into narrow definitions of processes to support student learning. Homogenization could be an outcome of IOL if IHEs begin to adopt QEP initiatives from each other without consideration of new knowledge creation or institutional context. An example of such new knowledge creation could include the modification of an existing QEP initiative to meet unique institutional needs followed by the dissemination of this modified version to the field (e.g., DoI). Institutional collaboration through IOL should not be limited to the exchange of ideas, as innovation should be an extension of this exchange (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). Although the QEP requirement provides IHEs with an opportunity to experience continuous improvement, the development and implementation of a QEP requires an abundance of time and resources. Thus, IHEs would be well served to maximize the impact of the QEP on student learning to the greatest extent possible by identifying and modifying effective initiatives and/or practices from the field. As Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) demonstrated, the innovation that occurs through the IOL process could help to facilitate such an impact.

The duties of administrators in the QEP implementation process may vary, yet the IRs from this study reported that these duties tend to be rooted in the provision of infrastructure and resources to support the QEP (e.g., resource allocation made by administrators to support online learning as reported in IR #14). Thus, administrators must focus on leveraging the effective practices of QEP implementation in order to best support the initiatives that have been shown to bolster student learning. Such leveraging, however, will require professional development for administrators in

132

effective pedagogy, student learning, and assessment in order to increase their ability to effectively implement a QEP. The lack of consensus demonstrated by administrators across the data sample on how to define and assess student learning could be addressed through training. In the area of assessment, administrators must also be aware that the mixed use of direct and indirect measures may require the purchase of external measures such as standardized tests. Similarly, the facilitation of HIPs as QEP initiatives may require new budgetary considerations (e.g., faculty development) as well as new forms of planning.

The findings of the present study also indicated that administrators' engagement with their colleagues through interinstitutional CoPs could facilitate the exchange of ideas related to the implementation of a QEP. In turn, this exchange may contribute to a culture of innovation that supports student learning in many different areas (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014). The QEP ultimately comes to an end at the close of a SACS reaffirmation cycle. However, if this requirement helps to facilitate a culture of innovation that administrators continue to support, the impact of the QEP on student learning and thus on student success will be ongoing.

As previously discussed, the findings from this study demonstrated that faculty are largely responsible for the execution of QEP initiatives that impact student learning, especially in curricular and co-curricular settings. The emergence of several themes throughout the data suggested that, although different areas of student learning may be impacted by different types of QEP initiatives, some commonalities exist. The importance of participation in faculty development opportunities, for example, was evident throughout the data. For faculty to be able to effect change in

student learning, they must also remain learners themselves and continuously update their own skills. Faculty development opportunities can foster collaboration (e.g., rubric development) that leads to new knowledge creation (Anitsal et al., 2010; Rodriguez, 2015). The exchange of ideas for new pedagogical strategies and forms of course-level assessment reportedly facilitated the impact of the QEP on student learning in several instances (e.g., IRs #6, 12, 19, 26, and 38). However, this impact was highly dependent upon the ability of faculty to transfer the knowledge gained through faculty development to the classroom.

With regard to course planning, faculty must consider the potential utility of HIPs in meeting both course and QEP objectives (Kuh, 2008). Institutional type will likely have a role in this consideration, as both the existing literature and the findings from the present study indicated that context matters when planning for the use of HIPs during QEP implementation (Gallagher, 2007; D. Jenkins et al., 2009). The assumptions here include faculty buying-in to the use of HIPs, being rewarded for effective teaching, and having the opportunity to participate in ongoing faculty development. Additionally, the mixed use of direct and indirect measures of assessment must be an intentional practice at the course level in order to effectively gauge and meet SLOs (Chun, 2010). As Hutchings (2010) recommended, faculty may also want to consider the inclusion of students in the assessment design process in order for students to take more ownership of their learning. This recommendation also relates to that of Werder and Otis (2010) regarding the use of active learning strategies to improve students' level of engagement, which could lead to gains in student learning.

As a regional accreditor that must keep pace with increasing federal mandates and accountability measures (e.g., proposed Warren, Durbin, and Schatz legislation), SACS may also gain from the findings of this study. These findings demonstrated that student learning has reportedly occurred across institutional types and topic areas due at least in part to the QEP requirement. However, in reviewing the areas in which student learning occurred, SACS must collaborate with IHEs in order to ensure that other key areas are not overlooked. For example, given the nationwide emphasis on student learning specifically in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) over the past decade, further inquiry into why these areas did not emerge from the data may be in order (Ossola, 2014). Further, in terms of policy considerations, SACS may want to revisit the implications of not requiring IHEs to make their IRs publicly available. Not only could this compromise the potential for IOL to occur at the administrator and faculty levels, but gauging whether student learning in specific areas is occurring on a regional scale becomes increasingly difficult without access to the data that provides evidence of student learning. Requiring QEPs and IRs to be publicly available could also increase the transparency and, in turn, the accountability of the accreditation process.

