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# Accountability and Quality in Higher Education: A Case Study

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

by

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A dissertation presented to the Department of Leadership, Counseling, and Instructional  
Technology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the present study was to gain a deep and rich understanding of the accountability process at a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States. Specifically, the present study sought to answer the following question: How is a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States substantiating the quality of undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates. The study utilized a qualitative research methodology, specifically a descriptive embedded case study design. A total of 16 interviews were conducted with participants representing the program level, college level, and administrative level. Three subunits of investigation provided the program perspective for the study. An analysis of the data collected at the subunit level and the data collected at the administrative level provided the information needed to craft rich detailed descriptions of the accountability processes at the University. In addition to the interviews with faculty members and administrators, data were obtained from publicly available resources and used for triangulation purposes.

The findings indicated that educational quality was substantiated based on the performance measures specified by the multiple internal and external stakeholders at the institution. Accountability process varied from program to program based on the number of stakeholders involved. The challenges in meeting the demands of the accountability processes were in terms of time, resources, and conflicting or competing demands from multiple stakeholders. University level assessment processes were viewed as compliance exercises as opposed to as part of the assessment processes required by programmatic accreditors. The program accreditation requirements specific to assessment of student learning were viewed as

helpful in informing practice. In conclusion, the institution lacked an integrated accountability process. The accountability processes were viewed differently from the administration's perspective and the program perspective. Based on these findings recommendations were made for practice and research.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” – William Bruce Cameron, 1963

U.S. higher education institutions, while considered self-regulating entities, are nevertheless subject to environmental pressures to provide evidence of the value and quality of what they offer. These external demands come from the environment representing stakeholders in regulative systems (federal and state governments), normative systems (accrediting bodies), and cultural-cognitive systems (private and corporate donors, prospective students and their parents, and others; Scott, 2008). However, these stakeholders may hold different views of legitimacy, because the concept is not universally defined, and the goals of higher education are not always held in common.

The push for accountability in higher education is not a new issue in the United States or internationally. According to Dill and Beerkens (2013), “the challenge confronting all nations is to design a policy framework that effectively balances the forces of the state, the market, and the academic profession to assure academic standards in universities” (p. 341). In the late 1800s, accrediting bodies were instituted to establish standards for quality in U.S. higher education. In addition to monitoring adherence to these standards, accrediting bodies now require members to provide continuing improvement plans and evidence of fiscally responsible operations. Accrediting bodies require U.S. higher education institutions to comply with the established standards as well as “all applicable government (usually Federal and state) policies, regulations, and requirements” (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011, xii). The Southern

Associations of Colleges and Schools's publication *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* includes a section specific to federal requirements, which states

The federal statute includes mandates that the Commission review an institution in accordance with criteria outlined in the federal regulations developed by the U.S. Department of Education. As part of the review process, institutions are required to document compliance with those criteria and the Commission is obligated to consider such compliance when the institution is reviewed for initial membership or continued accreditation. (2011, p. 39)

Even though accrediting bodies are independent from the government, these organizations are policing federal regulations.

The United States has numerous accrediting bodies, whose responsibilities range from national accreditation, regional accreditation, and faith-based accreditation to program-specific accreditations. These accrediting bodies are independent, nonprofit agencies, each of which holds colleges and universities accountable for somewhat overlapping standards. As an example, Table 1 illustrates the commonalities in standards among the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), a national accrediting body; the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), a regional accrediting body; and The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a programmatic accrediting body. Standards are based on the categories of mission, governance/administration, effectiveness, assessment, curriculum, resources, student support, faculty, admissions, and facilities. The categories listed are not all inclusive, as some of the standards cross over several categories.

Table 1

*Commonalities Across National, Regional, and Programmatic Standards*

Standard	ACICS	SACS	NCATE (unit standards)
Mission	Mission: Purpose and Objectives (Std. 3-1-100)	Institutional Mission (Std. 3.1)	Faculty qualifications, performance, and development (Std. 5)
Governance/ Administration	Organization (Std. 3-1-200) Administration (Std. 3-1-300)	Governance and Administration (Std. 3.2) Financial Resources (Std. 3.10)	Unit Governance and Resources (Std. 6)
Effectiveness	Institutional Effectiveness (Std. 3-1-110)	Institutional Effectiveness (Std. 3.3)	All standards Conceptual Framework
Assessment	Standards of Satisfactory Progress (Std. 3-1-420)	Institutional Effectiveness (Std. 3.3)	Candidate knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions (Std. 1) Assessment system and unit evaluation (Std. 2) Diversity (Std. 4)
Curriculum	Program Administration, Planning, Development and Evaluation (Std. 3-1-510) Educational Activities (Std. 3-1-500) Credentials Conferred (Std. 3-1-520) Instruction (Std. 3-1-530)	Undergraduate Programs (Std. 3.5) Graduate and Post-Baccalaureate Professional Programs (Std. 3.6)	Candidate knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions (Std. 1) Field experiences and clinical practice (Std. 3) Conceptual Framework
Resources	Library Resources and Services (Std. 3-1-800) Instruction (Std. 3-1-530)	Library and Other Learning Resources (Std. 3.8)	Unit Governance and Resources (Std. 6)

Standard	ACICS	SACS	NCATE (unit standards)
Student support	Student Services (Std. 2-1-440)	Student Affairs and Services (Std. 3.9)	Candidate knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions (Std. 1)
	Relations with Students (Std. 3-1.400)		
Faculty	Faculty (Std. 3-1-540)	Faculty (Std. 3.7)	Faculty qualifications, performance, and development (Std. 5)
Admissions	Admissions and Recruitment (Std. 3-1.410)	All Educational Programs (Std. 3.4)	Assessment system and unit evaluation (Std. 2)
	Tuitions and Fees (Std. 3-1-430)		
	Publications (Std. 3-1-700)		
Facilities	Educational Facilities (Std. 3-1-600)	Physical Resources (Std. 3.11)	Unit Governance and Resources (Std. 6)
Accreditation	Administration (Std. 3-1-300)	Substantive Change Procedures and Policy (Std. 3.12)	Unit Governance and Resources (Std. 6)
		Compliance with Other Commission Policies (Std. 3.13)	
		Representation of Status (Std. 3.14)	

*Note.* Standards listed are from *Accreditation Criteria Policies, Procedures, and Standards* (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools [ACICS], 2012); *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundation for Quality Enhancement* (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC], 2012b); and *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions* (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008).

In addition to the accrediting agencies, local and state governments have requirements for higher education institutions, because these governments provide funding and resources.

However, as previously mentioned, the accrediting bodies are responsible for monitoring



compliance to federal regulations. State regulations are independently reported, as specified by each state. In the state of Florida, the Board of Governors (BOG) requires public higher education institutions within the university system to provide data on finances, employees, teacher education programs, and student financial aid, among other types of information, via the state's Data Request System. The public colleges and community colleges report to a different agency.

Since the 1980s, all levels of government have placed increased demands on government agencies to operate more efficiently and deliver evidence of their worth. This has impacted not only K–12 education, with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), but also higher education. President George W. Bush signed NCLB into law in 2002, and the goals of NCLB are to increase student achievement, improve educational opportunities for disadvantage students, and hold schools accountable for student progress:

States, districts and schools are using their unique accountability plans to measure the progress of student achievement, report student and school progress to parents, identify for improvement those schools not making adequate yearly progress, provide support for the improvement of schools and districts, and provide options—including public school choice and tutoring—for children in underperforming schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, para. 1)

With each reaffirmation of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the federal government has been adding more requirements for accountability from post secondary institutions.

In an Association of Governing Boards of University and Colleges (AGB) podcast interview, Judith Eaton, president of the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA),

stated that the renewal of the Higher Education Act in 2008 instituted 150 new regulations on higher education (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges [AGB], 2012). This act was up for renewal in 2013 at the time of the present study, and according to Eaton, when updated, the act is likely to include even more regulations. Additional changes and demands for colleges and universities are anticipated because these institutions will continue to be held accountable for “cost, value, and quality” (Obama, 2013). *The President’s Plan for a Strong Middle Class & a Strong America*, a document released shortly after the President Obama’s February 2013 State of the Union Address, stated

The President will call on Congress to consider value, affordability, and student outcomes in making determinations about which colleges and universities receive access to federal student aid, either by incorporating measures of value and affordability into the existing accreditation system; or by establishing a new, alternative system of accreditation that would provide pathways for higher education models and colleges to receive federal student aid based on performance and results. (p. 5)

The public perception of the value of higher education has continued to decrease as the cost of tuition has continued to rise (Fischer, 2011). Although higher education institutions are self-regulated, they depend on resources from state and federal governments and must demonstrate that these resources are utilized in the most effective ways.

Federal government requirements have focused on the areas of access, affordability, quality, and accountability in higher education and demanded that evidence of these be made public. This was the recommendation from the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which was appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in 2006. For colleges and

universities to comply with all the demands coming from the environment (federal, state, and local governments, accrediting bodies, and others), resources have been allocated to collect the data needed from all stakeholders and to make that data available. Depending on the stakeholders, the data required sometimes differ. The data-collection process is complex and time consuming at all levels of the higher education environment. Colleges and universities have to provide a cohesive and consistent picture of how they are delivering the expected quality and value. The determination of these institutions' legitimacy varies according to the system on which the assessment is based.

According to Scott (2008), the basis for legitimacy from the regulative system, represented by the federal and state government, is to meet legal sanctions. The basis of legitimacy for the normative system, represented by the accrediting bodies, is to be a morally governed system, while the cognitive system views legitimacy as operating on a culturally supported and conceptually correct system (in other words, an agreed-upon socially constructed view).

During the U.S. House of Representatives hearing *Assessing College Data: Helping to Provide Valuable Information to Students, Institutions, and Taxpayers*, which was held in Washington, D. C., in 2012, witnesses expressed their concerns about the amount of time and expense required to prepare data reports. North Carolina Chairwoman Foxx stated, "Experts predict the burden will grow to 850,000 hours and \$31 million in the 2012-2013 school year" (p. 2). These amounts represent additional expenses of \$3 million and 50,000 hours in just one year, which higher education institutions will incur as they meet the increased reporting demands. Ranking minority House member Rubén Hinojosa expressed his concerns with the current

reporting system and highlighted one of its shortcomings: a requirement to report completion for first-time, full-time students, who represent just 14.6% of college enrollments, but reporting is not required for the total student body, which would provide a more accurate picture of the larger group (House of Representatives, 2012, p.4).

Although data reporting is important for the all stakeholders' benefit and for the documentation of the quality and value of each institution's offerings (i.e., the institutions' legitimacy), some issues clearly need to be addressed so the process is transparent and accomplishes the intended goals. From the perspective of the higher education institutions, another concern is the additional resources required to meet the imposed demands, which seem to continue to increase while resources continue to decrease.

How can institutions continue to operate under these demands and satisfy the need for information and accountability for all stakeholders? How do institutions decide which accreditations are worth their resources? How do institutions communicate a comprehensive picture of the quality and value of what they offer? These are issues that the current generation of educational leaders needs to address. This study will create a rich and detailed picture of these challenges at a regional, comprehensive university.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep and rich understanding of the accountability process at a regional, comprehensive university in the Southeast United States. The overarching research question was as follows: How is a regional, comprehensive university in the Southeast United States substantiating the quality of undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates?

## **Methodology**

To answer the research question, a descriptive embedded case study design was used. According to Yin (2009), case studies provide an in-depth description of a social phenomenon and therefore “contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (p. 4). The present study met all three criteria that Yin specified as ideal for case study investigation. First, the study focused on “how” an institution of higher education responded to the demands of the environment in terms of accountability and, ultimately, legitimacy within the environment. Secondly, the study focused on a contemporary issue, accountability in higher education. And lastly, I (the investigator) had little to no control over the subject matter.

The embedded case study is a type of single case study in which subunits of analysis are also used. In the present study, the University of North Florida (UNF) was the main unit of analysis, and three professional programs within the institution were the subunits of investigation. As Yin (2009) stated, “the subunits can often add significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single case” (p. 52). The ultimate goal of the embedded case study was to provide analysis for the main unit, the institution. UNF is what Yin (2009) describes as a “representative or typical case” (p. 48), satisfying the rationale for selecting the single case study methodology. In addition to UNF, 134 other institutions in the United States have the same basic size and setting profile (L4/NR), as specified by the Carnegie Classification (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010).

Through a combination of interviews and evaluation of artifacts and documents, this study provided insight to the issues of accreditation and accountability for UNF. Three subunits

were evaluated as part of the single case study, while the overall focus remained on the University.

The subunits (programs) selected for the study were the programs leading to the Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education, the Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics, and the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design and Digital Media. The subunits selected represented three professional programs offered at the institution, and each program had different levels of accreditation and accountability responsibilities at the time of the present study. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants represented three tiers within the institution, at the University, college, and program level.

Specific interview questions were based on the study's theoretical framework, which are outlined in Chapter 2. The purpose of these questions was to gain a detailed perspective of how faculty and administrators at the institution speak to the institution's legitimacy, based on the expectations of the regulative systems, normative systems, and cognitive systems, while concurrently meeting environmental demands. Questions were also structured to garner insight to the participants' views of the concept of "institutional isomorphism" and whether or not the institution conformed to this concept.

After receipt of UNF's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A), invitations were sent to potential participants. Participants were asked to review and sign the informed consent form (Appendix B) prior to completing a background survey and participating in the interviews. The survey was intended to collect participants' background information. Semistructured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were crosschecked with the recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were coded at multiple levels, beginning

with a set of a priori codes and then transitioning to in vivo coding. The a priori codes were based on the theoretical framework for the study, which is described in Chapter 2. The second level of coding was based on in vivo coding. Specific details regarding the coding techniques are provided in Chapter 3. After the interview transcripts were coded, I looked for patterns to identify themes. From these themes, I developed in-depth descriptions of participants' perceptions of the accountability process and interpreted the findings.

Analysis was conducted following Patton's (2002) "substantive significance" criteria, which included solid evidence in support of findings, how the findings increase the understanding of the phenomenon, and the usefulness of the findings (p. 467). The goal of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the accrediting and accountability process at the institution.

### **Setting**

The study took place at the University of North Florida (UNF), a regional university located in Jacksonville, Florida. UNF is one of 12 universities that comprise the State University System of Florida (SUS). The University was divided into five colleges: Brooks College of Health; Coggin College of Business, College of Arts and Sciences; College of Computing, Engineering, and Construction; and College of Education and Human Services. The subunits of the study represented professional programs in three of the five colleges.

According to the University Profile, in fall 2011, undergraduate enrollment at UNF was 13,722; graduate enrollment was 1,735; and postbaccalaureate and nondegree seeking enrollment was 915, for a total of 16,372 students. Most of the students enrolled at UNF (95%) are from Florida. The average incoming freshman GPA was 3.84, and the average combined SAT score

was 1,204. The institution employed 506 full-time faculty and 1,144 employees. The faculty to student ratio was 1:21 (University of North Florida, 2013o).

At the time of the present study the three subunits selected for the study had approximately 944 students (approximately 6.8% of total enrollment). The Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education had approximately 485 students and 15 full-time faculty members. The Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics had approximately 297 students and 7 full-time faculty members. And, the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design and Digital Media had approximately 162 students and 7 full-time faculty members (University of North Florida, 2013h).

Interviews were conducted with participants (faculty members and administrators) on the University campus. Documents and additional resources were accessed via the World Wide Web. Others documents were gathered from participants after the interviews had been conducted.

### **Significance of the Research**

The significance of this study is threefold. First, this study provided an in-depth look at the processes and challenges faced by a regional university as it continues to meet the competing demands imposed by the complex environment in which it operates. Specifically, using Scott's (2008) institutional theory model in which institutions are viewed as consisting of "cultured-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (p. 48), the study addressed how the institution responds to the requirements for legitimacy from each of these perspectives. This provided a comprehensive view of the institutional isomorphism, which is discussed in Chapter



5. In addition to Scott's (2008) institutional theory model, I viewed the organization from the perspective of Easton's (1965) political systems model, which helped explain how a set of inputs represented the external pressures and how the institution interpreted those inputs and, based on feedback, responded in the form of outputs in order to survive. The present study also examined the unintended consequences of this process and the impact these may have on the overall institution.

This study was conducted in 2013, the same year that the Higher Education Act was up for renewal. This act will have a major impact on funding and student loans and will impose more regulations on higher education. Therefore, higher education institutions, such as the University in this study, will need to make adjustments to their accountability plans to accommodate the additional demands. This study addressed how a specific institution has responded to the changes in expectations and reporting and how it will structure the process to facilitate the response to new demands.

It is important to note that the study focused on the main unit (the University) and not on the specific subunits used as part of the investigation. The subunits provided specific details of the programs in order to build a stronger description of the accountability processes at the institution as a whole.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following is a list of terms that will be used throughout this study.

*Accountability*: "the quality or state of being accountable; especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions" ("Accountability," 2013).

*Accreditation*: “a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (Eaton, 2012, p. 3)

*Accrediting agency*: “a legal entity, or that part of a legal entity, that conducts accrediting activities through voluntary, non-Federal peer review and makes decisions concerning the accreditation or preaccreditation in the status of institutions, programs, or both” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, section 602.3).

*Actuarial data*: “data such as graduation rates, endowment level, student/faculty ration, average admissions test, scores, and the racial/ethnic composition of the student body” (Klein et. al., 2005, p. 254).

*Legitimacy*: “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

*Program*: “a postsecondary educational program offered by an institution of higher education that leads to an academic or professional degree, certificate, or other recognized educational credential” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, section 602.3).

*Programmatic accrediting agency:* “an agency that accredits specific educational programs that prepare students for entry into a profession, occupation, or vocation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, section 602.3).

*Recognition:* “an accrediting agency complies with the criteria for recognition [established by the U.S. Department of Education] and that the agency is effective in its application of those criteria” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, section 602.3).

*Standards for accreditation:* “statements that articulate the quality and effectiveness expected of accredited institutions, and collectively they provide a framework for continuous improvement within institutions” (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities [NWCCU], 2010, p. 1).

*Student learning outcomes:* “particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences” (Ewell, 2001, p. 6).

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitations of the present study were that the study only captured one point in time, and the perspectives of the participants involved with the process of accountability and accreditation were only captured at that one point in time. This delimitation is a limitation of the case study methodology used for the study. The embedded descriptive case study focused on a single university as the main unit of analysis. Data were collected from representatives of three subunits specifically offering professional degrees within the context of one university. These

subunits represented three of the University's five colleges. Programs were selected based on their accreditation requirements. Participants were selected based on their roles in the accountability process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I invited 20 individuals to participate in the study, 6 representing the University level, 8 representing the college level, and 6 representing the program level. The goal was to have participants from each subunit at the college and program level. I was able to secure participants from the college and program level for the Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and the Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics. I was unable to secure college-level participants for the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design and Digital Media. In lieu of this, I included an additional participant at the program level, after learning of the person's involvement in college-level committees on accountability-related issues.

Another limitation of the study that possibly affected the ability to secure all desired participants pertained to the timeframe of the study. The timing became an issue because the academic term was ending by the time the invitations were sent to potential participants. Some participants indicated difficulty committing to additional time beyond the one-hour interview, and other individuals could not fit my request into their schedules. I did not receive responses from four participants regarding the transcription document reviews, despite follow-up emails requesting the information. Five participants approved the transcripts without any corrections. It is unknown whether this was because the transcripts were flawless or because the participants did not have time to review the documents.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation document is organized as follows. Chapter 1 presented an overview of the problem and an explanation of why this issue was important to research. Specifically, the chapter included the problem statement, the significance of the research, definitions of terms, delimitations of the study, and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 presents a background to the study, which details the issues of accountability in higher education. The review begins with an introduction on the topic, which is followed by three sections: the first section describes the purpose of higher education in the United States; the second section discusses the accountability stakeholders, and the last section discusses the types of data utilized to report quality to all stakeholders. The chapter concludes with the theoretical framework for the study, specifically Scott's (2008) institutional theory representing the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative structures (p. 33). The concept of "legitimacy" is also addressed (Suchman, 1995). In addition to Scott's institutional theory, Easton's (1965) political system model is discussed because it helps provide a broader perspective from which to view the organization.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology used to conduct the study. It begins with the research question, followed by the methodology used to address these questions. Details are provided regarding data collection methods, as well as how the data were collected and analyzed. The chapter also includes sections pertaining to ethical issues, the researcher as a tool, delimitations and limitations of the study, and credibility concerns.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, including the perspectives on the goals of higher education, perspectives of accountability processes at the program level, and accountability processes at the University level.

Chapter 5 includes the conclusion, discussion, and recommendations for practice and policy.