Implications for Future Study

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this study was that the findings were entirely dependent on how IHEs reported the outcomes of their QEP implementation processes. Thus, a future study could examine the impact of the QEP on student learning using additional data sources such as interviews with administrators and faculty who have been involved in the QEP implementation process. Interviews

135

could also be conducted with students in order to capture their perceptions of how the

QEP has impacted student learning on their respective campuses. Opportunities also

exist for longitudinal studies over the course of the QEP implementation period in

which interviews could be conducted in years one, three, and five. This design could

enable researchers to collect and analyze data on how perceptions of the QEP's

impact on student learning tend to vary, if at all, during this period. Currently, IRs do

not capture such anecdotal evidence of student learning, and this evidence could be

useful in helping IHEs to better understand how the impact of QEP initiatives may

change over time. Additionally, researchers could replicate the present study in order

to compare the findings to those that emerge from future iterations of IRs in order to

determine if these findings still hold.

Future studies may also consider the use of quantitative methodologies to

enable valid and reliable statistical analyses of QEP assessment data. This would

require access to data beyond what is typically reported in an IR. The results of such

analyses could better inform our understanding of how the QEP impacts student

learning, as it would become possible to determine whether the differences in

assessment results between student populations are statistically significant. A

quantitative design could also enable more IHEs to be represented in the data sample.

In turn, a larger sample could yield results that are generalizable across the population

of IHEs that are accredited by or seeking to be reaffirmed by SACS. Such a design

could also enable researchers to more closely analyze differences in QEP impact

between states. Further, replicating this study in other regions could enable a

comparative analysis of how accreditation requirements across the nation have impacted student learning.

Another implication for future study relates to the theoretical framework of the present study. As previously discussed, institutional engagement in IOL requires mechanisms to facilitate this engagement. Currently, mechanisms for IOL in the context of the QEP are informal and include Internet searches, conferences, and other forms of social networking. Internet searches, however, only yield information that IHEs have made publicly available. Conferences and social networking also have limitations as mechanisms for IOL, as the exchange of ideas is not necessarily widespread. Thus, a need exists for additional research into potential mechanisms for IOL to broaden the potential for innovation (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014).

Future studies may also more closely examine the role of DoI in knowledge sharing for the purposes of QEP implementation. If IOL is truly effective, it should yield a DoI that further perpetuates IOL (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014; Rogers, 1983). Sponsler's (2011) findings regarding the role of geography in policy diffusion present another potential line of inquiry. Although Sponsler (2011) found a negative relationship between the number of contiguous states with a postsecondary policy and a state's likelihood of adopting a similar policy, he noted, "geographic-based explanations for the spread of postsecondary policy have thus far proven inconclusive" (p. 113). Future studies could help to improve the field's understanding of whether DoI through IOL varies according to proximity, especially considering the similarities that emerged from the present study in QEP processes among proximate IHEs.

Conclusion

Each IR that I analyzed for the purposes of this study met the SACS requirement for reaffirmation. Beyond simply meeting an accreditation requirement, though, IHEs must reflect upon the potential value of these requirements. Such reflection is especially vital in consideration of the amount of time and resources that the QEP requires. The value of the QEP exists in its potential to impact student learning in postsecondary contexts. To ensure that a QEP is as efficacious as possible in achieving this aim, IHEs can share knowledge and lessons learned from the QEP implementation process through IOL. To reiterate, the objective in the application of IOL in the context of the QEP is not to homogenize student learning, nor is it to suggest that certain institutional types or QEP topics are limited in the areas of student learning that may be impacted. Rather, IOL presents an opportunity for IHEs to engage with each other to create new knowledge that bolsters student learning (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014).

Several key takeaways emerged from this project that serve to inform future practice and study. The QEP has impacted student learning in the areas of critical thinking, global competence, information literacy, and reading and writing mastery. Most institutional types have reported gains in student learning across all of these areas, although the associate and master's institutional types in the sample for this study did not report gains in global competence and information literacy, respectively. Several QEP initiatives have contributed to gains in student learning. The most commonly reported among these include faculty development in the form

of workshops to improve pedagogical practices as well as a focus on impacting the learning of first-year student populations. Over the years, IHEs have also identified practices that they have found to be particularly effective in bolstering student learning during the QEP implementation period. These include the mixed use of direct and indirect measures of assessment; engagement in interinstitutional and intrainstitutional CoPs; and the use of HIPs (Kuh, 2008), especially those that align with the topic area of a QEP. The gains in student learning that IHEs have experienced through engagement in intrainstitutional CoPs indicate the occurrence of OL (Crossan et al., 1999). If IHEs apply this practice in the context of interinstitutional CoPs, the potential for IOL to yield gains in student learning exists as well (Mozzato & Bitencourt, 2014).