## **Chapter 2: Background to the Study and Conceptual Framework**

U.S. higher education institutions are in the midst of an ongoing challenge: to prove their value and quality to stakeholders and the general public. This phenomenon is not only happening in the United States but also across the world. Economic competition among nations has increased since the 1980s; therefore, countries must be prudent with disseminating their limited resources, evaluating the efficiency and quality of any significant undertaking utilizing these resources, including education (Banta, 1992). As a result, colleges and universities are under pressure to provide evidence of their worth. However, deciding how value and quality are defined in higher education, and determining to whom colleges and universities must be accountable, remain issues of debate. This literature review seeks to provide a brief explanation of why higher education is important to this country and its economic growth, as well as to present an overview of the key government initiatives that have led to significant changes in accountability processes in colleges and universities across the United States. In addition, the stakeholders in defining quality and value will be identified, and ways in which quality and value are defined for the purpose of accountability in higher education will be discussed.

### **Higher Education in the United States**

To discuss accountability in higher education, one must understand the diverse opinions that attempt to define the role of higher education. According to Labaree (2006), “there is a fascinating double dynamic that runs through the history of American higher education, pushing the system simultaneously to become more professional and more liberal” (p. 9). The tension among perspectives builds, as some stakeholders believe higher education exists to prepare students for jobs, while others adhere to the more traditional notion that higher education’s

purpose is to provide knowledge with no necessarily implicit application. The current trend is the focus on professional rather than liberal education. Grubb and Lazerson (2005) developed the term “the Education Gospel” to describe “the idea that formal schooling preparing individuals for employment can resolve all public and private dilemmas” (p. 297). Considering various stakeholders’ extreme perspectives, higher education institutions are faced with the challenging task of establishing accountability processes that satisfy the needs and demands of all involved.

Hunt and Tierney (2006) stated that higher education has been an engine for economy and democracy since the early history of the United States. In his August 4, 1818, Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia, founding father Thomas Jefferson declared that among the benefits of [higher] education, the incalculable advantage of training up able counselors to administer the affairs of our country in all its departments, legislative, executive and judiciary, and to bear their proper share in the councils of our national government; nothing more than education advancing the prosperity, the power, and the happiness of a nation. (Jefferson, 1818, para. 20)

For the most part, Jefferson’s vision has not changed. Future economic growth depends on the educational product of academic institutions. Higher education’s mission is to educate the future work force, to promote cultural awareness, and to further knowledge through basic research and scholarship, ultimately leading to innovation and a competitive edge in a global economy. While that seems to be a common interpretation of higher education’s goals, Carnochan (1993) argued that higher education’s purpose is not clear and without a clear purpose one cannot evaluate higher education’s effectiveness or lack thereof. Per Carnochan,



the universities need not only to understand their own history better and how that history intersects with the larger history of the nation but also (once more) to understand what they have been trying individually and collectively to do—and then, as good sense may suggest, take steps needed to bring ends and means into closer alignment. (1993, p. 126)

However, a common goal for higher education is unattainable because not all institutions are the same.

Educator and former president of Harvard University Derek Bok (2006), in his book *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*, built a case against trying to identify a single purpose for higher education and instead suggested that anyone trying to define a common purpose for colleges and universities should examine higher education pre-Civil War. At that time, he claims, the classical curriculum focused on “mental discipline and character building” (p. 24). Bok also argued that at present “colleges should pursue a variety of purposes, including a carefully circumscribed effort to foster generally accepted values and behaviors, such as honesty and racial tolerance” (2006, p. 66). Hacker and Dreifus (2010) challenged Bok’s (2006) view in *Higher Education?: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It*, emphasizing that the goal of higher education is to “educate.” In the authors’ view, “college should be a cultural journey, an intellectual expedition, a voyage confronting new ideas and information, together expanding and deepening our understanding of ourselves and the world” (p. 3).

In his online *New York Times* commentary, philosophy professor Gary Gutting (2011) stated that there is a “basic misunderstanding—by both students and teachers—of what colleges

and universities are for” (para. 5). While he recognized that educating students is an aspect of higher education, he argued that the “raison d’être of a college is to nourish a world of intellectual culture; that is, a world of ideas, dedicated to what we can know scientifically, understand humanistically, or express artistically” (para. 6). He contended that this concept is only true if “intellectual culture” is important to society (para. 7), as he argued it should be. In a follow-up piece responding to those arguing that the goal of higher education should be to prepare students for jobs, Gutting (2012) argued that preparing students for jobs should be the goal of high schools, not higher education.

However, surveys of the general public support the role of higher education in preparing students for careers. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education issued a report compiled by Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, titled *The Affordability of Higher Education: A Review of Recent Survey Research* (Immerwahr, 2002). Among the themes that emerged from Public Agenda’s review of survey findings was the importance of higher education: “Preparation for jobs and career is seen as the primary role for higher education, but the public also stresses the importance of general skills such as maturity and getting along with others” (p. 3). According to the report, in a telephone survey of 2,011 registered voters, 96% said career training or retraining is very or somewhat important (p. 19). In another telephone survey of 1,014 employed adults, 64% said the primary purpose of higher education is “to prepare students for specific careers” (p. 19). However, in a telephone survey of 1,307 adults conducted by CBS News, respondents who had a child in college took a broader view. When asked what would be more important, a “well-rounded education” or a “well-paying job,” 51% answered “well-rounded education,” and 40% answered “well-paying job” (p. 20).

Trying to simplify, or even identify, the goals of U.S. higher education is a daunting task because these goals can be viewed both from the individual standpoint and generalized to societal and economic benefits. Different types of higher education institutions such as community colleges, traditional colleges, universities with a strong liberal arts foundation, research universities, and nontraditional career colleges all have unique purposes, yet all higher education institutions provide individuals the opportunity to gain necessary knowledge and skills to contribute to society.

A report written by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (1998) explored higher education's benefits, concluding that higher education's array of benefits fall into categories of public economic and social benefits, as well as private economic and social benefits (p. 20). Among higher education's public economic and social benefits are increased tax revenues, greater productivity, increased consumption, increased workforce flexibility, a decreased reliance on government financial support, reduced crime rates, increased donations to charitable causes, and increased quality of civic life (p. 20). Higher education's private economic and social benefits include higher compensation in the form of salaries and benefits, higher employment rates, higher savings levels, better working conditions, personal and professional mobility, improved health, improved quality of life for offspring, and better consumer decisions, among other benefits (p. 20). This study was one of the first reports from the New Millennium Project on Higher Education Cost, Pricing, and Productivity. According to Dickeson (2010), "the primary purpose of the benefits studies was to assist public policymakers in understanding the payoffs for public support for higher education" (p. 49).

When discussing higher education's goals, what students are gaining from their experiences must be examined. In their review of 30 years of empirical research about how colleges affect students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that although there is mixed evidence regarding college's effects on graduates' sociopolitical attitudes, higher education has a positive effect on students' civic and community involvement, in addition to students' racial, ethnic, and multicultural attitudes and values, which are carried through students' adult years (p. 342). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded:

Students learn to think in more abstract, critical, complex, and reflective ways; there is a general liberalization of values and attitudes combined with an increase in cultural and artistic interests and activities; progress is made toward the development of personal identities and more positive self-concepts; and there is an expansion and extension of interpersonal horizons, intellectual interests, individual autonomy, and general psychological maturity and well-being. (pp. 563–564)

While higher education's goals may or may not be clear, Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) research demonstrated that, intentionally or unintentionally, higher education shapes the way students view the world and therefore affects their actions and involvement as adults.

The individual benefits of higher education are one aspect of the discussion; another important facet is higher education's contribution to society. The economic demands put pressure on higher education to deliver a trained workforce to perform new jobs. According to the 2005 National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, also known as the Spellings Commission, 90% of the fastest-growing jobs that drive the new economy will require some form of college education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

In his 2009 Address to the Joint Session of Congress, President Obama stated, “In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a pre-requisite” (para. 59). President Obama emphasized that countries that have an advantage in their education programs will also have a competitive advantage over the United States. The United States cannot afford to have a global economic decline, one reason that quality educational opportunities for everyone are a priority of Obama’s administration. In 2009, the United States fell below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in graduation rates of first-time college students (OECD, 2012).

In a talk at RAND, Andreas Schleicher, the special adviser on education policy to OECD’s Secretary-General, discussed that the United States had dropped in these rankings not because fewer students were graduating but because other countries were graduating more students (RAND, 2012). In OECD’s 2012 Economic Survey of the United States, the nation ranked as one of the highest in income inequality and relative poverty. The organization recommended that the United States invest in educational reform to help disadvantaged students develop the necessary skills to help break this pattern (p. 8). President Obama (2012) has set a goal that by 2020 the United States will have the largest number of college graduates in the world.

The tension continues to build as higher education institutions attempt to meet everyone’s demands, especially considering the diversity of opinions regarding the purpose of a college education. According to Stancill and Frank (2013), Governor Pat McCrory of North Carolina “wants to change the way higher education is funded in North Carolina, focusing more on

careers for graduates and away from academic pursuits” (para. 1). Faculty have criticized Governor McCrory’s ideas, and the University of North Carolina system’s Board of Governors is working on a plan to increase the number of college graduates in the state, as a means to stimulate the state’s economy (para. 14).

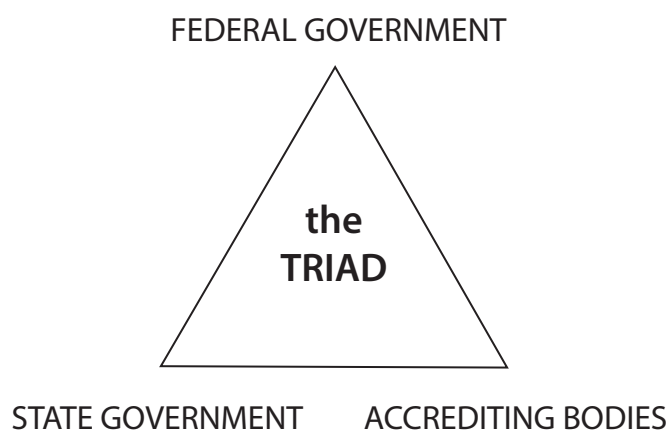
Therefore, the challenge remains for institutions to operate efficiently in difficult economic times and to remain accountable to all stakeholders—federal and state government, parents, students, and employers—while remaining true to the core goals of higher education. However, each institution may define those goals as it sees fit.

### **Major Stakeholders in Higher Education Accountability**

Defining quality as related to higher education is a complex task. The definition depends on who is defining the term and how that information is communicated. What the federal government may regard as a quality institution may be different than what a parent or student considers as such. For example, prospective students and their parents may rely on the college rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report* as their source for quality, perhaps not even considering the criteria used to achieve those rankings. For an accrediting agency, quality is assessed based on an institution’s compliance with the accrediting body standards. As Chun (2002) stated, “When it comes to understanding what students have actually learned in college (and linking learning to assessment of institutional quality), the literature suggests that we are faced with a conundrum” (p. 25). While parents and students may use college rankings published by national publications, bestselling author and journalist Malcolm Gladwell (2011) argued against this method: “There’s no direct way to measure the quality of an institution—how well a college manages to inform, inspire, and challenge its students” (para. 16). According to

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), “students and their parents are making college selections, and state and federal legislators are making public policy decisions, based on a flawed conception of educational quality that prompts misleading comparisons” (p. 642). To put these issues into perspective and to address the issue of quality, one must recognize all the key stakeholders, from both government and public sectors, discussing these individuals’ involvement and focuses.

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) refers to accrediting bodies, state governments, and the federal government as “the triad,” the three main entities responsible for quality assurance in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Figure 1 illustrates this concept.



*Figure 1.* The triad of entities responsible for quality assurance in higher education.

Each of these stakeholders serves a crucial role in maintaining quality. Both state governments and the federal government are concerned with transparency in the use of limited state and federal funds and rely on accrediting bodies to assure that every institution receiving these funds meets higher education quality standards.

### **Regional, National, and Specialized Accrediting Bodies**

According to Eaton (2011), colleges and universities have been relying on self-evaluation to assess the quality and effectiveness of their offerings. This process is known as accreditation and is defined as “a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (p. 1). The process relies on self-regulation as well as peer review, ensuring the three core values of higher education: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and commitment to the institution’s mission. While the accreditation process is theoretically voluntary, in order to qualify for federal funding, colleges and universities must be accredited by a USDE recognized accrediting body.

The accreditation process is unique to the United States, where higher education, for the most part, is self-regulated—unlike other countries, where a federal Ministry of Education or centralized authority controls higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, para. 1). Accountability in higher education can be traced back to the late 1800s, with the establishment of accrediting agencies. According to El-Khawas (2001), the first four regional accrediting bodies were established between 1885 and 1895, representing New England, the Middle Atlantic states, the North Central states, and the Southern states (p. 27). The mission of the accrediting bodies was to establish standards as to what constituted adequate preparation for college-level study, in addition to establishing relationships between administrators in secondary education and higher education.

Edgerton (1997) stated that accreditation serves three purposes: certifying minimum standards, improving quality, and providing the government with evidence that federal funds



were well spent. The accreditation process began at the turn of the century with the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI). Several others followed, including the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), founded in 1912. ACICS is considered the largest national accrediting organization (“About ACICS,” n.d.). Other organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) were formed around the same time, to represent the interests of colleges and universities around the country. All of these entities were private, and therefore not funded by the federal government.

The USDE does not accredit institutions and relies on the work of private, nonprofit educational associations at the national or regional level to develop standards and evaluation criteria. As published in the *Community College Times* (2008), the federal courts “held that actions of the private accrediting body are not considered state or federal action, so its decisions do not fall under constitutional due process requirements” (American Association of Community Colleges, para. 2). Accrediting bodies do not receive federal or state government funding; instead, member dues and fees fund operations.

Accrediting groups conduct peer evaluations to determine if the organization’s standards are being met. When the results of an assessment determine that an institution has met the criteria, accreditation is granted (affirmation). Affirmation is not a one-time process. Colleges and universities are required to go through the process every 5, 7, or 10 years, depending on the accrediting body (Wilkerson, 2012). For example, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) requires a fifth-year interim report but works on a 10-year comprehensive

review schedule (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012a).

Accreditation can be conducted at the college and university level (“institutional”) or be specific to a program (“specialized” or “programmatic”). Specialized accreditation pertains to programs, schools, or departments that are part of an institution. The USDE categorizes these under arts and humanities, education training, legal, community and social services, personal care and services, and healthcare (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The USDE recognizes six regionally accredited institutions: the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), 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).

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS), is the regional agency responsible for accreditation of degree-granting institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. SACS accredits institutions, not specific institution programs. As an example, in addition to SACS accreditation, a college offering degrees in education specific to teacher preparation programs may also request accreditation from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), a professional accrediting organization. CAEP accredits the “professional education unit” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2012, para. 2). In the case of CAEP, this means that the process must include a

review of all teacher and school professional preparation programs (K–12) that an institution offers, regardless of the department or school that houses those programs.

Some professions require individuals to receive their degrees both from regionally accredited institutions and from programs accredited by the professional accrediting body, in order to sit for certification exams and eventually practice in the field. In those cases, the accreditation, while still “voluntary,” is required to practice. For example, the American Bar Association (ABA), Council of the Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, is the professional accrediting body responsible for quality assurance of programs that confer Juris Doctor (J.D.) degrees across the United States. Enrolling in a non-ABA accredited law program may limit the possibilities of sitting for the bar examination and eventually practicing law. But several states, such as California, do not require candidates to have attended an ABA-accredited institution to sit for the state bar, as long as they have attended a California “registered” law program.

In addition to regional and programmatic accreditors, there are also national faith-based accreditors and national career-related accreditors. Faith-based accreditors accredit institutions affiliated with religious groups and are usually nonprofit. According to the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (2013), there are four faith-based national accrediting agencies: The Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), the Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools (AARTS), the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS), and the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS).

National career-related accrediting agencies mainly accredit for-profit career colleges. According to the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (2013), the USDE recognizes

seven: The Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES), the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC), the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET), the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), the Council on Occupational Education (COE), the Distance Education and Training Council Accrediting Commission (DETC), and the National Accrediting Commission of Career Arts and Sciences (NACCAS).

According to the USDE, the accreditation process benefits not only the institutions and the curricula they offer, but also prospective students, potential donors, and federal funding allocation. The following is a partial list of accreditation functions provided on the USDE website:

1. Verifying that an institution or program meets established standards;
2. Assisting prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions;
3. Assisting institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits;
4. Helping to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds;
5. Protecting an institution against harmful internal and external pressure;
6. Creating goals for self-improvement of weaker programs and stimulating a general raising of standards among educational institutions;
7. Involving the faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning;
8. Establishing criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation; and

9. Providing one of several considerations used as a basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance. (U. S. Department of Education, “Accreditation in the United States,” 2013)

The accreditation process requires that the institutions and the accrediting agencies establish quality standards. Based on these standards, each institution or program (depending on the level of accreditation) will conduct a self-study to assess how well the institution is meeting the standards. Following the self-study, a team of peers selected by the accrediting agency conducts an on-site evaluation. After the visit concludes, the team issues the evaluation results and grants accreditation, reaffirms an existing accreditation with or without recommendations, or denies accreditation. During a reaffirmation visit, if an institution is found to be out of compliance with the standards, it may either be placed on probation or receive a warning status and must comply with the standards within the required time, not to exceed two years. The results are then published on the accrediting body’s official website, and a final report is delivered to the institution. Institutions continue to be monitored and go through a reevaluation after a predetermined number of years.

In addition to the USDE, a second, nongovernmental group is responsible for recognizing accrediting bodies, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). According to Eaton (2011), CHEA funds its process through institutional members’ annual fees, while the USDE funds its process through a Congress-allocated budget. Eaton (2011) also explained that “the goals of the two recognition processes are different. CHEA’s goal is assuring that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining and improving academic quality. The USDE goal is assuring that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining the soundness of institutions

and programs that receive federal funds” (p. 9). CHEA, a private organization, serves as a national advocate of academic quality and self-regulation. Its membership consists of 3,000 degree-granting institutions. It recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations (CHEA, 2012).

Accreditation is a semivoluntary process based on peer evaluations; however, the accrediting process is highly criticized. Zemsky (2009) declared that the accreditation process is flawed because each agency has its own methodology and often changes its procedures (p. 186). Cohen and Kisker (2010) expanded on that idea by stating that reviewers’ expectations are inconsistent and the standards themselves limit the institutions’ uniqueness. In addition, the standards focus more on “process and input measures than to outcomes” such as quality of instruction and learning (p. 387). Carey (2007) also commented on the weakness of accreditation and called the process “merely a compliance exercise” (para. 20). According to Carey, Congress halted Secretary Spelling’s efforts to make the accreditation process and the bodies more credible.

The accreditation process is not completely flawed because it does focus on a series of inputs and their quality, such as organizations’ facilities, financial resources, and leadership, indicating when problems exist in these areas. After 1992, the federal government placed increased pressure on the accreditors when problems with fraud and abuse of federal student loan monies became evident (Hartle, 2012, p. 18). Since then, some changes have been made to the accreditation process focus, to accommodate the federal government’s concerns.

## State Governments

State governments are the second entity in the USDE “triad” responsible for quality assurance in higher education. States have a direct interest in the quality of education provided, as the college-educated workforce will have a direct impact on the state and its local economies. However, limited resources are available to fund higher education, a situation that often creates tension between state governments and their higher education institutions.

Institutional programs at state-funded institutions are supported by state and local funds, as well as tuition. According to the *State Higher Education Finance Fiscal Year 2012 Report*, published by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) Association (2013), “At public, two-year institutions, on average just over 75 percent of educational operating revenue is derived from state or local sources, with the remaining 25 percent coming from tuition revenue. At public, four-year institutions, on average well over 40 percent of educational operating revenue is derived from tuition, with the remainder from state and other sources” (p. 22). With the current financial pressures triggering tighter budgetary constraints, states are seeking ways to operate more efficiently.

Another source of tension between state governments and their higher education institutions is autonomy. Many states consider stronger state government oversight as the way to achieve efficiency. Within each state, several entities are involved in decisions regarding tuition increases. In the State of Florida, the Legislature has the authority to set tuition increases (Florida Supreme Court, 2011). According to Toutsis and Novak (2011), resulting from a battle between the Board of Governors (BOG) and the legislature over who had the authority to set tuition, in 2010 Judge Charles Francis ruled that the Florida legislature had the authority (p. 9). After the

BOG reached an agreement with the legislature, the current cap on tuition cannot exceed 15%. The decision to allow the legislature to make decisions regarding tuition increases was appealed at the 1st District Court of Appeal. Former U.S. Senator Bob Graham has been a part of this battle (*Graham v. Haridopolos*), claiming that the process of tuition increases would be less political if it were assigned to the BOG instead of the legislature (Toutsis & Novak, 2011, p. 9). Opponents of the position to allow the legislature to set tuition increases argued that allowing the BOG to set the increases would potentially mean higher overall tuitions. Graham agreed that was a possibility, but he also said, “the Legislature can and should offset those costs by directing more funds to the university system or to students via financial aid” (Giunta, 2012, para. 9). According to the Florida Supreme Court Docket, oral arguments in *Graham v. Haridopolos* were heard on October 4, 2012. On January 31, 2013, the Florida Supreme Court stated “we hold that the constitutional source of the Legislature’s authority to set and appropriate for the expenditure of tuition and fees derives from its power to raise revenue and appropriate for the expenditure of state funds” (Florida State Courts, 2013). The case is now closed.

In Florida, the BOG also has requirements for assessment and accountability of higher education institutions. These requirements dictate the assessment procedures that all public institutions within the BOG’s purview must follow. Among these requirements are the developments of Academic Learning Compacts (ALCs) as part of the assessment processes, which will “ensure student achievement in baccalaureate degree programs in the State University System” (State University System of Florida, Board of Governors, 2013).

In addition to managing the budgets, state governments are responsible for approving higher education institutions to operate in their states. Some states require evidence of quality



standards to be submitted with the institution's application and fees, while other states, such as California, exempt private, regionally accredited colleges and universities from regular state approval process.

### **Federal Government**

Third in "the triad" is the federal government, but, as previously noted, it typically relies on accrediting bodies to recognize the quality of higher education institutions. However, the federal government's involvement in the process has been more evident in recent years, because of greater demand for accountability of higher education institutions that receive federal funding. The following paragraphs discuss key federal initiatives that have impacted higher education funding and accountability over the last 60 years.

President Truman appointed the Commission on Higher Education in 1947. This commission changed higher education from an elite system to a system serving the masses (Boyer, 1990, p. 11). The Commission on Higher Education issued a report calling for higher education to be the vehicle by which all citizens are encouraged to pursue education as far as they are capable, thereby focusing on access, equality, and democracy. As a result of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, higher education experienced significant growth in the number of institutions. This bill provided educational benefits that allowed millions of servicemen returning from World War II the opportunity to either return to or attend college. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website, veterans accounted for 49% of college admissions in 1947 (2012, para. 13).

That volume of students triggered the opening of many higher education institutions, including community colleges and proprietary institutions that would take advantage of the

available funding. According to Cohen and Kisker (2010), close to 1,000 proprietary institutions offering degrees in business, trade, and personal services opened in the 1960s. More federal aid would fuel this growth, when the 1965 National Vocational Student Loan Insurance Act and the 1965 Higher Education Act went into effect (p. 456). Education became available to the masses instead of just to the privileged, changing the dynamics of higher education institutions.

As a result of the rapid growth, the quality of education that some of these institutions offered was questionable (Wellman, 1998). This problem was addressed when the GI Bill was reauthorized after the Korean War in 1952. Recognizing the quality issues that returning soldiers had faced with the original GI Bill, the U.S. Commissioner of Education (now known as the Secretary of Education) recognized accrediting bodies and published a list in an effort to identify quality institutions. The GI Bill was only available to students enrolling in institutions that were accredited by government-recognized organizations (Wellman, 1998, p. 4). The GI Bill was only one major federal government initiative to provide incentives to encourage education. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 also boosted the funding for college students loans and technical training. This effort was seen as necessary for the country to compete with other countries in science and math. The United States needed highly trained individuals, and the only way to achieve that was through quality education.

Following the reauthorization of the GI Bill and the Higher Education Act (HEA), Congress established advisory committees on accreditation. The name of the committee changed multiple times and is currently known as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Improvement (NACIQI). In addition to government involvement in recognizing

accrediting bodies that would insure quality education and the responsible use of federal funds to support quality institutions, the government was concerned with accountability to the public.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the USDE's focus was equality and thus civil rights enforcement. Moreover, additional federal support was provided to encourage college attendance. In 1965, the HEA was signed into law, providing federal funding for scholarships, loans, and job opportunities for young individuals to attend college. This law has been reauthorized several times, each time adding more requirements for transparency and accountability from higher education institutions. The HEA was up for renewal at the end of 2013, the time of the present study.

During the Clinton administration, the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) was enacted to address issues of confidence in the federal government by holding agencies accountable for achieving results, including in education. In 2000, a follow-up performance report was issued on the status of each agency. According to the report *Department of Education: Status of Achieving Key Outcomes and Addressing Major Management Challenges*, an evaluation of the USDE was impossible because not enough data existed to assess the performance (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001). The report concluded that the USDE was taking necessary steps to address the shortcomings of the progress report. One of the steps taken was to “put the student financial assistance programs on our high-risk list because they are vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement” (2001, p. 14). In 2011, President Obama signed an updated GPRA, the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, legislating that government agencies must improve their effectiveness and efficiency by following a performance management plan, with clear goals and outcomes.

Regardless of enacted measures and safeguards, concerns over the quality of U.S. higher education have continued. Per Cohen and Kisker (2010), because “federal and state tuition subsidies and state support of publicly funded institutions now approximate half of all operating revenues, governmental demands for accountability have grown ever more persistent” (p. 521). In 2006, during the Bush administration, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings appointed a commission to examine higher education. The final report addressed the four key issues of access, affordability, quality, and accountability, all of which U.S. higher education still faces (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. xii). The report also called for a higher education reform agenda that would include a transformation of the accrediting process and the focus to be shifted from inputs to learning.

In summary, the United States does not have a specific government entity responsible for regulating or monitoring higher education institutions. For the most part, higher education has been decentralized, allowing individual states and local governments to control their own institutions. States have the authority to grant institutions the license to award degrees. Each institution is self-governed or has a group of elected or appointed governing board members to oversee the organization’s operations. A range of private and public institutions award different degrees, from certifications, associate degrees, and baccalaureate degrees, to master’s and doctoral degrees.

According to the USDE’s National Center for Education Statistics, in 2008-09, 19.7 million students were estimated to be attending one of the 4,409 Title IV degree-granting colleges and universities operating in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010, Table 5). Out of the 4,409

institutions, 2,719 were four-year colleges: 652 public, 1,537 private/nonprofit, and 530 private/for-profit. Title IV institutions are classified as such because each institution has a written agreement with the Secretary of Education that allows the institution to participate in any of the Title IV federal student financial assistance programs (other than the State Student Incentive Grant [SSIG] and the National Early Intervention Scholarship and Partnership [NEISP] programs). (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.a)

Because Title IV institutions receive federal funds, the government is responsible for insuring that the funds are spent in the best interests of taxpayers and stakeholders. For that to happen, accrediting agencies have been established to set the basic standards for quality in higher education institutions.

However, according to CHEA's president Eaton (2012), as the government prepares for the HEA's reauthorization, NACIQI, which advises the U.S. Secretary of Education, has been working on changes that could affect the government's current involvement in accreditation. Among these changes, Eaton (2012) listed the following: "accreditation standards, requirements, and processes are, in the future, to be shaped by a federal agenda," "federally mandated fiscal integrity and performance measures are to be established for higher education institutions and monitored by accreditation," and "federal goals for higher education are to be developed for the use of federal funds" (p. 13). At the time of the present study, the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training was holding hearings on the HEA's reauthorization and

listening to testimony presented by representatives from higher education institutions, accrediting bodies, and students (Education & The Workforce Committee, 2013b).

### **Other Stakeholders in the Accountability Discussion**

Even though the federal government's process only recognizes three stakeholders in insuring the quality of higher education institutions, other independent, nonprofit organizations have played a role in this process.

In 1905, shortly after the institution of regional accrediting bodies, a Congressional act chartered and created the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) to serve as a policy and research center. CFAT funded studies that focused on standards and quality of professional programs, in an effort to provide transparency, educate the public on the topic, and call for program reform as needed. At CFAT's request, Cooke (1910) conducted a study on the cost and outputs of teaching and research in several physics departments across eight institutions of higher education, using the same evaluation as that of factories. Pritchett, CFAT's then president, wrote the report's preface, in which he asserted, "Only good can come to an organization—whether it be commercial, educational, or religious—when a friendly hand turns the light of public scrutiny upon its methods, resources, and aims" (Cooke, 1910, p. v). Cooke recognized that colleges and universities were in part businesses, and he approached the study from that perspective.

Five years later, in 1910, Abraham Flexner conducted a study of the quality of medical schools in the United States and Canada. The report, known as the "Flexner Report," addressed the issues of curriculum, facilities, and faculty, among other areas, and made recommendations

for medical school standards. In Pritchett's introduction to the report, he affirmed CFAT's commitment to the public:

The attitude of the Foundation is that all colleges and universities, whether supported by taxation or by private endowment, are in truth public service corporations, and that the public is entitled to know the facts concerning their administration and development, whether those facts pertain to the financial or to the educational side. (Flexner, 1910, p. ix)

The report fueled the restructuring of medical schools based on standards. A study conducted on legal education in 1928, the Reed Report, had a similar impact. The key to the success of the Reed and Flexner Reports was CFAT's desire to educate the public on the quality of professional programs in the country and to call for restructuring and standardization of medical and legal professional programs, not to become a standardizing agency. Close to 100 years later, Cooke, Irby, Sullivan, and Ludmerer (2006) called on law schools to go through a major restructure, referencing the benefits of the Flexner Report recommendations to medical education. Among the report's recommendations, the authors highlighted the need for flexibility and a willingness to change in order to stay current with the needs and demands of a changing world.

The benefits of the Reed and Flexner Reports parallel those of contemporary accreditation processes, in which nongovernment agencies set standards of quality for educational institutions or specific programs and require these entities to assess their performance against those standards. Accrediting bodies also mandate continuous improvement plans that require institutions or programs to evaluate their governance, processes, and curriculum on a regular basis and to remain accountable to the stakeholders.

In addition to CFAT, a number of other organizations focus on higher education policy, such as the following: the Center for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE), one of the first research centers in the nation to focus on higher education policy, housed at Pennsylvania State University; the Stanford Institution for Higher Education Research (SHER); and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), housed as part of the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada. Along with university-sponsored research, nonadvocacy think tanks such as the RAND Corporation and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) are involved in researching higher education policy-related issues.

Another group to consider in the discussion of accountability are publishers working with other organizations in order to publish college and university rankings, such as those featured in the *U.S. News & World Report*, *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, and *The Princeton Review*. These will be discussed in the upcoming section on “Reporting Quality in Higher Education,” under the subheading “Ratings.” In addition to these organizations, others are indirectly involved in the discussion of educational quality, including prospective students and their parents, current students, and alumni, as well as other supporters of higher education institutions.

Recognizing higher education’s funding sources helps to identify other stakeholders in the accountability discussion. Funding for colleges and universities comes from several sources, including but not limited to net tuition revenue; state, local, and federal appropriations, grants, and contracts; private gifts; investment returns; endowment income; auxiliary enterprises; hospitals; and independent operations (Desrochers & Wellman, 2011, p. 13). Every entity providing any financial support has a stake in the accountability discussion.



## **Reporting Quality in Higher Education**

According to Chun (2002), over the past 40 years, there has been a push to assess the quality of U.S. higher education at state, federal, and institutional levels. In a review of the literature surrounding accountability issues, Chun categorized the four main approaches that higher education institutions use to assess quality: actuarial data, ratings of institutional quality, student surveys, and direct measures of student learning. Each of these approaches will be described in the sections that follow.

### **Actuarial Data**

Input or actuarial data is the type of data reported in systems such as the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), College Portrait, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), College Measures, and the Common Data Set (CDS). These reporting outlets focus on graduation rates, student/faculty ratio, racial and ethnic composition of the student body, endowments, faculty credentials, course offerings, admissions test results, selectivity ratio, and other quantitative information that is relatively easy to collect and analyze with statistical methods (Chun, 2002).

Table 2 summarizes the types of data reporting systems, the data sources, and the sponsors for each. The only reporting system that currently provides information about student learning outcomes is the College Portrait, developed by the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) Program. Student learning outcomes are still a voluntary category in their reports, and for the most part, colleges and universities provide links to their individual websites to show how student learning is assessed at their respective institutions. Student learning quality reporting will be further discussed in the section titled “Direct Assessment of Student Learning.”

Table 2

*Actuarial Data Systems*

Reporting Systems	Data source	Sponsor	Report on Student Learning Outcomes
IPEDS	Institutions	USDOE	No
College Navigator	IPEDS	USDOE	No
CDS	Institutions	Publishers ( <i>College Board, Peterson's, U.S. News &amp; World Report</i> ) + Educational Community	No
U-CAN (Private nonprofit colleges and universities)	Institutions	National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities	No
College Portrait (Public colleges and universities)	Institutions	Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, American Association of State Colleges and Universities + Educational Community	Link to Institutional Information
College Measures	IPEDS Payscale College Board National Student Loan Data System	American Institutes for Research + Matrix Knowledge Group	No

These reporting outlets were created in response to a requirement for greater transparency specified in an amendment to the HEA. All higher education institutions receiving federal aid are required to report data on enrollments, program completions, graduation rates, faculty and staff, finances, institutional prices, and student financial aid and to make these data available to the public and researchers.

The main system used for this process is called the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which is based on the annual data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). This requirement is mandatory for all institutions participating in Title IV:

The completion of all IPEDS surveys, in a timely and accurate manner, is mandatory for all institutions that participate in or are applicants for participation in any Federal financial assistance program authorized by Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended. The completion of the surveys is mandated by 20 USC 1094, Section 487(a)(17) and 34 CFR 668.14(b)(19). (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b)

The data collected are made available to students and their parents through the College Navigator website and to researchers through the IPEDS Data Center. College Navigator presents the information in a user-friendly Web format, with search areas that allow visitors to search by school, state, zip code, major/program, degree level, and institutional type. Users can expand the search to include other criteria such as enrollment, fees, and test scores. The site also contains resources on financial aid, careers, and college preparation tips.

Another system created to provide data to consumers is the Common Data Set (CDS). This set of standards and definitions resulted from collaborative efforts between the higher education community and publishers, including the *College Board*, *Peterson's*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. The goal of CDS is to improve the quality and accuracy of the information provided, to help students who are transitioning to higher education and those involved in helping them. The CDS is not a website; instead, it is a developed set of standards that participating colleges and universities use to report information on their respective institutions' websites.

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) develops and manages the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), a database containing information from the NCES survey and the CDS but presented in a way that makes it easier for the public to find and use (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 2013b). U-CAN only reports data from private, nonprofit colleges and universities. The goal is to provide consumers (i.e., parents and students) with information about colleges and universities. Institutions voluntarily list themselves, and as of March 2013, 849 institutions were participating (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 2013a). The website is designed for specific searches by name of institution, state, and zip code, or for browsing through the list of participating institutions. Resources are also available to help select a college or university, including links to the College Navigator and College Portrait sites.

Public colleges and universities have also collaborated to create The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) Program, to provide information about undergraduate students and their experiences via a Web report called the College Portrait. This report includes basic information

that can be used to compare colleges. The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) and the Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) support the group. The VSA Website enables visitors to search for colleges or universities by name or state as well as within a geographic area, address, or zip code. The site also has a feature that allows college comparisons and additional resources similar to those available via College Navigator and U-CAN.

The Education Trust, a nonprofit organization located in Washington, D.C., has also created a searchable Web tool, College Results Online, to compare institutions of higher education based on graduation rates. This website allows for specific college searches and comparisons. The data reported through College Results Online comes from IPEDS.

Although the goals of each of these reporting systems are positive, these initiatives pressure colleges and universities to provide what is often duplicate information to a number of reporting systems, adding an additional burden to institutional research staff. This staff is also often responsible for coordinating the visits of and reporting to accrediting bodies. As noted earlier, those could include a regional accrediting agency and several professional accrediting agencies, depending on the number of programs an institution offers.

Critics of this type of quality assessment, which is based on actuarial data, emphasize that the use of actuarial data does not speak to the quality of the institution's effectiveness (Dey et al., 1997). In an effort to address these concerns about actuarial data and its limitations in providing a clear picture of institutional quality, a number of commercial assessment tools have been developed to assess dimensions deemed to evaluate student-learning outcomes. The topic of

student learning outcomes will be discussed later in this section, under the subheading “Direct Assessment of Student Learning.”

### **Ratings**

The second form of data that Chun (2002) discussed is ratings of institutional quality, a common resource that is usually featured in the media, especially when new reports are released. The most familiar of these is the *U.S. News & World Report* ratings. This report was first released in 1983 and has continued to gain popularity since then. Webster (1992) said that these rankings have become the most widely read and influential of higher education rankings. The methodology behind these rankings has evolved in response to criticism, an issue in itself.

The *U.S. News & World Report* ratings rely on proxies to measure quality in higher education. According to the report’s website, the latest edition published on September 12, 2012, “is based on up to 16 key measures of quality” that fall into seven broad categories (Morse, 2012). A detailed chart published on the website shows the evaluation methodology and the weight placed on each of the criteria. One of the most criticized aspects of the evaluation is based on what Morse described:

The ratings by high school guidance counselors are weighted 7.5 percent in the National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges rankings. The separate peer assessment rating factor of academic reputation by college admissions deans, provosts, and presidents is weighted 15 percent in the rankings of the National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges. Both sets of weights are unchanged from the 2012 Best Colleges rankings. (p. 4, para. 2)

Critics question the validity of this subjective assessment, based on opinions. How are high school guidance counselors expected to rank National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges fairly when their knowledge of such institutions may be minimal or solely based on hearsay or advertising materials? Would it not stand to reason that private institutions with larger recruiting budgets would be ranked higher, merely because of the sophisticated advertising materials received from such institutions and the personal contact of admissions counselors during high school visits? Similar questions could be raised about the opinions of college admissions deans, provosts, and presidents assessing academic reputation. Too many variables can impact the reporting.

Graham and Thompson (2001) argued that *U.S. News & World Report's* college rankings measure everything but what matters, student abilities:

Analysing U.S. News' data, we found that a high reputation score in the college guide correlates much more closely with high per-faculty federal research and development expenditures than with high faculty-student ratios or good graduation-rate performance, the magazine's best measures of undergraduate learning. (para. 19)

In addition to the popular *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings, several other publications provide ratings of institutional quality. Among these are *Forbes' America's Best*: “The rankings, which are compiled exclusively for *Forbes* by the Washington, D. C.-based Center for College Affordability and Productivity, focus on the things that matter the most to students: quality of teaching, great career prospects, high graduation rates, and low-levels of debt” (Noer, 2012, para. 3).

Other ranking reports are specific to disciplines; for example, *Business Week* ranks business schools on the basis of student satisfaction, post-graduation outcomes, and academic quality. *Newsweek* and its web counterpart *The Daily Beast* rank colleges and universities based on specific criteria such as “most affordable colleges” and “most rigorous colleges” (Newsweek & The Daily Beast, 2012). Chun (2002) concluded that according to the literature, “There is no clear link between such rankings and actual student learning” (p. 20).

Although ranking reports in consumer channels such as the ones discussed in this section are popular, these rankings’ methodologies are evidently problematic. Unfortunately, the media have heightened the visibility of these reports to the extent that they are consulted more than any other resources, such as those reporting actuarial data, student survey results, and student learning outcomes.

### **Student Surveys**

The third category for assessing higher education quality is based on student surveys. These data are collected from actual surveys in which students evaluate their experiences and satisfaction with their institutions. One of the most widely used surveys is the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory™ (SSI). This instrument assesses the satisfaction and priorities of students and the issues that are important to them. One of the incentives for using this tool is that the criteria align with those of accrediting bodies, such as SACCS (Noel-Levitz, n.d., para. 1).

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) College Senior Survey (CSS), developed and administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), provides information on student outcomes. HERI is housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies (GSE&IS) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The HERI



(2013) website states, “Established in 1966 at the American Council on Education, the CIRP is now the nation’s largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,900 institutions, over 15 million students, and more than 300,000 faculty” (para. 2).

Other instruments used to measure student satisfaction include The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE®). Pace and Kuh of the Indiana University Center for the Study of Postsecondary Research, Bloomington, developed the CSEQ. CSEQ evaluates students’ efforts in utilizing institutional resources and opportunities. The CSEQ measures the quality of student experiences, perceptions of the campus environment, and progress toward important educational goals (The College Student Experience Questionnaire Assessment Program, 2007). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE®) is another available tool for measuring student engagement as an indicator of quality. This instrument was developed by the Center for Postsecondary Research (CPR) in the Indiana University School of Education, with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). The NSSE® examines how students spend their time and what they gain from their college experiences.