The ongoing accountability movement in higher education indicates that accreditation requirements are here to stay, and that these requirements will most likely become increasingly stringent as the scrutiny of accreditors intensifies (Ewell, 2002; Kelderman, 2016). Yet, IHEs must not lose sight of the opportunity for continuous improvement that accreditation requirements often present. The implementation of a QEP may not only lead to gains in student learning, but also to positive change in institutional culture that far outlives a reaffirmation cycle. These outcomes do not occur in a vacuum, but rather through the use of effective practices that IHEs cultivate collaboratively over time. Thus, interorganizational learning and student learning are inseparable in the movement toward efficacy.

Appendix A

List of A Priori Codes

The first 10 a priori codes listed below reflect Kuh's (2008) high-impact practices (HIPs), defined as widely-tested practices that contribute to cumulative student learning as well as increase retention and engagement across student demographics. Student learning as defined by SACS (n.d.) was also an a priori code in this study. Included as sub-codes under the student learning code were several types of assessment practices. These sub-codes helped to address the means by which IHEs collect evidence of student learning. Additionally, Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice concept as well as Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations theory also served as a priori codes for the purposes of this study.

1. *First-year seminars and experiences (FYS)*: small group experiences that emphasize the development of students' intellectual and practical competencies (Kuh, 2008)

2. *Common intellectual experiences (CIE)*: programs that combine a variety of themes and offer both curricular and cocurricular options for students (Kuh, 2008)

3. *Learning communities (LC)*: two or more courses taken by the same group of students that explore a common topic and facilitate the integration of learning (Kuh, 2008)

4. *Writing-intensive courses (WIC)*: academic courses offered at all levels and across the curriculum in which students learn to write on a variety of topics for an array of audiences (Kuh, 2008)

5. *Collaborative assignments/projects (CAP)*: required course experiences in which students learn to problem solve with peers as well as gain insights from the perspectives of others (Kuh, 2008)

6. *Undergraduate research (UR)*: experiences across the disciplines that enable students to design and conduct empirical observations based on sound research questions (Kuh, 2008)

7. *Diversity/global learning (DGL)*: courses and programs (e.g., study abroad) that enable students to explore a variety of cultures and worldviews (Kuh, 2008)

8. *Service learning (SL)*: field-based experiential learning opportunities that reinforce lessons learned by students from their coursework (Kuh, 2008)

9. *Internships (INT)*: experiential learning opportunities in which students gain experience in a work setting that aligns with their academic and/or professional interests (Kuh, 2008)

10. *Capstone courses/projects (CCP)*: required culminating course experiences completed at the end of a baccalaureate degree in which students directly apply their learning (Kuh, 2008)

11. *Student learning (SL)*: the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students are able to demonstrate as an outcome of competency-based educational programs (SACS, n.d.)

12. *Assessment (A)*: an ongoing process that involves a review of student learning (Ewell & Ries, 2000)

    a. *Direct measures (DM)*: assessment tools that "require students to

represent, produce or demonstrate their learning" (e.g., standardized instruments, portfolios, capstone projects; Stanford University, n.d., p. 20)

b. *Indirect measures (IM)*: assessment tools that "capture information about students' perceptions about their learning experiences and attitudes towards the learning process" (e.g. focus groups, surveys, self-reports; Stanford University, n.d., p. 20)

c. *Formative measures (FM)*: assessments designed to gauge progress in student learning and to inform the ongoing teaching and learning process (R. Miller & Leskes, 2005)

d. *Summative measures (ISM)*: assessments designed to gauge mastery of student learning outcomes and to inform future teaching and learning practices (R. Miller & Leskes, 2005)

13. *Community of practice (CoP)*: a group of individuals who share professional interests, experiences, and a domain of knowledge (Harden & Loving, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991)

14. *Diffusion of Innovations (DoI)*: "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 1983, p. 5)

Appendix B

Researcher as Instrument Statement

As a Ph.D. candidate conducting qualitative research, I recognize that I bring an array of biases to this study based on my past and present experiences. Prior to becoming a Ph.D. student, I held a position at the Ohio Department of Higher Education that enabled me to gain extensive experience in academic program approval, assessment, and accreditation processes. In that capacity, I interacted with an array of institutional stakeholders, each of whom shaped my current understanding of the academic affairs sector of higher education. For example, I observed the role of hierarchical politics in many aspects of decision-making. I also served as the state representative on several peer review teams for on-site and off-site programmatic accreditation. In graduate school, I held the position of assessment and accreditation intern for two large, public institutions in the Midwest. Further, as a graduate assistant at the College of William and Mary, I was a part of the School of Education's programmatic accreditation team. Currently, I hold the position of assistant director of assessment at Christopher Newport University and also serve on the institution's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) committee.