Navigating through all the instrument options available can be a daunting task, as colleges and universities can select from over 250 instruments. A curated list of these assessment tools is available through the Measuring Quality in Higher Education website. This website was developed as an update to Borden and Zac Owens’s 2001 report, “Measuring Quality: Surveys and Other Assessments of College Quality,” which was published by the American Council on Education and the Association for Institutional Research (The Measuring Quality Inventory, 2012).

When viewing any assessment tool, an institution or individual must consider the reliability and validity of data collected using the instrument. Borden and Zac Owens (2001) cautioned colleges and universities about this issue but still advocated for use of the instruments:

Despite all the limitations presented by issues of reliability, sample representativeness, and validity, the results of these assessments still can be quite useful for internal improvements and external accountability. But campus administrators need to understand these limitations to make informed decisions. (p. 12)

According to Chun (2002), the main issue with student and faculty surveys derives from the reliability of the self-reported data. Ouiment, Bunnage, Carini, Kuh, and Kennedy (2004) concluded from their study of students completing the College Student Report that student self-reports about nature and frequency of their behaviors can be considered accurate indicators of activities that students recently experienced. However, researchers such as Pike (1999) warned against the use of self-reported data because of the possibility of the halo effect, in which students mask the relationships between college experiences and gains.

Student surveys only capture students' perceptions of their experiences in colleges and do not provide enough information to be a sole source to speak to educational quality.

### **Direct Assessment of Student Learning**

The last category identified by Chun (2002) for evaluating quality in higher education is direct assessment of student learning. This process involves analyzing course grades and using standardized tests to assess general academic or subject matter knowledge. The problem with using a test to assess learning has been documented extensively, as researchers have evaluated the impact of standardized testing resulting from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Standardized

testing has come under great criticism because the NCLB placed standardized test scores as the primary indicator of school quality, affecting the way students, teachers, principals, and schools are evaluated (Ravitch, 2010, p. 15). As an illustration, O'Malley Borg, Plumlee, and Stranahan (2007) found in a study of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) that African American and Hispanic students from low socioeconomic groups are less likely to pass the FCAT. This is one of many studies exploring possible biases in standardized testing.

As specified in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, "Testing programs for institutions can have high stakes when aggregate performance of a sample or of the entire population of test-takers is used to infer the quality of service provided, and decisions are made about institutional status, rewards, or sanctions based on test results" (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999, p. 139). No matter how reliable, valid, and fair the test may be, these data only capture a snapshot of the student's achievement and not a true representation of the student's skills. While there is no immediate call for standardized testing to be used as a single indicator of quality in higher education, institutions must recognize the potential issues associated with this method of quality assessment.

Advocates for authentic forms of assessment, such as the portfolio, consider the evaluation of artifacts as a solution to the issue of standardized testing. Herman and Zuniga (2003) defined a portfolio as "a collection of student work that can exhibit a student's efforts, progress, and achievements in various areas of the curriculum" (p. 137). Even though this is a simple definition, when combined with the word "assessment," the term can become complex. The portfolio assessment has different meanings and serves different purposes, depending on the

type of portfolio created. Many variables affect portfolio evaluations, including but not limited to who selects the work included, what the presentation format is, what criteria are used to evaluate the work, who evaluates the work, and what evaluators do with the information they gather (Davies & LeMahieu, 2003).

Banta (2007) suggested that portfolios could help illustrate growth over time instead of relying on the one snapshot of student performance captured by a test. She argued that reliability could be achieved by using faculty-developed scoring rubrics. Scoring rubrics are “the established criteria, including rules, principles, and illustrations, used in scoring responses to individual items and clusters of items” (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999, p.182). If faculty use the same evaluation criteria and are trained in using the rubrics, the results should be as intended by the test developer(s), producing scoring reliability.

Stecher et al. (1997) pointed out that the more authentic the assessment, the harder it is to develop, and the more costly it is to implement. In addition to the cost issue, training needs to be conducted to increase process reliability and validity. One of the main complaints against portfolio assessment is that the results of portfolio assessment are not reliable and valid (Koretz, 1998; Mills, 1996).

Some professional accrediting bodies do require student portfolios as part of their assessment criteria. Such is the case with NCATE (2012): “NCATE Standard 1 requires teacher candidates to demonstrate that they are able to ‘facilitate student learning of the subject matter . . . through the integration of technology.’ (One way to demonstrate this could be through artifacts in candidates’ teaching portfolios)” (“Does NCATE Require Digital Portfolios,” para. 1). This is

a step toward recognizing the importance of an authentic assessment process when assessing student learning.

Alternate forms of assessment, such as performance and portfolio assessment, are more costly to implement. In an era in which tight budgets are impacting higher education, portfolio assessments may not be the most practical solution to evaluate student achievement. Therefore, colleges and universities are using tests to assess student learning, regardless of the controversy surrounding standardized testing, in an effort to address the limitations of other evaluating systems, such as those previously discussed (actuarial data, ratings, and student surveys).

An example of the types of tests that colleges and universities use to assess student learning is the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) developed as a standardized test by ACT. This test is intended to measure student learning outcomes and general education program outcomes (ACT, 2013). A similar tool is the ETS® Proficiency Profile. Institutions that are a part of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) have selected the ETS® Proficiency Profile test as their gauge of general education outcomes (Voluntary System of Accountability, 2011)

Those are just two of the many tools available to assess student outcomes. The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) and the National Center for Education Statistics sponsored the development of the *NPEC Sourcebook on Assessment: Definitions and Assessment Methods for Communication, Leadership, Information Literacy, Quantitative Reasoning, and Quantitative Skills* in an effort to provide a guide to commercial assessment tools. This sourcebook is intended to help institutions select a tool from those available. The sourcebook provides information on commercial tools available to evaluate each of four domains:

communication, leadership, information literacy, and quantitative reasoning (Jones & RiCharde, 2005).

While student learning outcomes reporting is not currently required, many institutions have chosen to include some form of learning assessment as part of their assessment plans. As previously stated, VSA's College Portrait is the only data reporting mechanism that lists student learning outcomes for public colleges and universities.

For example, the University of North Florida (UNF) lists the ETS® Proficiency Profile, as well as a state requirement known as the Academic Learning Compacts (ALCs), on its Office of Institutional Research and Assessment Web page. The Florida Board of Governors and university policy require each program to publish the ALCs and an explanation of how the criteria are evaluated for each program offered. As part of the College Portrait profile, UNF also acknowledges that many programs it offers are accountable for student learning based on their professional accreditors' guidelines (College Portrait, 2013).

Finding an appropriate tool to assess student learning is complex. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), housed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, developed a framework to help institutions share evidence of student learning based on the assessment data they already compile. This framework is based on six key components of student learning assessment, and the evidence of these is provided on institutions' websites for the benefit of all stakeholders. The six components include student learning outcomes statements, assessment plans, assessment resources, current assessment activities, evidence of student learning, and use of student learning evidence (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012).

Perhaps the addition of an instrument that could be used to gather reliable and valid data about student learning outcomes would contribute to creating a more comprehensive picture of an institution's quality. However, as already discussed, relying on standardized testing to evaluate student-learning outcomes presents issues. Banta (2007) argued, "A substantial and credible body of measurement research tells us that standardized test of general intellectual skills cannot furnish meaningful information on the value added by a college education nor can they provide a sound basis for inter-institutional comparisons" (para. 29).

Similarly, Shavelson (2007) argued that "we must design assessment systems to collect both snapshots of performance at one point in time (achievement) and over time (learning)" (p. 33). Although a clear solution has not manifested for how higher education institutions can demonstrate the quality of what they offer, this issue continues to be addressed by all involved stakeholders.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on two complementary theories: Easton's political systems model and Scott's institutional theory. Easton's political systems model emphasizes the environmental pressures organizations face and how, in order to survive, organizations need to manage these pressures. This framework views the organization as an open and adaptive system. Scott's institutional theory helps clarify the environmental expectations by viewing how the external pressures translate into internal practices that conform to cognitive, normative, and regulative structures. Each of these structures views the organization's legitimacy differently, which helps further explain the challenges higher education institutions face.

### **Easton's Political System Model**

Easton's political system model (1965) is based on four general concepts: system, environment, response, and feedback. The last two, response and feedback, set Easton's model apart from other system models. His model is based on a series of inputs from the environment and outputs based on how the system processes and responds to the inputs. System refers to a system of behaviors instead of a single entity, which is different from the environment in which the system exists. More specifically, it is an open system that must cope with environment-generated demands. This environment influences the system and can add stress to the system that internal stress can compound. The ability of a system to survive the stresses (inputs) created by the demands and the support of the environment are based on the system's ability to respond to them in the form of outputs: "persistence of a system, its capacity to continue the production of authoritative outputs, will depend, therefore, upon keeping a conversion process operating" (Easton, 1965, p. 132).

Under Easton's political system model, one must evaluate a system by analyzing the following variables: (a) nature of inputs, (b) conditions under which the variables will create stress in the system, (c) the condition of the environment that creates the stress, (d) how others systems have coped with stress, (e) information feedback, and (f) the role outputs play in the coping and conversion process (1965, p. 132).

From the literature provided in this chapter, it should be evident that the issue of accountability in higher education is complex, because numerous stakeholders in the discussion, with different perspectives and expectations, all have a role in the environment affecting the system. For instance, the accreditation process, which is considered a self-regulatory and



voluntary process, is truly not voluntary in light of federal, state, and local government expectations and the changes that are yet to come (Eaton, 2012).

Colleges and universities are under pressure to demonstrate the “quality” of their services, using a number of proxies that may not necessarily represent quality. The pressure (inputs) comes from all angles—federal, state, regional, and national accrediting bodies; professional accrediting bodies; and prospective students and their parents, among others. In challenging economic times, institutions are required to meet each group’s expectations by reporting the required data (outputs/evidence). The resources needed to keep up with the requirements continue to increase, as the demands for further documentation and evidence grows.

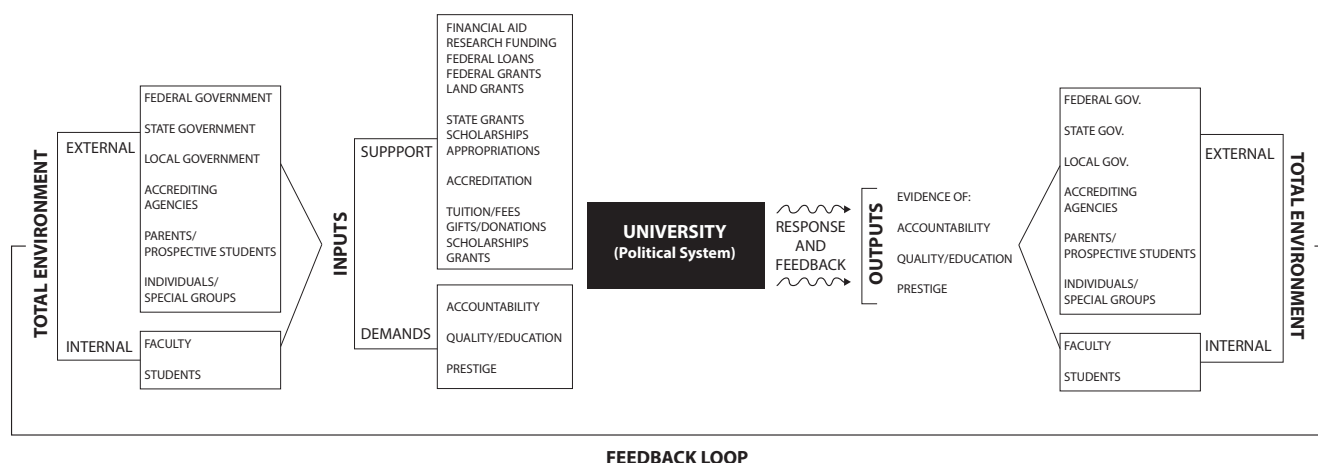


Figure 2. Easton’s political system model. Adapted from *A Framework for Political Analysis* by D. Easton, 1979. Reproduced with permission of The University of Chicago Press.

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamics of this process. On the left side and on the right side is a list of the external and internal system stakeholders. External stakeholders include the government and individuals, and the internal stakeholders include faculty and current

students in the system. Each of these stakeholders provides a series of inputs in the form of support and demands on the system. The support provided is contingent on the system's ability to respond to the demands. The institution has to respond to these inputs to manage the stress that the stakeholders impose on the system. The wavy lines indicate that the response and the feedback generated provide information for authorities to determine the output type (evidence). The process does not end at that point. The stakeholders then provide feedback on the outputs, in the form of additional inputs. The system's ability to utilize these additional inputs to shape future behaviors allows the system to survive. As Easton (1965) stated, "without feedback and the capacity to respond to it, no system could survive for long, except by accident" (p. 32).

### **Scott's Institutional Theory**

Scott's Institutional Theory framework provides a useful model to view the issue of accountability in higher education and the demands of the environment. As institutions of higher education continue to aim to communicate their legitimacy, it is important to recognize that the complexity of the environment in which they operate has a direct effect on how legitimacy is viewed through each of the stakeholders and communicated by the institution.

Scott (2008) stated, "Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (p. 48). Looking at higher education as a combination of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures provides a more comprehensive view of how higher education institutions must respond to the demands from the environment in which they operate, to enable them to justify the legitimacy of higher education from each perspective. As seen in the background of this study, the stakeholders involved in the discussion represent each of these

perspectives. Table 3 represents this concept, expanding on the basis of compliance, mechanisms, indicators, and basis of legitimacy.

Table 3

*Regulative, Normative, and Cultural-Cognitive Structures in Higher Education*

Principal Dimensions	Structure Types		
	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-Cognitive
Stakeholders	Federal, state & local government	Accrediting agencies Parents & prospective students Individuals/ Special groups	Faculty Students
Basis of Compliance	Expedience	Social obligation	Taken for granted
Mechanisms	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
Indicators	Rules, laws & sanctions	Certification & accreditation	Prevalence, isomorphism
Basis of Legitimacy	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Culturally supported, conceptually correct

*Note.* Adapted from *Institutions and Organization: Ideas and Interest* by W. R. Scott, 2008. Reproduced with permission of SAGE.

For example, federal and state government decisions and requirements for higher education represent regulative agents in the operations of each institution, while professional organizations and accrediting bodies represent normative agents. Although regulative and

normative structures are different, they can also be “mutually reinforcing” (Scott, 2008, p. 53).

For instance, the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations of Accreditation*, published by SACS (2012b), includes a section specific for federal requirements that specifically states the following:

The federal statute includes mandates that the Commission review an institution in accordance with criteria outlined in the federal regulations developed by the U.S. Department of Education. As part of the review process, institutions are required to document compliance with those criteria and the Commission is obligated to consider such compliance when the institution is reviewed for initial membership or continued accreditation. (p. 38)

The general public, philanthropists, donors, and faculty members may represent cultural/cognitive agents also having an impact on the way higher education operates (i.e., its behavior). Ultimately, these agents may not necessarily be aligned with each other, and their demands and expectations may conflict (Scott, 2004). For example, in the case of the general public, the basis for legitimacy may be the quality and scope of athletic programs offered at the institution, while for the faculty members, programmatic accreditation for their school or department may be the basis for legitimacy.

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), institutions that are able to succeed in complex environments by becoming isomorphic within them “gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive” (p. 352). The reason is that institutions use external assessment criteria and socially constructed definitions to deliver what the environment wants, thus keeping the institution safe from failing. Isomorphism therefore comes with consequences, as Meyer and Rowan (1977)

outlined: “(a) they incorporate elements which are legitimated externally, rather than in terms of efficiency; (b) they employ external or ceremonial assessment criteria to define the value of structural elements; and (c) dependence on externally fixed institutions reduces turbulence and maintains stability” (p. 349).

Suchman (1995) defined legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Suchman further explained that legitimacy is a socially constructed concept, as it represents the intersection of institutional behaviors and how stakeholders view these behaviors. Institutions cannot satisfy all stakeholders and their expectations, but are capable of presenting their activities as “desirable, proper, and appropriate within any given cultural context” (p. 586).

According to Scott (2008), legitimacy is contingent on the structure from which it is viewed: regulative structures view legitimacy based on the ability to conform to legal requirements; cultured-cognitive structures views legitimacy based on the common, agreed upon definition; and normative structures view legitimacy based on moral and value expectations. The struggles with defining what quality represents in higher education, as presented in this section, are clear examples of how perspectives drive the way quality is reported.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on how the regional, comprehensive university studied managed external demands and recognized and responded to the diverse perspectives and expectations, a process required for the institution’s survival. Specifically, this study focused on identifying the

stakeholders impacting the institution's environment and determining how legitimacy was defined and communicated to each of these stakeholders.

This chapter, which provided the background to the study, was intended to present a view of the ecology impacting higher education. Institutions compete for limited resources and have to meet the demands of the environments in which they operate. The way institutions respond to these demands depends on their internal regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures. Understanding the complex and often conflicting demands that the environment imposes provided a comprehensive perspective of how higher education institutions survive and highlighted how essential it is for these institutions to have a strong legitimacy strategy to communicate to all stakeholders.

The next chapter details the research methods of the study, including the research question, design, data collection, analysis, ethical issues, concept of the researcher as a tool, limitations, generalizability, and credibility techniques.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

The descriptive embedded case study method (Yin, 2009) was the ideal approach to investigate the subject of this study—accountability in higher education as related to the complexities of the environment. Merriam (1998) said, “A descriptive case study in education is one that presents a detailed account of the phenomenon under study” (p. 38). The purpose of this embedded case study was to gain an extensive and in-depth perspective of how personnel at a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States were substantiating the quality of their undergraduate professional programs and the success of their graduates in response to the environmental stakeholders’ expectations and demands.

Donmoyer (2000) built the case for the advantages of the case study methodology: “accessibility,” “seeing through the researcher’s eyes,” and “decreased defensiveness” (pp. 61-65). A case study design allows the researcher to experience unique situations vicariously. In the case of the present study, that meant that I could gain a perspective about the complex phenomenon of accountability in higher education, specific to the institution studied, through the perspectives of the individuals directly involved with the phenomenon. In turn, I was able to craft a rich and detailed description of the accountability processes and the challenges faced by those involved in those processes at the institution. Therefore, the reader is able to view the phenomenon through my perspective. These concepts will be further explored in the Research Methodology section of this chapter.

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 outlined the complex environment impacting higher education institutions and how the demands imposed (or expected) by the environment define the institution’s legitimacy. For example, the complexity of the demands from regional

accrediting bodies, professional program accrediting bodies, and all levels of government—and the need to meet all of these groups’ standards—can create stress within the organization, as it attempts to manage all the different expectations. The system’s ability to manage and conform to the expectations of the different perspectives allows institutions to survive. This survival comes at a cost in time and resources. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) stated, “The more highly institutionalized the environment, the more time and energy organizational elites devote to managing their organization’s public image and status, and the less they devote to coordination and to managing particular boundary-spanning relationships” (p. 363).

This study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of how this process worked in the selected regional, comprehensive university in the Southeast United States. I selected the descriptive case study methodology, specifically an embedded case study design (Yin, 2009, p. 50) in which a single organization was studied based on the analysis of three embedded units within the organization. In order to gain a comprehensive picture of the “institutionalized environment” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) of the University, the subunit participants provided data that spoke to the program level and how faculty and administrators responded to the demands of the regulative systems, normative systems, and cognitive systems. Collectively, these data, combined with the perspective of administrators at the college level and university level, helped create the detailed description of the main unit of study, the University, while avoiding the common pitfall of embedded case studies, as described by Yin (2009), “when the case study focuses only at the subunit level and fails to return to the larger unit of analysis” (p. 52).

The embedded units (or subunits) were three professional programs within the University: the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design and Digital Media, housed in the



College of Arts and Sciences; the Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics, housed in Brooks College of Health; and the Bachelor of Arts in Education in Elementary Education, housed in the College of Education and Human Services. The three subunits selected provided a comprehensive view of the complexities of the process as it related to the institution.

All the subunits of investigation represented professional programs offered at the institution. The selection of professional programs was intentional, because professional units tend to have external demands for accreditation that traditional academic units do not have. Because the focus of the study was accountability, I determined it would be best to focus on the subunits that had prescriptive accountability requirements, involving multiple stakeholders in the accountability discussion. Program outcomes for professional programs are easier to articulate because the outcomes are usually expressed in terms of traditional measures, such as graduation rates, job placement, and/or graduate school acceptance.

### **Research Question**

The overarching research question was as follows: How is a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States substantiating the quality of undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates?

### **Research Design**

Merriam (1998) stated, “the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). The goal of this study was to investigate the complexity of an accountability process at a regional higher education institution.