The culmination of the above experiences has resulted in an in-depth knowledge of assessment and accreditation processes, yet largely outside of the realm of the SACS region and the QEP requirement. My initial exposure to and knowledge of accreditation stemmed from the policies and procedures of a different regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). In the data analysis that I will conduct in this study, I must remain aware of any biases toward the HLC such as how

to adequately meet accreditation requirements based on their standards. This accrediting organization has its own definition of and process for assessing student learning, and I recognize the need to separate this knowledge—to the greatest extent possible—from that which I continue to gain while working within the SACS region. Further, my ongoing work on a QEP for my current institution is exposing me to new knowledge of the application of SACS accreditation processes. This may result in differences in the way that I approach my institution's QEP relative to the approaches of the IHEs included in the sample for this study.

Beliefs and Values

My beliefs about accreditation in general and the SACS QEP requirement in particular include the notion that the design of these processes is fairly well intentioned and student-centered. I genuinely believe that, overall, accreditors share a common goal of enabling colleges and universities to remain accountable for continuous improvement. I also believe that the accountability that regional accreditation provides is necessary for maintaining quality academic programs that yield optimal student learning outcomes. At the institutional level, my experiences in the field have shown that stakeholders who represent colleges and universities often view assessment and accreditation processes as burdensome. However, I believe that the accreditation requirements that institutions undergo as part of these processes more often than not enable them to strengthen as organizations.

In terms of my values as they pertain to the topics of accreditation and the QEP requirement, I value quality assurance and therefore view this requirement as vital to the student learning experience for SACS-accredited colleges and universities.

144

I also value institutions taking the time to reflect upon the learning environments that they are providing for students, as well as taking the time to learn from the lessons of their peers in order to be able to discern between effective and ineffective practices in providing learning environments that enable growth.

Expectations of Study Findings

In this study, I am willing to discover that SACS-accredited colleges and universities do their due diligence to develop and implement QEPs that reflect their institutional missions and reinforce strong student learning outcomes. Further, I am willing to discover that their QEP Impact Reports (IRs) will reflect this due diligence. I anticipate that the reported impact of QEPs on student learning within the first five years of implementation will vary by both institutional type and QEP topic area, although I remain uncertain as to what extent and why such variances will occur. I am also willing to discover that the analysis of the IRs will show evidence of a need for interorganizational learning between institutions that complete QEPs, which the theoretical framework for this study supports. I am not willing to discover that QEPs have no impact on student learning, nor am I willing to discover that institutions lack a desire or need to engage in interorganizational learning in order to develop QEPs that are as efficacious as possible.

Expected Outcomes

At the conclusion of this study, I expect SACS-accredited colleges and universities to be able to utilize the findings in order to learn from the lessons of their peers in the QEP implementation process, especially from those with corresponding institutional types and/or QEP topic areas. Beyond this outcome, however, I am also

145

hopeful that these institutions will recognize the potential long-term benefits of sharing their practices with each other as they pertain to other aspects of assessment and accreditation. Ultimately, the goal is for institutions to increase the efficacy of such practices in order for their most important stakeholder—the student—to benefit to the greatest extent possible in their learning.

References

American College Test. (2017). *ACT CAAP*. Retrieved from

http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/act-collegiate-

assessment-of-academic-proficiency.html

American Council on Education. (2017). *ACE Internationalization Laboratory.*

Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/ACE-

Internationalization-Laboratory.aspx

American Council of Trustees and Alumni. (2016). *Accreditation reform*. Retrieved

from https://www.goacta.org/initiatives/accreditation_reform

Anitsal, M. M., Anitsal, I., Barger, B., Fidan, I., & Allen, M. R. (2010). Achieving

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) objectives: Impact of on-line and on-ground

course characteristics by undergraduate student personality traits. *Academy of*

Educational Leadership Journal, 14(1), 37-54.

Ashworth, K. H. (1994, January). *A proposal for the restructuring of accreditation in*

American higher education. Paper presented at a meeting of the National

Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation, Tucson, AZ.

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2016). *Information literacy*

competency standards for higher education. Retrieved from

http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency#ilhed

Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher

education. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 25*(4), 297-308.

Banta, T. W. (2008). Profiles of good practice in assessment. *Assessment Update,*

20(6), 3-4. doi:10/1002/au

Batten, M. R. (2010). *Group attributes and group processes: An inferential analysis of facilitating and inhibiting factors for Quality Enhancement Plan development* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3488353)

Beno, B. A. (2004). The role of student learning outcomes in accreditation quality review. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 126*, 65-72. doi:10.1002/cc.155

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information. Thematic analysis and code development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Brown, N. B. (1999). *Presidential and political perceptions of regional accreditation effectiveness and reform* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 9944233)

Brown, S. (2015). Authentic assessment: Using assessment to help students learn. *RELIEVE, 21*(2), 1-8. doi:10.7203/relieve.21.2.7674

Burke, L., & Butler, S. M. (2012). *Accreditation: Removing the barrier to higher education reform* (Report No. 2728). Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation.

Carey, K. (2010, December 17). Student learning: Measure or perish. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://www.chronicle.com/article/Measure-or-Perish/125671/

Carey, K. (2012, August 3). Why one accreditor deserves some credit. Really. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-One-Accreditor-Deserves/133179/

Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE). (n.d.). *CIGE model*

for comprehensive internationalization. Retrieved from

http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/CIGE-Model-for-Comprehensive-

Internationalization.aspx

Chaffee, E., & Tierney, W. (1988). *Collegiate culture and leadership strategies.* New

York, NY: American Council on Education and Macmillian.

Chaffin, J. J. (2015). *Social network dynamics of quality enhancement initiatives in*

the community college setting: Strategic choice and emergent change

(Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses

Global. (Order No. 3708899)

Chun, M. (2010). Taking teaching to (performance) task: Linking pedagogical and

assessment practices. *Change: The magazine of higher learning, 42*(2), 22-29.

doi:10.1080/00091381003590795

Cogswell, C. A. (2016). *Improving our improving: A multiple case study of the*

accreditor-institution relationship (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 10103201)

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). (2015). CHEA at-a-glance.

Retrieved from http://www.chea.org/pdf/chea-at-a-glance_2015.pdf

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks,

CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Craig, M. L. (2006). *Student learning outcomes assessment and CIS program*

effectiveness in Alabama community colleges (Doctoral dissertation).

Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No.

3223299)

Cronin, C., Cochrane, T., & Gordon, A. (2016). Nurturing global collaboration and
    networked learning in higher education. *Research in Learning Technology,
    24*, 1-14. doi:10.3402/rlt.v24.26497

Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W., & White, R. E. (1999). An organizational learning
    framework: From intuition to institution. *Academy of Management Review,
    24*(3), 522-537. doi:10.2307/259140

Cruise, C. T. (2007). *A single case study of the quality enhancement plan component
    of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' accreditation process:
    Identifying influential factors* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from
    ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3252707)

Davis, T. H. (2009). *The challenge of change: A case study of the institutionalization
    of employability skills at Guilford Technical Community College* (Doctoral
    dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order
    No. 3380376)

DeLoach, S. B., Kurt, M., & Olitsky, N. H. (2015). Does content matter? Analyzing
    the change in global awareness between business- and nonbusiness-focused
    short-term study abroad courses. *Journal of Teaching in International
    Business, 26*, 4-31. doi:10.1080/08975930.2014.929512

Dickeson, R. C. (2009). *The need for accreditation reform* [White paper]. Retrieved
    from file:///C:/Users/user/Documents/Graduate%20School/
    Ph.D/EDUC%20800/Resources/dickeson.pdf

Eaton, D. (2010). *Accreditation and the federal future of higher education.* Retrieved

from https://www.aaup.org/article/accreditation-and-federal-future-higher-education#.WPu7ptLys2x

Eaton, D. (2015). *An overview of U.S. accreditation*. Washington, DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Retrieved from https://www.chea.org/userfiles/uploads/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202015.pdf

Eaton, J. S. (2001). Regional accreditation reform: Who is served? *Change: The magazine of higher learning, 33*(2), 38-45. doi:10.1080/00091380109601786

Educational Testing Service. (2017). *ETS Proficiency Profile*. Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/proficiencyprofile/about

Elwood, J., & Klenowski, V. (2002). Creating communities of shared practice: The challenges of assessment use in teaching and learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 27*(3), 243-256. doi:10.1080/02602930220138606

Ewell, P. T. (1994, January). *A proposal for the restructuring of accreditation in American higher education.* Paper presented at the meeting of the National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation, Tucson, AZ.

Ewell, P. T. (2001). *Accreditation and student learning outcomes: A proposed point of departure.* Washington, DC: Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Ewell, P. T. (2002). An emerging scholarship: A brief history of assessment. In T. Banta (Ed.), *Building a scholarship of assessment* (pp. 3-25). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ewell, P. T., & Ries, P. (2000). *Assessing student learning outcomes: A supplement to*

Measuring Up 2000 (Report No. 00-5). Washington, DC: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Farrow, C. A. (1975). *The accreditation process of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as perceived by staff members at ten selected public junior colleges in Alabama* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 7610896)

Freeman, S., & Kochan, F. (2012). The role of assessment and accountability in higher education doctoral programs: A presidential perspective. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 7*(2), 1-13.