The nature of this study warranted the embedded case study design because it met the three requirements specified by Yin (2009), “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question was being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator had little or no control” (p. 13). The primary research question addressed the first requirement of having a “how” question: How are faculty and administrators at a regional, comprehensive university in the Southeast United States substantiating the quality of their undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates in response to environmental stakeholders’ expectations and demands? The second requirement was that the “how” question was asked about a contemporary set of events. In this particular case, the accountability process was contemporary, as discussed in Chapter 2 regarding the background of the study. The last requirement was the issue of the investigator’s control. In this study, I had no ties to the actual process; I am a student at the institution and not employed by the institution. Based on the theoretical framework used for the study, it can be argued that I represented the perspective of the cognitive structure and am therefore indirectly involved in the accountability discussion. However, in terms of control, I had no direct influence.

### **Ethical Issues**

The potential risk for participants in the study was minimal, as all participants were adults working for the institution studied, in roles directly relating to the investigation topic. Participation in this case study was voluntary, and candidates were asked to sign an informed consent form when they chose to participate in the study (Appendix B). This form contained information on the purpose of the study, in addition to who the information was for, how it would be used, and what risks and/or benefits were involved for the person being interviewed.

Also, a copy of the survey and interview questions were provided at the time the consent form was presented for the participants' review.

During the interviews, participants were reminded about their right to not answer any questions they did not want to answer and that they could ask to speak off the record. After the interviews concluded, participants were offered a digital copy of their interview transcript for their review and comments. In addition, I offered to email an electronic copy of the study abstract and a link to the UNF library Digital Commons, where participants could download the electronic copy of the approved document. After the study is completed and approved, it will be available online through the UNF Digital Commons, where anyone affiliated with the institution can access the electronic document.

### **Researcher as a Tool**

My interest in this topic is based on my experience in higher education. I have been a college professor in the area of graphic design for the past 12 years (and a graphic designer for 22 years) and have held the position of chair and program director at two separate higher education institutions, one of which was a specialized, private nonprofit college and the other a for-profit institution. I have been involved with the accrediting process specific to the standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). I have been part of the accreditation committees during the preparation and site visits in a period of substantive change and provided necessary documentation to speak to the quality of the programs I was leading.

I was also an assistant professor in the design program from 2006-2008 at the University where this study was conducted. I left this position five years prior to the present study. During that time, I was also involved with the accreditation process, but from the faculty perspective,

and participated in a preliminary visit from a consultant for the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD). At that time, the department was considering going through the accrediting process specific to the disciplines offered.

During my doctoral studies in educational leadership at the same university, I continued researching the topic of accountability and assessment in higher education. I attended a workshop at Teachers College Columbia University, sponsored by the Assessment and Evaluation Research Initiative (AERI) Institute, titled “Quality Assessment, Accreditation, and Accountability in K–12 and Higher Education Systems.” The presenter was Dr. Judy Wilkerson from Florida Gulf Coast University. Dr. Wilkerson was very familiar with the organization I used for this study, because she had been a past consultant for the College of Education and Human Services on the issue of assessment and accreditation. Dr. Wilkerson’s presentation provided me with the foundation I needed to conduct this study. Based on my experiences in higher education and with the accrediting process, I consider myself a “connoisseur” (Eisner, 1998) in the area of assessment and accountability in higher education.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitations of this study were that the study only captured one point in time, and the perspectives of the participants involved with the process of accountability and accreditation were only captured at that one point in time. This was the nature of the case study methodology. The study was delimited to a single higher education institution, the University of North Florida and to representatives of three subunits specifically offering professional degrees within the context of that university. These subunits represented three of the University’s five colleges.

Programs were selected based on their accreditation requirements. Participants were selected based on their roles in the accountability process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Delimiting the study to a single institution introduces a key limitation in that the results will not be immediately generalizable to other institutions; however, steps have been taken to promote *transferability* to other settings. Delimiting the study to professional programs leads to a limitation in the study as the perspectives presented are not representative of all programs at the University. In addition, delimiting the study to three subunits representing three of five colleges at the University leads to the limitation in perspectives of all professional programs at the University.

Another limitation for the present study is that the issues surrounding accountability practices are constantly changing. The perspectives captured during the present study only represent the perspectives based on the latest knowledge of each participant that may not be based on the latest developments. The nature of higher education and its constant state of change, as institutions strive to meet their environment demands, often leads to reappointments and restructuring. This in and of itself can be stressful to the system. Although this study attempted to capture an accurate description of how faculty members and administrators in this regional university substantiated the quality of their programs, this information was gathered from the experiences of those reporting as participants recalled the activities and were able to provide the necessary details through their own perspectives. The perspectives of some study participants were based mainly on experiences prior to joining UNF and had little to contribute to the discussion on the accountability processes specific to UNF. Other participants only had

experiences within the context of the University and the exposure to the topic of accountability specific to their roles within the organization.

Within the timeframe of the study, two participants left their positions. While I was able to collect data from the participants prior to them stepping down, the participants were not available for follow up questions after the interviews. One of the two participants did respond to the request to review the transcript and provided some edits while the other one did not respond.

In addition to this, the issue of accountability was sensitive to some participants, as evident from concerns expressed by some participants prior to their agreeing to be part of the study. Some felt that they were not as informed as they should be about the processes. One prospective participant declined the invitation to participate, citing a lack of knowledge about the topic. Several participants edited content out from the transcripts and or requested to speak off the record about certain issues.

Another limitation was that participants would not or did not share complete details of the process, due to personal or professional concerns or their own biases. Their reporting may have been influenced by their ideas of what answer was anticipated for a given question, preventing them from providing an authentic response.

Due to the timeframe of the study, which coincided with the end of an academic year, some invited participants declined to participate in the study because of scheduling conflicts.

All attempts were made to remain neutral in the data collection. I assumed the role of a researcher wanting to know the details of the process, to gain a well-rounded understanding of how accountability processes impact an institution of this size.

### **Research Methodology and Data Analysis**

This study used the embedded case study design (Yin, 2009), with the goal of crafting an extensive and in-depth description of how faculty and administrators at a regional, comprehensive university in the Southeast United States (University of North Florida) substantiated the quality of their programs and the success of their graduates in response to stakeholder expectations and demands. The research methodology and data analysis were systematic and detailed. Following, I will explain how I selected the sample for the study and arrived at my participant pool. I will also discuss the collected and obtained data for the study. In addition, I will explain in detail the data analysis and how the results informed the rich and thick descriptions presented in Chapter 4 and the synthesis and conclusions presented in Chapter 5. I will conclude with describing the credibility and trustworthiness techniques utilized to promote quality in the present study.

#### **Sample**

I selected three professional programs for the study, the Elementary Education program, the Didactic Program in Dietetics, and the Graphic Design and Digital Media program at the University of North Florida. Each of these programs was selected based on their accreditation requirements. The Elementary Education program required program accreditation by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Florida Department of Education and in addition had specific accountability requirements towards the federal and state governments. The Didactic Program in Dietetics was selected because the program was accredited by the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND), and accreditation which was not required but desired. Finally Graphic Design and Digital Media was

selected because it did not have a specific program accreditation. At the time I was selecting the participant pool, I was unaware that the State of Florida, specifically the Board of Governors (BOG), required that all programs offered by the State University System (SUS) that were eligible for programmatic accreditation seek the accreditation. I originally identified the program accreditation as a voluntary accreditation and not mandatory.

The three subunits programs represented three of the five colleges at the University. The Elementary Education program was part of the College of Education and Human Services (COEHS), the Didactic Program in Dietetics was part of the Brooks College of Health (BCH), and the Graphic Design and Digital Media program was part of the College of Arts and Sciences (COAS).

The sample was a purposeful sample. I identified prospective participants from each program from studying information available on the University website. I specifically looked for job titles and information posted on the participants' bios indicating a connection with assessment practices and accountability processes at the University.

The purposeful sample provided me with the participant pool of 20 individuals who could speak specifically about the accountability processes in their respective programs or colleges. I was able to secure participants at all levels of the university system—university administration, college administration, and program level. The diversity of the participant roles allowed for different perspectives (Yin, 2009, p. 187). The data collected supported multiple perspectives, yielding a stronger case.



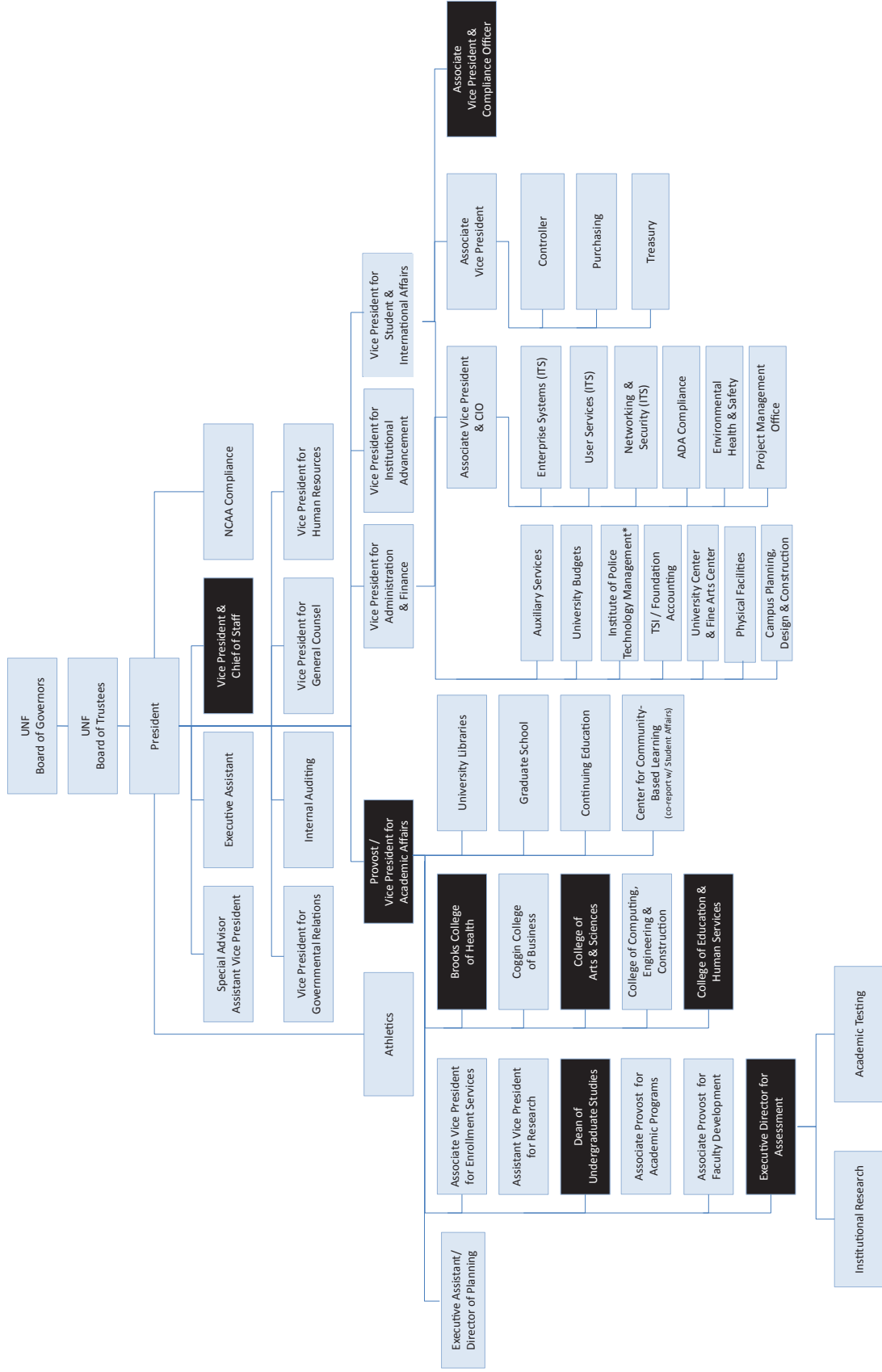


Figure 3. UNF Abbreviated Organizational Chart (University of North Florida, 2013i)

Figure 3 illustrates an abbreviated institution organizational chart and the specific positions identified as important to the study. This figure illustrates that two Tier 1 participants were direct reports to the University president, and all others, with the exception of one, were part of the division of Academic Affairs. Academic Affairs representatives were responsible for most of the accreditation and accountability issues in academic institutions.

I received UNF IRB approval on April 18, 2013 (Appendix A). After IRB approval, I sent the official email invitation to 20 prospective participants, including those with whom I had already conversed and who had expressed interest in being part of the study. I wanted to ensure that even though these individuals had already expressed interest, they were receiving the same level of detailed information included in the approved email text that other prospective participants received. I did include a more personal note with those invitations, alluding to prior conversations, as some had taken place 3–4 months prior. In the email invitation, I provided my contact information and indicated that anyone with questions could contact me. I had email exchanges with four prospective participants, who wanted additional information in order to fully grasp what the study was about and what their involvement would be. The prospective participant list was divided as follows: six invitations were sent to Tier 1 university-level participants, eight invitations were sent to Tier 2 college-level participants, and six invitations were sent to Tier 3 program-level participants. An additional Tier 3 participant was added later when recommended during one of the interviews; therefore, the final total of invitations sent was 21 (see Table 4). After I received replies from prospective participants indicating interest in being part of the study, I provided the informed consent form (Appendix B), background survey (Appendix C), and the sample interview protocol (Appendix D) for the prospective participants’

review. I received three email replies from prospective participants, expressing concerns that they were unsure if they could answer the provided questions with any level of accuracy. After a few email exchanges and in one case, a follow-up phone call, all three participants felt confident that they would be able to contribute to the study. Two additional participants expressed concerns regarding the timeframe for the data collection and the individual time commitment. These concerns were addressed to the prospective participants' satisfaction, and interview times were scheduled. The total number of participants who agreed to be part of the study was 16.

Table 4

*Invited Participant List Divided by Tier and College Affiliation*

Tier No. & Level	Total No. Invitations	Positions	Affiliations	Final No. Participants
1: University	6	Administrators	University	6
2: College	3	Administrators	COEHS	3
	3	Administrators	COAS	0
	2	Administrators	BCH	1
3: Program	2	Representatives	BA, Elementary Education	2
	3	Representatives	BFA, Graphic Design and Digital Media	3
	2	Representatives	BS, Nutrition and Dietetics	1

Two Tier 2 college-level representatives declined due to time constraints, one Tier 2 college-level representative declined based on what the individual described as limited involvement with the most recent accrediting body visit, and two individuals (one from Tier 2

college-level and one from Tier 3 program-level), while willing to participate, could not meet during the data collection timeframe. I invited an additional participant based on recommendations from several Tier 3 participants. I had representatives in Tier 2 and Tier 3 from the Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Dietetics and its corresponding College, the Brooks College of Health (BCH), and the Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and its corresponding College, the College of Education and Human Services (COEHS). I was only able to secure participation from Tier 3 from the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design and Digital Media program because all three Tier 2 representatives from the College of Arts and Sciences (COAS) declined to participate. Additional attempts were made to identify other participants who could speak from the Tier 2 perspective for the COAS, but after conversations with the dissertation committee chair, Dr. Katherine Kasten, we determined that the perspectives of past administrators in that role may not be relevant to the study, considering that the embedded case study captures a specific moment in time. Based on participants' recommendations, an additional participant was added in Tier 3 from the Graphic Design and Digital Media program. This individual was added because of the individual's involvement with Tier 2 college-level accountability discussions, including participation on college and university committees. The final participant count was 16: six from Tier 1, four from Tier 2, and six from Tier 3.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection included data collected during the interviews and extant data obtained from publicly available reliable sources such as government websites and the University website. I began the process of gathering publicly accessible data at the start of the dissertation process and while defining my research question, a year and half prior to this final report. I conducted

extensive research on publicly available resources representing the institution's legitimacy profile.

In the process of obtaining this information, I had informal conversations with several individuals in each of the selected programs. After I identified the potential list of interview participants, I contacted them via email to introduce myself and provide an overview of study and to gauge their levels of interest in participating. That initial contact occurred 3–4 months prior to the actual interviews. Some of these email exchanges led to meetings. I met the majority of my participants and informally conversed with them about the topic, while I awaited IRB approval. I provided my background information for the sake of transparency, because I had taught at the institution 5 years prior to conducting the study and some participants had either heard my name or met me in person. Conversations were candid and informative. Some participants offered to let me view additional materials at the time of our meetings. I always asked if the documents and/or artifacts participants were willing to share were public record and respectfully declined any offer to view materials that were not, or when the participant was unsure if the documents were public record or for internal use only. Because of the nature of a public institution, most documents were public record, so sharing of these documents did not compromise the study's integrity.

Data collection specific to interviews and surveys were conducted during the months of April and May 2013. Sixteen interviews were conducted, averaging 55 minutes each. Each interview recording was transcribed and sent to the participants within 72 hours of their interview for review. I asked for comments, changes, and deletions to be returned within a week of their receipt of the transcript documents. If I did not receive a response, I informed

participants that I would consider their nonresponse permission to proceed with the information collected as is. I received no response from four participants, no changes from five, and minor editorial changes from seven participants. Only one participant edited out specific statements.

None of the 16 participants completed the preliminary background survey prior to the interviews. Approximately 5 minutes of the scheduled interview times were used to complete the short survey, either prior to the formal interview or immediately after, based on participants' preferences. The preliminary background survey contained questions about participants' experiences with the accountability processes as part of their positions at the University or other institutions (Appendix C). This information helped me understand the participants' level of experience with accountability processes and how their perspectives may be influenced by their experiences outside the institution.

Out of coincidence, the participants were evenly split between males and females. Half of the participants had experience with accountability processes at other institutions, and the other half had experienced accountability processes only at UNF. Only five participants had served on external review committees for accreditation teams or program reviews. All but two participants had attended some form of workshop or training specific to accountability or accreditation processes and found those to be informative and helpful with their roles in the accountability process at UNF, mainly by providing information on the latest expectations and changes specific to the accrediting bodies.

Interviews were semi-structured, departing from the interview protocol (Appendix D) and allowing for additional or rephrased questions to be asked. The interview protocol was developed and tested with a peer from another institution, which allowed me to pilot the questions to make

sure the wording was clear and precise. This individual had experience with the accountability processes at another institution and had also been a SACS reviewer. He has served in all three tiers (program, college, and university) and was able to give me feedback on the questions from each of those perspectives.

During the interviews, I sought to be a “creative listener” (Wolcott, 2005, p. 111), becoming more of an integral part of the conversation during the interview, more so than just asking questions. Interviews became candid conversations, and participants seemed to be comfortable speaking with me, at times even using humor in their responses. I had a genuine interest in what participants were saying and in making sure I understood what they were saying. At times, I paraphrased questions to help participants understand what I was trying to find out, as some interview questions were worded in ways that did not connect with all participants. For example, one participant had originally requested to omit a series of questions prior to the start of the interview because she did not feel she knew the answers. I asked the participant if I could explain what I was trying to find out, to make certain that she understood what I was asking; she acquiesced to my request. After I explained, the participant had a better understanding of the intent and agreed to answer all of the questions.

Prior to each interview, participants were reminded that they were permitted to speak off the record. I also reminded them that if they shared something, and they later realized they should not have shared that information, they could make any necessary changes during the transcript review. During the interviews, only one participant asked to speak off the record. At that point, all recording devices were turned off, and no notes were taken. I resumed recording

when the participant indicated that I could do so. And only one participant revised the interview transcript to remove statements made.

As a novice qualitative researcher and as an educator with some firsthand experience with the accountability process, I was vigilant regarding my own biases during the interviews. I acknowledged that subjectivity in my interpretation was part of this research (Peshkin, 1988, p.18). In order to be mindful of my subjectivity, I kept a journal during the data-gathering phase and during the analysis phase, to document any possible biases that may have informed the way I viewed the data. At times I caught myself trying to diagnose problems and generate solutions, instead of simply listening for information. I attribute this tendency to my design training—I listen to identify opportunities for improvements in processes relating to communication problems. I noted this observation in my journal, and some of these types of observations became practical implications of the study.

During the interviews, I also made notes to highlight sections or comments that reminded me of other responses, which were starting to show some potential patterns. Additionally, I made notes of materials I needed to reference because participants recommended the resources, or I had already reviewed the resources as part of my preliminary research of additional documents and artifacts. I reviewed these other materials within 24 hours of conducting the interviews.

Each interview was recorded using three devices: a digital data recorder, a laptop equipped with a microphone, and digital recording pen. Specifically, I used Livescribe™ Sky™ wifi smartpen, Audacity® software on the laptop, and an Olympus® digital recorder. The smartpen uploaded the recording via wifi to the Web-based password-protected site Evernote® for later retrieval. The Audacity® recordings were stored on a password-protected laptop and



were transferred as encrypted documents between the transcriptionist and me. For permanent storage, the encrypted files were stored on the UNF SkyDrive®.