Fridrikkson, H. V. (2008). *Learning processes in an inter-organizational context: A study of krAft project* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from JIBS Dissertation Series. (Order No. 046)

Friedlander, J., & Serban, A. M. (2004). Meeting the challenges of assessing student learning outcomes. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2004*(126), 101-109. doi:10.1002/cc.158

Gallagher, M. (2007). *Improving institutional effectiveness: The relationship between assessing student learning outcomes and strategic planning in California community colleges* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3246648)

Gardner, J. N., Barefoot, B., & Swing, R. L. (2001). *Guidelines for evaluating the first-year experience at four-year colleges* (2nd ed.). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.

Glenn, N. G. (2008). *Leveraging quality improvement to achieve student learning assessment success in higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3386584)

Gordin, P. C. (2006). *An instrumental case study of the phenomenon of collaboration in the process of improving community college developmental reading and writing instruction* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3248277)

Graca, T. J. (2009). Accreditation's legal landscape. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 33,* 642-649. doi:10.1080/10668920903034925

Gulliford, M. (2016, January 12). Re-authorization of the Higher Education Act: Accreditation overhaul? Or is it just a load of codswallop? (That's baloney to you) [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://www1.taskstream.com/re-authorization-of-the-higher-education-act-accreditation-overhaul-or-is-it-just-a-load-of-codswallop-thats-baloney-to-you/

Haaland, G. A. (1995, September). Scaling the depths of institutional evaluation. *Trusteeship Magazine, 3*(5), 8-11.

Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harden, S. B., & Loving, K. (2015). Outreach and engagement staff and communities of practice: A journey from practice to theory for an emerging professional identity and community. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship, 8*(2). Retrieved from http://jces.ua.edu/outreach-and-engagement-staff-and-

communities-of-practice-a-journey-from-practice-to-theory-for-an-emerging-professional-identity-and-community/

Harris, B. R. (2012). Subversive infusions: Strategies for the integration of information literacy across the curriculum. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 39*(2), 175-180.

Herbert, I. P., Joyce, J., & Hassall, T. (2014). Assessment in higher education: The potential for a community of practice to improve inter-marker reliability. *Accounting Education: An International Journal, 23*(6), 542-561. doi:10.1080/09639284.2014.974195

Holmes, J. D. (2002). *Perceptions of college presidents from past and present AABC accredited institutions towards the accrediting association of bible colleges and regional accreditation* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3059947)

Hsieh, H., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277-1288. doi:10.1177/1049732305276687

Humphreys, D., & Gaston, P. L. (2016). Quality assurance and accreditation in challenging times. *Liberal Education, 101*(4), 14-23.

Hutchings, P. (2010). *Opening doors to faculty involvement in assessment* [White paper]. Retrieved from National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment website: http://www.learningoutcome assessment.org/documents/PatHutchings.pdf.

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. (2015). *Basic*

classification description. Retrieved from http://carnegieclassifications

.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (2016). *Institution lookup.*

Retrieved from http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/lookup/lookup.php

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (2017). *About NSSE.* Retrieved

from http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm

Insight Assessment. (2017). *California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST).*

Retrieved from https://www.insightassessment.com/Products/Products-

Summary/Critical-Thinking-Skills-Tests/California-Critical-Thinking-Skills-

Test-CCTST

Jacobson, A. B. (2001). *Involvement of faculty in higher education student*

assessment practices (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest

Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3015411)

Jenkins, D., Ellwein, T., Wachen, J., Kerrigan, M. R., & Cho, S. (2009). *Achieving*

the Dream colleges in Pennsylvania and Washington State. Retrieved from

http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505232.pdf

Jenkins, J. N. (2006). *Student learning assessment in the social sciences: Establishing*

a national baseline for criminal justice programs (Doctoral dissertation).

Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No.

3213308)

Jones, B. D. (2005). *Restoring accreditation in two private Texas Historically Black*

Colleges (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations &

Theses Global. (Order No. 3174485)

Kaplan, S. (1989). The quest for institutional excellence: The CEO and the creative

    use of the accreditation process. *NCA Quarterly, 64*, 379-386.