I transcribed 10 of the 16 interviews, and a transcriptionist transcribed the remaining six. I reviewed all transcripts prior to sending them to the participants for review. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix E) to protect the data and the participants' information.

Upon completing the data collection, I proceeded with the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

After I either received transcript approval or no response, I coded each transcript using a priori (descriptive) codes based on keywords from the interview questions and from the theoretical frameworks of the study. As keywords, I used *process*, *challenges*, *stress*, *stakeholders*, *regulative*, *normative*, and *cognitive*. I also used the phrases *assessment of student learning*, *philosophy toward accountability*, *communication*, *integrated model*, *goals of higher education*, and *description of UNF*. Additional codes were added using open coding, specifically in vivo coding based on my journal notes where I had written specific keywords or phrases that stood out from the interviews, including *shelf* and *additional workload*. Some of these in vivo codes helped identify in-context words or notes that would enable me to see further patterns in the responses. I also highlighted excerpts that I could use to support my descriptions.

I used MAXQDA® data analysis tool (version 11) for all the coding (MAXQDA – Qualitative Data Analysis software, 2013). The software provided a convenient way to manage and code the transcripts. The interface was user friendly; therefore, the learning curve was minimal. I added my transcripts to the document system pod in the software. I organized the

transcripts by tiers to allow for relationships to be explored by one tier at a time or by multiple tiers. The application allowed activation of individual documents or sets at a time. I utilized the color-coding feature to group subunit participants together within tiers and across tiers. This facilitated the cross-section analysis of the data for each subunit, as well as within tiers. The document browser pod displayed next to the document system pod showed the activated documents, allowing for in vivo coding or coding using the a priori codes. I built the codes in the application's code system pod as individual codes and also as sets. This allowed me to group codes based on my theoretical framework. I used the word frequency finder feature to view the results, but upon reviewing the findings, I determined that these results offered no value to my study. I also was able to highlight any text I felt could potentially be used as an excerpt.

I was confident in utilizing MAXQDA®, as Bright and O'Connor (2007) and Ganza (2012) concluded that the results of computerized text analysis are similar to results from traditional text analysis. The benefit of using computerized text analysis was that it reduced the amount of time needed to process the data (Bright & O'Connor, 2007). The tool proved convenient because it allowed me to examine hundreds of pages in a fraction of the time that it would have taken me with a traditional system of printed documents.

I started the data reduction by focusing and funneling. I first focused on specific a priori codes to arrive at the rich details specific to each code. A priori coding helped organize the data based on the typology that would facilitate the descriptive part of the data reporting for this embedded case study. I coded one tier at a time, and then I moved through each tier specific to the subunit. Table 5 shows an example of the two-phase process that I followed for the BA in Elementary Education subunit. The process shown was repeated for all three subunits.

Table 5

*Example of BA in Elementary Education Subunit Data Analysis Process*

Subunit: BA Elementary Education

A Priori Code: *Process*

Specifics: Descriptive Component of the Study

**Phase I of Data Analysis**

Tier 3: Program

- Step 1: Reviewed and coded individual Participants 3A and 3B responses. Looked for anything pertaining to *process* in each response.
- Step 2: Compared Participants 3A and 3B responses, seeking commonalities, differences, supporting statements (possible quotes), and facts describing the process.
- Step 3: Crafted a preliminary description based on the collective responses.

Tier 2: College

- Step 1: Reviewed and coded individual Participants 2A, 2B, and 2C responses. Looked for anything pertaining to *process* in each response.
- Step 2: Compared Participants 2A, 2B, and 2C responses, seeking commonalities, differences, supporting statements (possible quotes), and facts describing the process.
- Step 3: Crafted a preliminary description based on the collective responses.

Tier 1: University

- Step 1: Reviewed and coded individual Participants 1A–1F. Looked specifically for anything related to process in the subunit in question.
- Step 2: Compared Participants 1A–1F responses, seeking commonalities, differences, supporting statements (possible quotes), and facts describing the process.
- Step 3: Crafted a preliminary description based on the collective responses. (Tier 1 participants' responses were not as specific to the unit, to allow for a relevant subunit description relating to the specified code.)

### Phase II of Data Analysis

- Step 1: Compared Tier 3 preliminary description to Tier 2 preliminary description, seeking commonalities, differences, supporting statements (possible quotes), and facts describing the process that would help craft a more comprehensive description of *process* specific to this subunit.
- Step 2: Edited the preliminary description to include additional information. Reviewed additional artifacts and documents as appropriate to corroborate what was stated in interviews.
- Step 3: Added anything relevant from the Tier 1 contributions to the crafted description.

After all transcripts were coded, axial coding was utilized to group the coded passages into sets that matched the two theoretical frameworks and the key themes of the research question. For example, as keywords I used *process*, *challenges*, *stress*, *stakeholders* from the Easton's political system model, and *regulative*, *normative*, and *cultural-cognitive* from Scott's institutional theory. I also used the phrases *assessment of student learning*, *philosophy toward accountability*, *communication*, *integrated model*, *goals of higher education*, and *description of UNF* from the key themes from the interview questions. When I crafted the interview questions, I had linked the questions to these specific terms.

For the purpose of connecting the findings to the main unit of analysis, I utilized strategies from cross case analysis methodologies to develop the University description (essentially, looking across the individual embedded cases to identify consistencies and patterns to arrive at general statements representative of the unit of study and not specific to the subunits). In addition to coding using MAXQDA®, I wrote notes for each tier and code in a notebook,

which I referenced heavily when crafting descriptions and finding additional patterns. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process.

For the findings, I crafted a set of statements based on the patterns I identified from the data analysis. I looked at each statement and searched my data for “nonexamples” (Hatch, 2002, p.157), to make sure I could justify these with the data I collected and to identify any contradicting statements. As I crafted the detail-rich description for each tier, I referenced the matrices I had created, in addition to the highlighted excerpts. Because the present study was a descriptive study, I relied heavily on triangulation to ensure accuracy and richness of the information presented. I crafted descriptions based not only on the data collected during the interviews, but also from the artifacts and documents previously reviewed, in order to get a complete picture. No single participant told a complete story. I used excerpts to bring participants’ voices and the human elements into the descriptions I crafted.

To interpret my findings and arrive at a higher level of analysis, I drew conclusions across tiers and codes based on my theoretical framework. I used the theoretical framework as lenses from which I viewed my findings. I referenced the background of the study in the conclusion and provided any contrasting information.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

In order to present a credible and trustworthy study, I used a number of credibility techniques including member checks, informal peer debriefing, triangulation, and thick rich description. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the implementation of credibility techniques serves two purposes:

First, to carry out the inquiry in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced, and second, to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities studied. (p. 296)

Member checks occurred during the data collection process as I requested for participants to review the interview transcripts and provide any corrections or edits participants deemed necessary.

The transcriptionist became a peer reviewer. She developed an interest in the topic from the start of the transcriptions, especially after transcribing two interviews within a short time period, when she started to recognize certain terminology that was repeated. We scheduled meetings to exchange files and discuss what was surfacing from the interviews. I found it helpful to have her perspective, especially considering that she had no prior experience with the topic of accountability. Her involvement helped promote a neutral perspective.

I used thick, rich description to help the reader understand the accountability processes at the program level and the University level. I followed the descriptions with interpretation explaining the findings (Patton, 2009). Specifics on the rich and thick descriptions and findings can be found in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study.

I used data triangulation to confirm the findings. I looked at published information available through reliable and credible sources online such as pages on the United States Department of Education, the Board of Governors website, the Florida Legislature, NCATE, ACEND, NASAD, and the University of North Florida websites to supplement and/or corroborate what participants stated. I also reviewed the materials available from the list of

extant data included in Appendix F. In addition, after the interviews, I asked participants to corroborate any information I added from the online sources and to provide additional resources if needed. For example, I requested from one of the participants to provide a copy of the ALCs grading rubric which contained wording specific to performance-based funding.

After crafting the thick rich description for the Elementary Education program, I requested a Tier 2 participant to provide feedback on the description. This participant had provided the most comprehensive description of the accountability processes. This member-checking technique helped confirm the rich thick description crafted. I also referenced descriptions published in NCATE reports and the department and college website prior to requesting the participant's review. I contacted another Tier 2 participant to clarify information provided. This process yielded information that helped provide a more accurate portrait of each of the subunits. For the Didactic Program in Dietetics and the Graphic Design and Digital Media program, since the processes were far less extensive than the Elementary Education processes, the descriptions were simpler to confirm by reviewing published information on the accrediting body websites and the program web pages. In addition, I contacted participants in Tier 3 of both of these programs to confirm or clarify information I was including in the description.

I kept a well-organized database of the coded, approved transcripts, and three volumes of additional documents and artifacts collected as part of the process. These data will be stored for three years in case an audit trail is necessary. The database will also be available to other researchers interested in reanalyzing the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 204).

### **Generalizability and Transferability**

For the purpose of this study, generalizability was viewed from the perspective of the schema theory, meaning that the role of the research is not to identify a correct interpretation of the accountability process at the institution, but instead, as Donmoyer (1990) stated, “to expand the range of interpretations available to the research consumer” (p. 194). Case studies allow for vicarious experiences (Stake, 1995), permitting researchers to draw experiential understanding from those involved in the study. This understanding is crucial for the success of this type of study because the goal is to expand the cognitive structures of the reader, in order to transfer to other scenarios. Donmoyer’s use of the schema theory is loosely based on Piaget’s concepts of assimilation, accommodations, integration, and differentiation (1990, p.91). The case study provides the information needed for readers to go through these stages, allowing them to apply the case study findings to their own situations. According to Merriam (2009), “it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context” (p. 51). For someone with no basic knowledge of the accountability process in higher education, the findings should at least be informative. For individuals with prior knowledge of the process, the value will come from the *transferability* of the perspective provided based on the theoretical framework used for this study.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the rationale for the selection of the case study method to explore the phenomenon of accountability in higher education specific to one institution, the University of North Florida. Additionally, the details regarding the selection of the three subunits—professional units within the University context—were explained. The specifics of data



collection methods for this particular study have been discussed in the form of a detailed narrative. Credibility and trustworthiness were also discussed in this section.

The next chapter discusses the interpretation and analysis of the data. Specifically, I will present the rich and thick descriptions of the accountability processes for each of the subunits and the University.

## **Chapter Four: Interpretation and Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep and rich understanding of the accountability process at the University of North Florida (UNF), a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States. Specifically, I was interested in how members of this organization substantiated the quality of undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates.

The background to the study provided information on the complexities associated with defining quality and success in higher education. In an effort to narrow down these complexities, I sought to view the issues through the lenses of Easton's political system model, which I selected as one of the theoretical frameworks for this study. I wanted to understand three concepts specific to each subunit studied: processes associated with the reporting of program quality and student success (inputs/outputs), stakeholders involved in the process (environment), and challenges encountered throughout the process (stress).

In this chapter, I will be presenting rich and thick descriptions of these three concepts in the context of the accountability processes for each of the subunits selected for the study as expressed by representatives from each of these programs: BA in Elementary Education, BS in Nutrition and Dietetics, and BFA in Graphic Design and Digital Media. I used excerpts from the interviews to bring the participants' voices into the descriptions. In following the nature of the embedded case study methodology, at the end of the chapter I will return to the unit of analysis, the University, to provide the perspective of how the processes, stakeholders and challenges relate back to accountability processes at the institution. Before discussing the findings based on processes, stakeholders and challenges, I will provide a brief overview on the research

methodology as a reminder of the embedded case study model. I will also describe the labeling system developed to reference participants in this chapter. In addition, I will present the participants' perspectives on the role of undergraduate education. According to the literature review I conducted for this study, there are two distinct perspective on the goals of undergraduate education in the United States: one being the goal of preparing students for the workforce and the other to develop the knowledge. These two different perspectives are at the root of many challenges institutions face when speaking of the quality of their programs. For the present study, it was important to learn the participants' perspectives about the goals of higher education to set the foundation to understanding how the participants' perspectives may influence their views towards accountability processes in their units and the University.

### **Methodology Overview**

This study was an embedded case study (Yin, 2009). I selected the following programs as the subunits of investigation: BA in Elementary Education, BS in Nutrition and Dietetics, and BFA in Graphic Design and Digital Media. Each of these units represents a different college at the University of North Florida and has unique accountability processes based on the specifics of each discipline. The Elementary Education program was the most complex system of the three units studied as faculty and administrators report to a number of stakeholders including accrediting bodies and state and federal governments. The Graphic Design and Digital Media program has the least structured accountability process, as, at the time of the present study, it was not accredited and only followed the institution's internal accountability processes. The Nutrition and Dietetic program fell in between these two as it did report to both an accrediting body and the institution's accountability process.

It was important for the study to view the perspectives within specific programs and across different administrative levels at the University to be able to get a complete description of the accountability processes as viewed by program participants and administrators at the institution. To remain true to the embedded case study model and avoid the common pitfall in using the embedded case study model of not returning to the main unit of analysis, the analysis of the subunits will provide the foundation from which to build the rich and thick description of the accountability processes at the University (Yin, 2009, p. 52).

### **Reporting**

For the purpose of data reporting and protection of identities, I labeled each participant using a two-part unique identifier. The first part is a number representing the tier and the second part is a letter representing the individual. For example, for Participant 2A, the number 2 represents a Tier 2, college level participant, specifically an administrator in the College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) and the letter A corresponds to the order in which the person was placed on the list of participants. I did not include titles, as titles would make it easy for identities to be revealed. Table 6 shows participants and their general role, program, and college or university affiliation.

### **Perspectives on the Goals of Higher Education**

As expressed in the introduction to this chapter, participants' perspectives on the goals of higher education could inform participants' views on the accountability process at the University. Considering the present study focused on professional programs, it was possible for some of the perspectives to be focused on the extreme views of what higher education should

achieve as described in the literature reviewed for the present study, that is, career preparation or knowledge generating.

Table 6

*Participant Coding Chart*

Tier	Participant Code Number = Tier Letter = Individual	Position	Affiliation
Tier 1: University	Participant 1A	Administrator	University
	Participant 1B	Administrator	University
	Participant 1C	Administrator	University
	Participant 1D	Administrator	University
	Participant 1E	Administrator	University
	Participant 1F	Administrator	University
Tier 2: College	Participant 2A	Administrator	COEHS
	Participant 2B	Administrator	COEHS
	Participant 2C	Administrator	COEHS
	Participant 2D	Administrator	BCH
Tier 3: Program	Participant 3A	Representative	BA, Elementary Education
	Participant 3B	Representative	BA, Elementary Education
	Participant 3C	Representative	BFA, Graphic Design and Digital Media
	Participant 3D	Representative	BFA, Graphic Design and Digital Media
	Participant 3E	Representative	BFA, Graphic Design and Digital Media
	Participant 3F	Representative	BS, Nutrition and Dietetics

Upon evaluating the responses, it was clear the members of the institution valued undergraduate higher education as both a vehicle for preparing students to become contributing members of society as well as developing the skills to enter the workplace or pursue graduate studies. While the language varied some between individuals, the message was the same. Participants 1A and 1C both explained that their perspectives on the goals of undergraduate higher education were different while they were pursuing their own undergraduate degrees, when they placed the focus more on the job skills than on the liberal arts despite experiencing integrated curriculum that included a required general education component in addition to the discipline specific curriculum. Participant 1A noted that as he reflected back on his education he realized he missed out on truly valuing the first two-years of his education stating:

One of my dreams was that upon retirement, I would go back and take my freshman year and my sophomore year again and really open the book! . . . and really get into it . . . to say “wow, that’s fascinating . . . isn’t that interesting!”

Similarities in terminology used were found among representatives of the College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) when describing the purpose of higher education. Upon further investigation, I discovered that the terminology used aligns with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the accrediting body that accredits the unit specific to “Unit Standards #1: Candidate knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions” (NCATE, 2012). For example, Participant 2A stated: “The purpose of higher education when it comes to undergraduates is to prepare citizens with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to help our society move forward with what is going around the world.” Notice the words *knowledge*, *skills*, and *dispositions* in Participant 2C statement. Participant 2A’s commented:

I think there are probably at least two components: One is to yield a well-educated person. The idea of university – the word ‘universe’ – a wide array of knowledge being offered to the person so that they can be generally well-educated. The other piece of undergraduate education would be preparing a person to become competent in the world of work. That might mean specific professional education. It might also mean developing skills, habits, even intangible types of things, and more the dispositional kind of things that would help a person be successful in the work place.

Perhaps the coincidence in the terminology used was influenced by the accrediting body language that was somewhat prescriptive for this group in the COEHS; however, as I consulted with a COEHS member, he suggested that the opposite was true – the language developed from the profession and the accrediting bodies adopted the language to establish standards. This last perspective suggested that there is greater collaboration between the accrediting bodies and the practitioners (between the normative and cultural-cognitive structures) than I anticipated based on the theoretical framework used for this study. At the time of the present study, NCATE was in the process of finalizing a two-year process of merging with the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) via a process informed by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). As part of that process, the Commission on Standards and Performance invited the education community to comment on the new standards for educator preparation programs. Although the members of the commission will have the ultimate say on what standards are adopted, the invitation for commentary suggested a more collaborative effort between the accrediting body and the practitioners.

Participants from all three tiers shared the same values described in the institution’s published mission without a specific reference to that statement. The institution’s published mission stated:

The University of North Florida fosters the intellectual and cultural growth and civic awareness of its students, preparing them to make significant contributions to their communities in the region and beyond. At UNF, students and faculty engage together and individually in the discovery and application of knowledge. UNF faculty and staff maintain an unreserved commitment to student success within a diverse, supportive campus culture. (University of North Florida, 2013n)

UNF's mission referred to the "discovery and application of knowledge" and the "civic awareness of its students," honoring both the liberal arts curriculum as well as the professional aspects of many of its programs.

All participants agreed on the perspectives of the goal of higher education and most offered the opinion that UNF is doing a good job in contributing to this goal, such as Participant 1F who stated

We are able to take [students] that might typically not be able to have that access and put them in a position where they can develop those skills, those talents, and then get out of here, hopefully, and find a way to put those [skills] into action.

Other participants expressed concerns with what they considered the disconnect between general education and professional programs' curricula. Each participant who alluded to this topic represented a different tier in the study, suggesting that the issue was not isolated to the views of one tier of the University structure.

I think we are doing a reasonable job of balancing the two things [liberal arts education and professional education]. I think our professional schools are well positioned. They train our students for those specific professions. I think our nurses are among the best to graduate in this area. I think our teachers are among the best that graduate in Florida. I don't know all of our professional programs well enough to be able to stamp them the same way, but I hope they are doing as well. We also have some liberal arts faculty who are engaged and are doing a really good job. I think we may fail there more than we do in



the professional area. It is a little bit because of the faculty. Because the faculty who are very passionate about literature, history, and areas like that only want to teach upper division courses so they can really get a bit meatier, so I am not sure we always have our best faculty in the first two-years. I don't have any basis to make this statement. This is just a guess on my part. I also think society doesn't help students understand the importance of those first two-years. . . . (Participant 1A)

From Tier 2 college level Participant 2A observed that

Also, there has been – I hate to say disconnect between gen ed and the major studies – but we have not focused as much on making that connection as dramatic or deliberate as we might have possibly done so. It's almost like we got folks that do the general ed and have been doing that really well and they have contact with everyone to say is this helping prepare the person for the major, but there is not really that context of how does general ed follow through with the student if the student goes to the professional area. I would say that characterizes our institution fairly well.

Participant 3E, representing Tier 3 program level, explained the efforts the institution has put forth to assess the general education curriculum and how the general education curriculum connected with the upper level curriculum. Participant 3E had been involved with that process for eight years. He claimed the process began while the institution was preparing for the 2009 Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaffirmation visit and had continued in relationship to the state general education curriculum reform initiative. This initiative was part of the Postsecondary Education House Bill 7135 Chapter 2012-134 that passed on April 30, 2012, requiring Florida College System and State University institutions to include 30 semester hours of general education courses by 2014-2015 academic year instead of the previous requirement of 36 semester hours. This requirement had forced institutions to revisit their general education curriculum (Florida Senate, 2013c). In the August 2012 Provost's newsletter delivered to the UNF community, the provost stated the following: "General education reform is being driven, as I understand it, at least in part by a desire to gain efficiency within and across the state's higher

education systems” (University of North Florida, 2013l). The general education reform at UNF seemed to have been driven by internal and external interests; however, there were conflicting demands between stakeholders.