Kedia, B. L., & Cornwell, T. B. (1994). Mission based strategies for

    internationalizing U.S. business schools. *Journal of Teaching in International*

    Business, 5(3), 11-29. doi:10.1300/J066v05n03_02

Kelderman, E. (2016, April 22). Education dept. warns of more scrutiny for

    accreditors. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from

    http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/education-dept-warns-of-more-

    scrutiny-for-accreditors/110644

Kelly, M. J. (1983). *The effects of regional accreditation on small, private colleges*

    (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses

    Global. (Order No. 8328239)

Kezar, A. (2005). What campuses need to know about organizational learning and the

    learning organization. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2005*(131), 7-22.

    doi:10.1002/he.183

Kezar, A. (2007). Learning from and with students: College presidents creating

    organizational learning to advance diversity agendas. *NASPA Journal, 44*(3),

    578-609. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.1837

Kilgo, C. A., Sheets, J. K. E., & Pascarella, E. T. (2014). The link between high-

    impact practices and student learning: Some longitudinal evidence. *Higher*

    Education, 69(4), 509-525. doi:10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has*

    access to them, and why they matter. Washington, DC: Association of

American Colleges and Universities.

Kuh, G. D., O'Donnell, K., & Reed, S. (2013). *Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale.* Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Larsson, R., Bengtsson, L., Henriksson, K., & Sparks, J. (1998). The interorganizational learning dilemma: Collective knowledge development in strategic alliances. *Organization Science, 9*(3), 285-305. doi:10.1287/orsc.9.3.285

Lauer, A. J., & Korin, J. R. (2014). Expanding assessment perspectives: The importance of student leadership in student learning outcomes assessment. *Assessment Update, 26*(1), 1-16. doi:10.1002/au.20003

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Lucca, D. O., Nadauld, T., & Shen, K. (2016). *Credit supply and the rise in college tuition: Evidence from the expansion in federal student aid programs* (Report No. 733). New York, NY: Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Maki, P. L. (2002). Developing an assessment plan to learn about student learning. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 28*(1), 8-13. doi:10.1016/s0099-1333(01)00295-6

Maki, P. L. (2010). *Assessing for learning: Building a sustainable commitment across the institution.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, Inc.

Manning, P. K., & Cullam-Swan, B. (1994). Narrative, content, and semiotic

    analysis. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Guba (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative*

    research (pp. 463-477). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

MAXQDA. (2016). *Software for basic qualitative text analysis*. Retrieved from

    http://www.maxqda.com/products/maxqda-base

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum: Qualitative social research,*

    1(2). Retrieved from http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs

Mercer University. (n.d.). *QEP topic selection resources.* Retrieved from

    https://oie.mercer.edu/qep/resources/

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded*

    sourcebook (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Miller, M. A., & Ewell, P. T. (2005). *Measuring up on college-level learning.*

    Retrieved from http://www.highereducation.org/reports/mu_learning/

    Learning.pdf

Miller, R., & Leskes, A. (2005). *Levels of assessment: From the student to the*

    institution. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and

    Universities.

Morse, J. M., & Field, P. A. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for health*

    professionals (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mozzato, A. R., & Bitencourt, C. C. (2014). Understanding interorganizational

    learning based on social spaces and learning episodes. *Brazilian*

    Administration Review, 11(3), 285-301. doi:10.1590/1807-7692bar2014370

National Science Foundation. (2016). *Expanding use of the CAT: Assessing and*

improving critical thinking. Retrieved from

https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1022789

Nelson, C. B. (2014, November 24). Assessing assessment. *Inside Higher Ed.*

Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/11/24/essay-

criticizes-state-assessment-movement-higher-education

New America. (2013, March 1). Higher education accreditation [Blog post].

Retrieved from https://www.newamerica.org/post-secondary-national-policy-

institute/our-blog/higher-education-accreditation/

Office of U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren. (2016). *Senators Warren, Durbin, and*

Schatz introduce bill to reform higher education accreditation and strengthen

accountability for students and taxpayers [Press release]. Retrieved from

https://www.warren.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=1249

Ossola, A. (2014, December 3). Is the U.S. focusing too much on STEM? *The*

Atlantic. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/

2014/12/is-the-us-focusing-too-much-on-stem/383353/

Patel, D. D. (2012). *Impact of accreditation actions: A case study of two colleges*

within Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission

for Community and Junior Colleges (Doctoral dissertation)*.* Retrieved from

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3551539)

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization focused evaluation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

Publications, Inc.

Paul, R.P., & Elder, L. (2006). *The miniature guide to critical thinking concepts &*

tools (7th ed.). Tomales, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Peterson, M. W., Augustine, C. H., Einarson, M. K., & Vaughan, D. S. (1999). *Designing student assessment to strengthen institutional performance in associate of arts institutions.* Stanford, CA: National Center for Postsecondary Improvement.

Pianta, R. C. (2016, October 26). Teacher preparation regulation: Déjà vu or real change? *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-c-pianta/teacher-preparation-regul_b_12557108.html

Powell, W. W., Koput, K., & Smith-Doerr, L. (1996). Interorganizational collaboration and the locus of innovation: Networks of learning in biotechnology. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 41*(1), 116-145. doi:10.2307/2393988

Rodriguez, B. J. (2015). *An examination of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on colleges' quality enhancement plans at two institutions through the lens of quality improvement* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 10095900)

Rogers, E. M. (1983). *Diffusion of innovations* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: The Free Press.