At the time of the study, Senate Bill CS/CS/SB/1720 requested for the 36 hours of general education core requirements to be reinstated due to SACS informing institutions that such change would require a substantive change request to remain compliant with the accreditation requirements. As stated in the Florida Senate Bill Analysis and Fiscal Impact Statement:

The bill reinstates the general education credit hour requirement to 36 semester hours from the proposed 30 hours. The core general education requirements will remain at 15 semester hours while the institutionally-specific portion will be provided the additional six hours of flexibility, thereby raising that component of the general education requirements to 21 semester hours. The reinstatement of the 36 credit hour requirement will also address accreditation concerns identified by SACS. (Florida Senate, 2013a)

The bill passed in 2013 (Florida Department of State, 2013).

The issue of general education curricular requirements seemed to be governed by external stakeholders; however, internal stakeholders also expressed concerns with the connection of the general education curriculum and the curriculum in professional programs.

From the expressed comments from participants in all three tiers of the present study, there seemed to be a lack of integration between the liberal arts component of the education and the professional programs. Even though all participants valued both perspectives of the educational experience, there seemed to be an opportunity for additional dialog between

professional program leaders and general education leaders on facilitating a more integrated approach for the educational experience.

### **Perspectives on the Accountability Processes at the Program Level**

The accountability processes varied significantly among all three subunits included in this study from prescribed and overlapping processes to what Participant 3E referred to as “native reporting mechanisms.” The main reason for the variation in processes had to do with the level of accrediting or approval bodies each unit was required to report to in addition to the requirements of the University’s institutional effectiveness plan. The institutional effectiveness plan was a common plan for all programs at the University. The standardization of the plan seemed to allow for easier reporting to the BOG and to SACS.

The institutional effectiveness information was then reported to SACS in compliance with Core Requirement 2.5 but more specifically to Comprehensive Standard 3.3 which stated:

The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas: 3.3.1.1 educational programs to include student learning outcomes. . . . (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012b)

The information was reported to SACS during the reaffirmation visit and an update would be part of the fifth-year interim report.

The institutional effectiveness information was also reported to the Board of Governor (BOG) in compliance with 8.015 Regulation which required a comprehensive assessment plan which included “developing, implementing, and reviewing Academic Learning Compacts”

(ALCs). The ALCs were implemented in 2004 as a mechanism to report what students should learn in their programs and learning is measured (Florida Board of Governors, 2013a).

### **Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education**

Beginning with the most extensive accountability process from the three subunits selected for the present study, the Elementary Education (K-6) program accountability processes were structured in terms of the requirements and expectations of the State of Florida Department of Education, NCATE, and the Federal Department of Education (specific to Title II).

Annual reports were issued to all of these groups and also to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). COEHS utilized a combination of manual and electronic processes to help facilitate the collection and reporting of data. According to Participant 2A, “We are required both by federal Title II of Higher Education Act as well as the Florida Department of Ed, in the vein of transparency and accountability, we must publicly post those data.” This information was published via the COEHS website home page. Anyone visiting the website could download the detailed report. At the time of this study “Effectiveness and Accountability Report 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012: An Executive Summary,” a 29-page detailed report, was available for download.

In terms of assessment, the students interested in pursuing an elementary education degree had to meet not only the University admissions requirements but also college-specific requirements. These requirements were as follows: candidates must have earned an Associates of Arts degree from a Florida institution, a GPA of 2.5 or higher, passing scores for all 4 parts of the State of Florida General Knowledge exam, and completed three college specific prerequisite courses with a *C* grade or higher (University of North Florida, 2013d). Once accepted into the

program, students had to meet *critical tasks* that were embedded throughout the course of study. These critical tasks were based on knowledge, skills, and dispositions of each candidate as defined by each accrediting group. These tasks were aligned to the standards from both NCATE and FDOE, which were not always the same. Course syllabi were extremely detailed in outlining the goals and objectives for each course and which critical tasks students were required to complete in order to successfully pass the course. Faculty members developed assignments and corresponding rubrics to evaluate the critical tasks. These critical tasks were in addition to course specific goals and outcomes, which were also assessed in each course via a number of activities, tests, and other deliverables. Faculty members were required to provide remediation until students passed the critical tasks prior to allowing a student to complete the course. Faculty reported on these critical tasks via the Electronic Candidate Assessment Tracking System (ECATS), a custom electronic database (University of North Florida, 2013c).

ECATS allowed administrators to track and report on the critical tasks assessment points based on the requirements of the accrediting bodies. In addition to class specific assessment, student learning and progress were monitored through other check points built in the program such as evaluations of field-based clinical experiences (two levels) and the capstone internship course. These were all part of the community-based education requirements with the Florida Department of Education and aligned with the community-based initiative that was embedded through the UNF experience. In addition to standard assessment tools, students were required to keep an e-portfolio documenting their experiences and accomplishments during their internship. Students used Nuventive® iWebfolio™ portfolio system for managing their

portfolios. Faculty and administrators had access to students' portfolios through this tool for assessment purposes.

Data were collected after students completed their program and took the Florida Teacher Certification Exams (FTCE). According to the 1012.34 Florida State Statutes, "A performance evaluation must be conducted for each instructional employee and school administrator at least once a year and twice a year for newly hired classroom teachers in their first-year of teaching in the district" (Florida Department of Education, 2013). Those results were reported back to the institution once a year as first-year employment data. In addition, graduates of the UNF teacher preparation program who were employed as teachers in public schools in the State of Florida continue to be assessed on the Value Added Model (VAM), which was based on the teacher's students' performance in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). According to Participant 3B, if a graduate was not performing, the program could be asked to provide remediation to the graduate post-graduation in the first two-years following their degree completion. Participant 3B added that while it could happen, UNF's program was doing very well in preparing teachers, and faculty had not had to provide any remedial education.

In addition to the assessment data collected in the individual classes, the FTCE data, and the program completers' first-year employment data, the COEHS also collected and reported data on graduation rates, GPA, and retention rates. Furthermore the department sent out satisfaction surveys to their program completers as well as employers' satisfaction surveys. The combination of all these mechanisms provide the necessary data to speak of the success of the teacher preparation program as required by the accreditors. However, when it came down to

defining success, the focus was on the students and their readiness and ability to teach.

Participant 2C shared thoughts on this by stating the following:

I think success is one of those words that will be defined depending on what the goals of each unit is. Success here is not the same as it is in the College of Business, or College of Health. . . . For us, the way we measure success, we first put a lot of time in making sure that our graduates are well prepared. We have a very strong curriculum, and we make sure that we provide those safety nets for students so that when they leave us, we know that they are well prepared. It goes beyond a grade, beyond that GPA, or a letter A. It goes down to whether they have the knowledge or skills that are needed to be the teacher in the district or anywhere in the world. That is how we measure success.

Running parallel to all of these reporting systems, the COEHS also needed to report information via Nuventine® TracDat™ system, an assessment management tool used by the institution to track data on the progress of Academic Learning Compacts. At the time of the present study, the electronic databases were not integrated even though the technology was capable of such integration. Participant 1C commented:

Actually because TracDat™ is so flexible and configurable, I can actually set up structures for individual units or add reports for individual units that would configure the data in a way that would make their accreditors happy. TracDat™ is still sufficiently new that not many units have taken me up on that offer yet. That is something that I will be pushing more. There are simple things I encourage them to do. But if they just make their program learning outcomes identical to their accreditors' standards, then they are collecting data in the same way that they could use for multiple purposes. So even if that means that the education programs have 43 learning outcomes, if they have to assess those anyways, they might as well be using the same 43 learning outcomes, although I would otherwise encourage them to have fewer. The College of Education [and Human Services] is using this for ALCs. Every time I turn around, it seems like the Department of Education is changing their standards. They have to do the student-by-student tracking in addition. We have not yet arrived at how we're going to integrate those two systems (program level outcomes and student-by-student tracking) and there is a kind of mismatch there.

The accountability processes for the Elementary Education program were extensive and should have worked seamlessly considering the structure and prescribed nature of the process.

However, from speaking with the participants, it was evident that many challenges come with the accountability process. The most commonly mentioned issue was resources. The COEHS was the only unit at the University that had a dedicated director of assessment and accreditation position. When budget permitted, the director had a part-time assistant helping with data collection and sending out surveys. At the time of the present study, the assistant position was vacant due to budgetary constraints. Even with the full-time director, keeping the processes updated and reporting on schedule required much collaboration with program leaders, program chairs, college administrators, and faculty members. College administrators worked closely with the director of assessment and accreditation to insure all reporting was accurate. In addition to the internal demands, the director and college dean also worked with the accrediting bodies and the state to stay abreast of changes and expectations. Even with the support at the administrative level, the processes placed additional demands on faculty. Participant 2C commented:

The problem in Florida is that the state dictates what you have to do and there is this big issue of academic freedom, so within these constraints, the academic freedom, the instructional piece plays a very big role. But it is very, very difficult and muddy, that relationship between compliance and academic freedom.

Participant 2A added:

So it's a combination of creating positions strictly devoted to this, and obviously if we're devoting resources to that, we're not devoting it to something else so that's always the tradeoff. Not just that we need to do it, but we're working from a finite pool of resources. There are times that it seems like we are operating in order to justify what we do, that's the main thing, and secondarily, why we are doing it.

Participant 3B emphasized the faculty perspective:

It is very time consuming and labor intensive to keep up with the demands particularly the state department of education constantly changing the curriculum – revamping, teaching to the standards. We just revised the whole curriculum because of the revised Sunshine State Standards. Changing the courses. Changing the syllabi. They come visit in the fall to see how we did and then we are moving ahead – changing again for the



Common Core. The demands are very time consuming. We keep up with them. We do very well. The demands of the state, NCATE, SACS – they are very labor intensive, very expensive. Constantly sending faculty to training . . . people going to workshops. Now you have to change syllabi to the Common Core. There is some resentment from the faculty. We are the “the PhDs,” the leaders in education, and we are being told what do to by people that sometimes don’t even have a master’s degree. So there is some resentment. When you are told, “this is the way you are going to assess.” We have faculty – national level experts – why are they not the ones determining what is appropriate? The micro management by the state is somewhat unnerving and I think stifles creativity.

Participants both at the college level and the program level recognized the challenges on individuals’ time and the college’s resources caused by the process. Beyond time and resources, participants expressed concern for faculty morale as the process challenged the individual professional perspectives.

In addition, participants expressed concerns that the reporting that was required was not representative of a complete picture of the program success. For example, the data that were available on first-year employment only reported on first-year teachers employed in public schools in the State of Florida. While many graduates remained in the state, not all taught in public schools, and others left the state. Even if graduates who left the state later returned, the data were not reported as it was not considered a first-year experience. Several graduates pursued other avenues of employment, which were not tracked. Participant 3B stated that even though they conducted regular focus groups in addition to the data reporting to gain feedback from teachers and principals,

We haven’t done a great job like I said with talking to other agencies that are not traditional in teaching or in following up with other states. We don’t have information on how they are doing in Vermont once they leave here.

Aware of the incomplete quality profile that was the product of the prescribed reporting structure, the COEHS went beyond the required reporting mechanism to speak to the quality of

their programs. For example, students were invited to be a part of Florida Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (FACTE) Day on the Hill in Tallahassee to share their experiences with representatives from the legislature. Faculty and administrators also spoke of the quality of their programs while representing the institution externally by participating in community events and serving on organization boards, among other activities.

In addition to limited resources, additional faculty demands, and incomplete information, the COEHS participants remarked on how often the standards of evaluation change. The NCATE reaccreditation visit took place in 2012, but since then NCATE had become a part of The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). At the time of this study, CAEP was working on gathering feedback on what CAEP representatives called “the next generation of accreditation standards for educator preparation” which would lead to new changes in the standards used (NCATE, 2013). At the time of the present study, COEHS was preparing to be a part of a pilot study for the Florida Department of Education because, they too, changed the standards known as the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAPS). Participants noted that changes were constant, and it was hard to continue to ask faculty to do more.

Although this study focused specifically in the Elementary Education program, it should be mentioned that the Elementary Education program was one of the 16 programs in the COEHS specific to teacher preparation. There were other programs within this college, some of which were associated with different accreditation bodies than the ones mentioned in this description of the Elementary Education program. The same staff person who responded to the demands discussed in this section was also responding to the demands from other program accrediting bodies. It was evident that the challenges would continue. As standards change, most syllabi

within each program would need to be realigned to the new standards. The accountability process in the Elementary Education program could ultimately be described as extensive, demanding, and never ending, and therefore continued to tax the available resources.

### **Bachelor of Science in Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD)**

The Didactic Program in Dietetics at UNF was the second subunit included in this study. The overall accountability process in this unit was less extensive than what the Elementary Education program experiences, as the program only reported to one accrediting body specific to the nutrition discipline in addition to complying with the University's assessment requirements.

The Didactic Program in Dietetics was one of the programs under the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, which was housed under the Brooks College of Health (BCH) at UNF and was accredited by the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND). ACEND was recognized by the United States Department of Education, and it was responsible for accrediting quality programs focused on preparing registered dietitians or registered dietetic technicians (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2013). Although ACEND accreditation was voluntary just as NCATE is for COEHS, ACEND accreditation was a highly desirable accreditation for nutrition programs as it was overseen by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the professional organization. The Didactic Program in Dietetics at UNF had been accredited since 1991 and at the time of the present study was preparing for a reaccreditation visit in fall of 2013.

Although students could pursue entry-level employment immediately following their graduation from the Didactic Program in Dietetics in food management, program faculty wanted the program to focus on preparing students to go on to supervised practice and eventually sit in

for the Registered Dietitians (RD) exam. Participant 3E explained that earning the degree from an accredited program was just the first step in the process. Upon graduating from the program, students had the necessary credentials to apply to dietetic internships. These internships required 1200 hours of practice. Students had to apply to obtain one of the approximately 220 opportunities available. These internships had a steep cost associated with them. Upon successful completion of the internships, the candidates could apply to take the RD examination.

The program coordinator and faculty members tracked students beyond graduation to see how many completed the internships and how many passed the examination. The data were collected informally, as faculty did not have a formal mechanism in place to collect this type of information beyond graduation. Faculty and the program coordinator used email lists and social media to gather as much information as they could, but, as Participant 3F commented, it got harder to track students five years post-graduation. Ideally, a graduate listed UNF for the outcome reporting of the RD examination, and the department was notified by the examination administering body of the results. However, faculty members did consider successful graduate internship completion and RD examination completion as part of their measures of success, even when graduates at that point were no longer UNF students.

According to Participant 3E, the accountability process in the Didactic Program in Dietetics followed two models. One was the University's model, which was managed through the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA), and the second model was what was required by ACEND. Faculty members in the Didactic Program in Dietetics had worked closely with the OIRA to develop an integrated process for the type of data they had to report.

We have a lot of standards – I think it's 23 standards – with specific learning outcomes, and then we decide again, when it comes to student learning, what we're going to track. The way I set it up, so we're not doing double duty, I choose the same things to track for both our university assessment and ACEND. It fits really nicely getting to choose that, and that has worked out really good.

However, the process of documenting program data in compliance with the University and the accrediting body requirements was still manually done. The program coordinator copied and pasted information from one form to another and eventually the data for the University were entered in TracDat™.

The program director coordinated all accountability efforts with faculty in the program. Faculty members participated in yearly retreats where they discussed their assessment plans and discussed ideas on program improvements based on the assessment data collected. According to Participant 3E, this was the main focus of the University's assessment plan, a plan for continuous improvement.

According to Participant 2D, the faculty members in the Didactic Program in Dietetics handled all the accreditation processes, as they were the specialists. The deans and associate deans provided the support needed to gather any data required to complete their accountability reports but for the most part did not get involved in the process.

At the department level, the focus was on the students and meeting the demands of the accrediting body and the University assessment expectations. Faculty members were also involved with the community, professional organizations, and working on their own faculty research. At the College level, the focus was more on external stakeholders and meeting their expectations. Participant 2D noted that in addition to the stakeholders the faculty had identified, individual special groups were very important stakeholders for the department and the college.

I would probably add under stakeholders the individual special groups things like Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition, that it is made of physicians and public health people, people that work in child care, anybody that has an interest. . . . I think it's really important for faculty, even though if you look at their assignment, it's 5% service, if you're not in the community, somehow engaged in something relevant to your discipline, I think that is a missed opportunity. A lot of the funding, grant money, and things that we have been able to obtain have come from those community associations, so if you're giving them something, they're more likely to give you something.

But for visibility in the community, it really helps UNF to have the faculty out there and involved because we are the academicians, we are teaching the future professionals, and if we are not out there focusing on these needs, then who is? I think it's just really important.

The Department of Nutrition and Dietetics was the sixth flagship program at UNF.

Faculty in the Nutrition program received the honor of flagship status in 2011. The University President awarded flagship status based on the recommendations of the Flagship Committee and the Provost. According the information available through the University's website:

Programs are selected for Flagship status in general because of their excellence in the scholarly accomplishments of their faculty and the demonstrable potential of those faculty to sustain a trajectory toward scholarly distinction; their potential to produce particularly compelling or exceptional educational outcomes for students; and their power to link the quality of education at UNF to a range of civic needs in the region. (University of North Florida, 2013f)

Flagship status was viewed as a great honor for the program and guaranteed faculty members additional budgetary support for five years. Faculty members were expected to develop external relationships that would lead to continued funding support.

The Bachelor of Science in Didactic Program had a less extensive system of accountability than the Elementary Education Program, as there was not a direct involvement

from the state or the federal government in determining the expectations of the program. The priority for faculty remained on serving the students and providing students with the best education possible as defined by the expectation of the professional accrediting body, ACEND.

### **Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design and Digital Media**

The Graphic Design and Digital Media program was the only professional program under the Art and Design Department; the department was part of College of Arts and Sciences (COAS) at UNF. In addition to Graphic Design and Digital Media, the department also included programs in Painting, Drawing and Printmaking, Sculpture, Photography, and Art History. The Graphic Design and Digital Media program was a limited-access program at the University. Students interested in studying Graphic Design and Digital Media had to be admitted to the University, had to complete the prerequisite courses, and pass a limited-access review. Faculty members had developed the review process to assess the prospective students' potential for success in the Graphic Design and Digital Media program based on the evaluation of a set of works presented in the form of a portfolio demonstrating creativity, exploration, motivation, design and composition, and technical proficiency (University of North Florida, 2013g).

Of the three subunits studied, Graphic Design and Digital Media had the simplest of the accountability processes when viewed from the number of stakeholders involved. Formally, program faculty only needed to meet the prescribed expectations of the internal University level accountability process. However, from speaking with Participant 3D, the faculty members in the program were more concerned with the needs of industry and how well their students were meeting those needs than with any other expectations.

The department chair had appointed a faculty member from the department but not specific to Graphic Design and Digital Media to manage the assessment process for the department after receiving feedback from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment expressing concerns with the program assessment practices. Participant 3C provided the following information:

The assessment is tied to academic learning compacts. That is very circumscribed. Some of the data we received was well meaning, intended to reflect portfolio review, painting/drawing, graphic design and digital media and photography but submitting that data in the format required by the assessment center – we didn't receive good grades. I am not proud to say that, but I think we will improve that. That has been a bit of a challenge. As far as simplifying – it seems in the last year or two it has been simplified. We found dissonance between what was expected from assessment and how we assess in this department. We have had to rewrite some things. We have done a lot of curriculum changes to update for industry standards but also for contemporary expectations as well.

The original set of Academic Learning Compacts were intended to serve the purpose of all programs under the Art and Design department. The programs were very different in focus and scope, so having one set of ALCs was not practical. Faculty complied with the requirements for the ALCs by reporting on what faculty members thought was expected. Participant 3E contended:

That assessment and reporting is not something that is obvious – partly because you're having to explain what you do to people who are not your students, don't see it, don't understand it, don't learn about it, don't have degrees in it, don't do it themselves, and have a specific language or set of criteria they're asking you to describe yourself in terms of. Most faculty just don't know how to approach this. They're not sure what they want, what the assessment reporting authorities want, and I compare this in some way to students sometimes talk about a teacher as not forthcoming as faculty should be or as clear as they should be on certain assignments. Students say "I just try to figure out what the professor wants" . . .this is the experience the faculty have. [Students] are just trying to understand what is expected of them. Well there isn't, in all of the assessment reporting infrastructure that has been set up, a real educational mechanism. You couldn't have for instance our director of assessment go individually to every faculty member at the University and spend time with them to educate them about the process. We have



certain types of collective processes that are partly voluntary. Primarily each faculty member has to learn how to describe what they do and how to report on what they do in terms that will satisfy the assessment reporting authorities and that is a learning process that the University I don't think has really solved yet.

This Tier 3 participant recognized the benefits of going through the redefining of the ALCs and the restructuring of the process. Participant 3D commented:

We are doing an overhaul of assessment right now. The past few years we have either not reported or underreported on assessment. So [a faculty member] has taken the task of writing a lot of the content – pulling a lot of content for assessment. Actually, it has been very helpful because we have been able to define a clearer mission for the department. We have set individual goals for each of the areas that are now tied specifically to courses to assess these set criteria. In doing this and pulling the data from these assessments will help us understand whether or not we are being able to offer what it is we think we are offering.