Sambell, K., McDowell, L., & Montgomery, C. (2012). *Assessment for learning in higher education.* London, UK: Routledge.

Sanyal, B. C., & Martin, M. (2007). *Higher education in the world 2007:*

Accreditation for quality assurance: What is at stake? Basingstoke, UK:

Palgrave Macmillan.

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA:

SAGE Publications, Inc.

Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed.).

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research

projects. *Education for Information, 22*, 63-75.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). (n.d.). *Direct assessment:*

Competency-based educational programs. Retrieved from

http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/DirectAssessmentCompetencyBased.pdf

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). (2013). *Process for the*

review of the QEP Impact Report. Retrieved from http://www.sacscoc.org

/fifth%20year/Process%20review%20of%20QEP%20Impact%20Rpt.pdf

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). (2016a). *General information*

on the reaffirmation process. Retrieved from http://www.sacscoc.org/

genaccproc.asp

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). (2016b). *The fifth-year*

interim report: Information, forms, and timelines. Retrieved from

http://www.sacscoc.org/FifthYear.asp

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). (2016c). *Membership*

directory. Retrieved from http://www.sacscoc.org/membershipInfo.asp

Sponsler, B. A. (2011). *State adoption of undocumented student tuition policy: An*

event history analysis (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest

Dissertations & Theses Global. (Order No. 3449219)

Stanford University. (n.d.). *Assessment methods.* Retrieved from

https://web.stanford.edu/dept/pres-provost/irds/assessment/downloads/

AM.pdf

Stratford, M. (2015, November 6). Shaming accreditors. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved

from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/06/obama-

administration-pushes-transparency-prod-accreditors

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide* (2nd ed.). San

Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Templin, T. J., & Blankenship, B. T. (2007). Accreditation in kinesiology: The

process, criticism and controversy, and the future. *Quest, 59*, 143-153.

doi:10.1080/00336297.2007.10483543

Theule, R. W. (2012). *An exploratory, quantitative study of accreditation actions*

taken by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting

Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (WASC-ACCJC) Since 2002

(Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses

Global. (Order No. 3514328)

Thompson, G. B. (2002). Information literacy accreditation mandates: What they

mean for faculty and librarians. *Library Trends, 51*(2), 218-241.

Tilghman, S. M. (2011, January 14). [Letter to Susan D. Phillips]. National Advisory

Committee on Institutional Quality Archives

(https://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/naciqi-dir/2011-spring/naciqi-6-

2011-comments.pdf), Washington, DC.

University of Alabama at Birmingham. (2015). *Learning in a team environment*.

Retrieved from https://www.uab.edu/accreditation/images/qep/

documents/uab-qep.pdf

University of Tampa. (2015). *Learning by doing: Inquiry-based experiential

education.* Retrieved from http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/

4ca402a3#/4ca402a3/1

U.S. Department of Education (USDoE). (n.d.). FAQs about accreditation. Retrieved

from http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/FAQAccr.aspx

U.S. Department of Education (USDoE). (2016). Overview of accreditation in the

United States. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/

accreditation.html#Overview

Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE

Publications, Inc.

Weiner, J. M. (2011). Is there a difference between critical thinking and

information literacy? *Journal of Information Literacy, 5*(2), 81-92.

doi:10.11645/5.2.1600

Werder, C., & Otis, M. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Engaging student voices in the

study of teaching and learning.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Wheelan, B. S., & Elgart, M. A. (2015, October 22). Accreditation's real cost (and

value). *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/10/22/real-costs-accreditation-

and-processs-value-essay

Vita

Madeline J. Smith

Birthdate: January 16, 1989

Birthplace: Columbus, Ohio

Education: 2014-2017   The College of William & Mary
                            Williamsburg, Virginia
                            Doctor of Philosophy

               2012-2014   Ohio University
                            Athens, Ohio
                            Master of Education

               2007-2011   The Ohio State University
                            Columbus, Ohio
                            Bachelor of Arts

Experience: 2016-Present Christopher Newport University
                            Newport News, Virginia
                            Assistant Director of Assessment

               2014-2016   The College of William & Mary
                            Williamsburg, Virginia
                            Graduate Assistant

               2013-2014   Ohio Department of Higher Education
                            Columbus, Ohio
                            Assistant Director of Program Approval

               2012-2013   Ohio Department of Higher Education
                            Columbus, Ohio
                            Administrator of Education Program Approval

               2011-2012   Office of the Governor
                            Columbus, Ohio
                            Legislative Liaison, P-20 Education