While the development of new ALCs was in progress, the faculty in graphic design and digital media continued to assess their student learning and program outcomes the way that made most sense to them. The tracking and sharing of the data were informal and were mainly used for program improvements. Participant 3D noted:

In my own curiosity I have tracked data from limited access – because I am in charge of limited access for the past 13 semesters. I have pretty hard numbers on how many students get into the program on average. We have room for 20 students each semester. We can track how many get in. What percentage of those who applied got in. When they got in . . . when they have graduated. I have seen some really interesting results from this. When we do this assessment [referring to the above], it is really more about synthesizing the data and writing a comprehensive assessment.

Participant 3D asserted that the faculty members had collaborated to develop curriculum that helped prepare students for the needs of the regional employers. A complete rewrite of the curriculum was done seven years prior to the present study after identifying deficiencies and opportunities in the curriculum. Faculty had collectively developed lesson plans, exercises, projects and corresponding grading rubrics for the specific classes, and shared these among

themselves to insure that the content was consistent from class to class despite who was teaching the course.

Faculty members assessed student performance and learning by evaluating student outcomes in the capstone portfolio class and the AIGA portfolio review. The AIGA was the professional organization for design. AIGA did not accredit educational programs or organizations. However, according to Participant 3D, members of the AIGA, specifically educators, had a strong voice in design education. AIGA had an educator's community with the mission focused on academic preparation:

The AIGA Design Educators Community (DEC) seeks to enhance the abilities of design educators and educational institutions to prepare future designers for excellence in design practice, design theory and design writing at the undergraduate and graduate levels while supporting the fundamental mission of AIGA. (AIGA, 2013a)

The AIGA had over 200 student groups across the United States (AIGA, 2013b). At the time of the present study, UNF had a student group, which was a part of the Jacksonville AIGA chapter. All faculty members in the Art and Design department were active members of the local AIGA chapter in Jacksonville, and two of them served as the education directors for the chapter. Once a year in the spring, the AIGA conducted a student portfolio review where regional colleges and university graphic design students showed their work to industry leaders and faculty members. Portfolios were assessed utilizing an established rubric focusing on student readiness to enter the field of graphic design. Students received feedback on their work and presentation and were ranked based the evaluation received. UNF Graphic Design and Digital Media students had been recognized in top positions for the last three years.

Program faculty had used information from the capstone course results, the AIGA portfolio review evaluations, and graduation rates to speak of the quality of the Graphic Design and Digital Media program. The AIGA portfolio review was not a complete measure because the process only happened in the spring so fall and summer students did not have the opportunity to participate unless they planned ahead to be involved in the spring.

Resources were the biggest challenge the faculty in the Graphic Design and Digital Media program faced in meeting the demands of the diverse stakeholders. The assessment process was time consuming, and, as Participant 3F noted, the University level accountability process did not come naturally to faculty as faculty members found the process too prescriptive. Program members were working through the issues. In addition to the issues faculty members experienced with the process, although it was not specifically evident from the perspective all of the Tier 3 participants, the Art and Design department as a whole experienced similar challenges as other programs in the present study with building and securing resources external to the institution. Participant 3C maintained:

I don't know if all chairs do this, but I spend a lot of time with development. In the last five years, we have managed to attract five endowed scholarships of \$25,000 dollars apiece. I just heard one of the donors wants to give us another 25, and in the next 18 months another 25. That is a reflection of the entire department. It truly is. It is a vital department. But I do spend a lot of time at lunches and [gallery and museum exhibit] openings and you never know about those things. . . .

The department faculty also worked closely with the administrators at the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville (MOCA). MOCA was a cultural resource of UNF. Graphic Design and Digital Media faculty were not as involved with MOCA as faculty in other programs within the department which focused in the areas of fine arts and art history. The department had

a group of supporters, “The Friends of Art and Design,” which generated some external support in the form of scholarships. The department planned specific activities for this group including social gatherings, travel tours, and lectures. Developing and maintaining the external relationships were part of the regular duties of most faculty members in the Art and Design department.

The department chair followed the steps necessary to pursue accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD). This accreditation was important to the department for the purpose of external recognition. In addition to the prestige of the NASAD accreditation, another driver in securing accreditation was the Florida Board of Governors. The BOG wanted all programs in the State University System (SUS) who were eligible for accreditation to be accredited. However, faculty members did not seem to be invested in the process. Participants 3D and 3E were not aware of the status of the NASAD accreditation process. NASAD was a university level accreditation as NASAD accredits all programs in art and design offered by the institution, which would involve programs across departments, including the Art Education program, which was offered in the College of Education and Human Services.

In 2007, the department went through a NASAD consultant visit, and, as a result, the programs had to secure additional funding from the University to upgrade resources and facilities to prepare for accreditation. Improvements to facilities had taken place at the time of the present study, several other improvements were planned to meet the requirements of NASAD. In addition to resources, the department had to focus on completing the Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) project survey, a requirement to seek NASAD accreditation. According to

Participant 3C, this was a very extensive report that required assistance from multiple tiers at the University level to provide the necessary information to complete the survey. Before the University could pursue NASAD accreditation, the program chair needed to complete three years of HEADS survey reporting. At the time of the present study, the program chair had completed only one year, and therefore the accreditation process was still a few years away.

The Graphic Design and Digital Media program was unique within the Art and Design department because Graphic Design and Digital Media was the only professional program in the department. The accountability processes in the Graphic Design and Digital Media program were self-directed in response to the information program faculty had gathered from the AIGA and the regional employers. Program faculty used this information to help inform curriculum and instruction decisions and activities.

The Graphic Design and Digital Media program had the least extensive accountability process of the three subunits included in the present study. In terms of accountability to stakeholders, faculty priorities were based on industry demands and needs specific to the region of North Florida as most of the Graphic Design and Digital Media program graduates remained in the area. Program faculty had accepted the prescribed nature of the ALCs process, and faculty were working in integrating the ALCs process as part of the program accountability process under the guidance of one appointed faculty.

Thus far, I have provided rich and thick descriptions of the accountability processes of the three subunits of the study – Elementary Education, Didactic Program in Dietetics, and Graphic Design and Digital Media – and the challenges faced by each of the programs. As discussed, the processes varied from program to program and were linked to the number of

recognized stakeholders. The term *recognized* was used to acknowledge that, although there were a number of internal and external stakeholders that all programs were accountable to including but not limited to prospective students and parents and special groups, participants focused on discussing the stakeholders having the strongest demands for accountability in each specific program.

The goal of the next section is to bring the focus back to the main unit of analysis for the present embedded case study, the University. Tier 1 participants' perspectives of the accountability process at the University were similar to those expressed at the subunit level. The main difference was based on the recognized stakeholders.

#### **Accountability Processes at the University of North Florida – Case Report**

In staying true to the embedded case study methodology (Yin, 2009), after reviewing the specifics within each of the subunits selected for this study, it was important to return to the main unit for the final analysis. Understanding accountability processes at the University of North Florida would have been a challenge without viewing the individual perspectives from program and college level participants who best understand the processes. However, one of the delimitations of the study, which became a limitation to the study, was the University of North Florida offered in excess of 58 unique programs so the subunits used for this study only provided the perspective of faculty and administrators of three professional undergraduate programs at the University. In this section, I will discuss the accountability process as viewed mainly from the Tier 1 participant perspectives focusing on stakeholders and challenges.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS) accredited the University of North Florida (UNF). The last reaffirmation visit at the time of the

present study had taken place in 2009. The administrators were preparing the fifth-year interim report for SACS.

UNF operates under prescribed expectations from the Florida Board of Governors (BOG) and the BOG's strategic plan. At the time of the present study, the BOG's strategic plan focused on meeting four goals: access to and production of degrees, meeting statewide professional and workforce needs, building world-class academic programs and research capacity, and meeting community needs and fulfilling unique institutional responsibilities (Florida Board of Governors, 2013b). The BOG strategic plan set the framework for the priorities institutions in the state university system focused on in order to meet the expectations and receive state funding. From the Tier 1 participant perspective, these expectations took a priority in the accountability processes at the University level. The BOG was responsible for the operation and management of the state universities.

Much of the reporting presented to the BOG was in the form of compliance reports. The UNF Office of Institutional Research and Assessment website included a link to what was labeled the *BOG Hit List*, the BOG data request system. University staff members collected data and compiled accountability reports, which were then sent to the BOG. The BOG in turn generated a system report, which was a compilation of all the data received and, in the case of some reports, the data would be sent to the Department of Education. Reports posted were public documents and available for download from the website. At the time of the present study, the search for *current year request* for the University of North Florida on May 25, 2013, yielded 63 different reports the University administrators had either already submitted or would need to submit by the specified date. Out of the 63 required reports, 56 reports were routine requests and

seven were ad hoc requests. Each month institution representatives complied with submitting anywhere between one to eight reports, as was the case in the month of June 2013 (Florida Board of Governors, 2013b).

According to study participants, participants were not sure whether the reports were read. The hit list only listed the status of the reports as *due*, *submitted*, or *approved*, but it was unclear whether *approved* meant acknowledgement of the receipt of the document or something beyond that. In a candid remark, Participant 1A commented:

I think much of the data that the staff from the BOG asks for is sensible data. Some of it I don't believe it is and I don't know why it isn't because they are very smart people, so I have to believe someone above them asks them to collect stupid stuff.

Reports presented to the Board of Trustees (BOT) were a different story according to Participants 1A and 1B. The University president presented the Annual Work Report to the Board of Trustees (BOT), and the members of the BOT staff provided feedback to the president. According to Participant 1A, the feedback received from the BOT was extremely helpful. The BOT conducted workshops to work through any identified issues. Members of the University administration valued the input received from the BOT. Participant 1B viewed the role of the BOT as bridging external and internal university stakeholders with a special emphasis on the northeast region of Florida. Participant 1A observed:

They want us to serve this community and they want us to graduate good students. They listen to what we say. We can say "we are not sure" and we can have a discussion. They are not heavy handed. When they push us, we need to learn to listen . . . because they are not always pushing us. When they do, we have to pay attention. We need to take this seriously. We are not in an adversarial role.

In President Delaney's 2011-2012 Annual Report presented to the BOT, he spoke of the quality of the institution in reference to the strategic goals for the institution. The annual report



was written in narrative form, elaborating on each of the measures reported beyond just the numbers and providing and discussing observed patterns in the data. The content of the report provided background information to help the audience for the report understand the information presented beyond just the numbers. The annual report was posted on the UNF website and available to the faculty, students, parents, and the general public.

According to Delaney, at UNF the focus of the University administrators had been on raising the student profile specifically the profile of incoming freshman, measuring student learning at the start of their studies and upon graduation, and on completion rates. The University administrators used the Educational Testing Service (ETS®) Proficiency Profile test to measure learning gains in writing and critical skills of incoming freshman and graduating students (University of North Florida, 2013e).

In addition to completion rates, retention and time-to-degree rates were other indicators of student success, which were also measured and reported. Disciplines that required licensure or certification exams such as the teacher certification were also tracked and reported as part of the quality measures for the University and programs.

In addition, President Delaney spoke of programs and the process of self-reflection and evaluation, which fostered the continuous improvement of each program. Each program at the University had to follow a program review cycle, which included self-assessment, outside evaluation, and a program report. Sometimes the outside evaluation was based on the program accreditation visit, and when a program accreditation was not available, the outside evaluation was based on the evaluation from an external consultant. In addition to all of the measurements mentioned above, President Delaney highlighted student success stories as well as faculty

achievements. Delaney also spoke of UNF's rankings on the *Princeton Review*®, *Forbes*®, and *Kiplinger*®.

Following is a list of all the indicators of quality used in President Delaney's 2011-2012 Annual Report (University of North Florida, 2013j):

- Freshman student profile which included SAT scores and GPA information
- ETS Proficiency Profile – speaking of the learning gains in critical thinking and writing
- Retention rates
- Graduation rates also known as completion rates
- Time-to-degree rates also known as 6-year graduation rates
- Number of degrees awarded
- Success in licensure or certification exams post graduation
- Student success stories
- Faculty achievements
- College rankings

As shown above, academic quality at UNF was discussed in terms of 10 different criteria. Each indicator required an explanation to provide the context needed to understand what the measure meant in relationship to the quality of education at UNF.

In addition to the BOG and the BOT, members of the administration submitted reports focusing on institutional operations to the Southern Associations of Colleges and Universities (SACS), the regional accrediting body for the institution. The focus of this accrediting body was on quality of educational programs and continuing improvement at the accredited institutions. The feedback from SACS visits was delivered via a formal report to the University provost and

president. Administrators perceived the feedback received as useful. Even though the SACS reaffirmation visit was on a 10-year cycle, SACS had incorporated a fifth-year (mid-point) impact report in their accreditation process providing for more frequent evaluation. The data collection and reporting were on-going for the purpose of SACS. Participant 1D commented:

I always receive responses from SACS when we do our reaffirmation and we receive a response with the fifth-year impact report. It's peer reviewed which makes it of higher value, it's not really SACS per se, it's SACS members who review these types of documents. All the regional accrediting bodies have members from institutions who function as peer reviewers. SACS as an organization provides structure and helps peer reviewers . . . . conduct their peer review, but it is peer reviewed, so to me that is of value and I get feedback.

The focus of SACS was on quality enhancement by continuous improvement, and the organization required accredited institutions to develop and implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as part of the reaffirmation process. UNF developed the QEP based on community-based learning as part of the reaffirmation visit of 2009. Participant 1D stated at the time of the present study that faculty and staff members were working on gathering the data on the progress of the QEP program to report as part of the fifth-year impact report.

Participant 1B clarified that even though the process of reporting to all the different stakeholders was exhausting, each report served a different purpose. Although the idea of a simpler reporting structure was appealing to most participants, it was not possible because each stakeholder had different expectations. Participant 1B observed:

They can't be reduced to one kind of report. They are different. They serve different purposes. The same can be said about discipline-based reports. They tend to be focused more on content and performance. Given that they are narrow by definition, they have their own reason for being. I wish reporting could be simplified, but I am not sure there is a practical way of doing that. If anything, I would say we are moving in the opposite direction with a proliferation of accountability reporting.

However, Participant 1E maintained:

It [the process] could be simplified – yes! Do I have any great ideas? Well, don't ask for data that just sits on a shelf. If you are going to ask for it, then use it. But we submit file after file after file. We generate data, but there is no value judgment associated with it, there is no quality element to reporting data, and issuing a report of graphs and charts, and even comparing institutions from a graph and chart perspective is so totally irrelevant from my perspective because we don't have the same priorities and so for us to say that we spend x amount on A and someone else spends x amount on B – it's a function of what we've determined is our priority and they signed off on our mission, and so "ok." The amount of data that is submitted is [excessive] for the value that is gained, I'm not sure it's worth it. Keep maintaining the data that we need to operate and if you need it at some point in time, fine, but these annual reports because we've always done it this way – let's have a conversation about is it necessary to do it that way now? I don't know if we sufficiently have those conversations often enough.

Participant 1B noted the different purposes of the required reports, but Participant 1E commented that compliance for compliance sake was not helpful to the institution. Multiple participants agreed that conversations between the stakeholders requesting the information and the University were key in determining what would be the best reporting outlet.

Internally, participants recognized challenges in the University's own assessment and accountability processes, indicating that the issues were not just with the external stakeholders. The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment web page stated, "Although accreditors and governing bodies require assessment, we do it because it's a fundamental professional responsibility to continually ensure that students learn what we think we are teaching, and to figure out ways to do better" (University of North Florida, 2013a). However, this was not the perception expressed by Tier 3 participants.

As a part of the University accountability process, each academic program was required to go through a program review every seven years. This process could create conflicts with program accreditation processes because of timing and resources needed to complete each

process. Participants observed that there had been efforts made to streamline the reporting so that the information from the programmatic accreditation could serve the purpose of the program review. At the time of the present study, the integration of the process and reporting was still under development, and university administrators were working on ways to streamline the process. University administrators were encouraging programs with specific accreditation requirements to use the information they provided to their accrediting bodies in their university level assessment plans. As described by the subunit participants, that was still not a common practice.

Every academic program was also required to develop Academic Learning Compacts (ALCs) in compliance with the requirements of the BOG. The ALCs reflected essential learning outcomes for each program. Each program was responsible for keeping the ALCs current and relevant to their program of study and to evaluate each program outcome on a four-year cycle of assessment. Participant 1C described the process:

Every March 1st, each undergraduate program, majors and minors are required to update their reporting on TracDat™ so it's an annual reporting cycle. Then I have a rubric that I use to give them feedback. This rubric rates them on each of the components of the assessment plan and then I give them comments on each area, and then there is a total score, the total score rankings get reported to the deans. The provost has actually agreed to include the statement that basically says that if we had money – which we don't – if you have a good ALCs, you are more likely to get new faculty lines. So I went through 84 of the ALCs. Then I gave them all a two-week do-over period, and now I'm going back through the ones that resubmitted. I'm about to lose my mind. Our institutional policy is that each outcome has to be assessed at least every four years. So I encourage them to minimize the number of outcomes, certainly no more than ten, preferably fewer than that. Some programs have accreditors who assess each outcome every year in which case [they] might as well report it in TracDat™ because then they have satisfied both their accreditor and the state and SACS all in one fell swoop. In the absence of that requirement, then once every three to four years for each outcome is the requirement.

Program representatives in the three subunits worked closely with the director of assessment to develop the ALCs. The University invested in TracDat™ software to help streamline this process. As seen in the subunit analysis, individuals involved with the assessment process were still working on trying to integrate their paper-based forms into the electronic system.

University administrators were aware that the BOG was working on performance-based matrices to determine annual funding. Participant 1A asserted:

The Board of Governors is contemplating adding performance-based metrics to its annual funding formula. I shouldn't say formula. It doesn't really have a formula. It is considering adding performance-base funding metrics as a factor in determining what kinds of resources it should be providing to institutions. And, the Council of Academic Vice Presidents has been meeting more often than not telephonically but sometimes in person to review the iterative drafts of performance-based funding metrics. That has become urgent. When that comes up, we drop other things. We rearrange the schedule is a better way to put it, to accommodate those conference calls or to produce whatever documents we need to.

At the time of the present study, the State of Florida had piloted performance-based funding for programs specific to computer and information technology and had requested from the BOG and the State Board of Education to make recommendations to the legislature for allocating performance-based funding including additional programs beyond computer and information technology. The funding would be available based on employment outcomes: percentage of graduates employed or enrolled in further education, average wages of employed graduates, and average cost per students (Florida Senate, 2013b).

Performance-based funding was not only being implemented at the state level but University administrators were beginning to consider integrating it into the internal funding practices. Participant 1A noted that moving forward, the administration would begin to implement some performance-based funding formulas in internal funding practices. Participant

1C confirmed this and pointed to the ALCs rubric for specific language pertaining to performance-based funding. For example, ALCs were evaluated based on a point system rubric, and the following statement was included in evaluation rubric.

Because student learning is at the core of our mission, and because student-learning outcomes increasingly drive our redesign of curricula, it's fair to expect that new faculty will facilitate the achievement of these outcomes. In addition to justifying faculty hiring based upon traditional criteria of disciplinary expertise, departments can further strengthen the case for recruitment by indicating how a new faculty member will contribute to achievement of student-learning outcomes. Thus, starting with the approval process for the FY14 budget, departments that develop and maintain refined Academic Learning Compacts will be better able to make compelling cases for new faculty lines. University administrators were moving in the direction of holding faculty accountable for their program outcomes and tying in funding incentives for those doing an exceptional job in the ALCs.

Similar to what was observed in the subunits, the University also managed accountability requests from recognized stakeholders specifically the BOG, and the BOT. However, according to Participant 1F, the priority in stakeholders would be changing due to limited funding resources. Participant 1F observed:

Where that might be changing a little bit is that a lot of state universities across the country are no longer state universities, they are state-supported institutions meaning they get less than half of their funding from the state. UNF is just above 50% right now and I saw a graph about a year ago that within the near future that number will dip below 50% and so we would be getting less than half of our operating budget from the state so we would no longer by definition be a state university and we will be a state-supported

institution. What that means to me—and this has been the trend all over the country – that universities have to start leaning on other stakeholders because the states are divesting.

The shift described by Participant 1F may help explain to saliency of the topic of building external relationships among Tier 2 and Tier 3 participants. The subunit participants expressed how important it was for them to develop external relationships with current or potential donors. Participants from Graphic Design and Digital Media and participants from Didactic Program in Dietetics commented how important it was to identify stakeholders who may be able to provide financial support in the form of scholarship moneys. Participants also noted how time consuming it was to identify, secure, and nurture relationships with individuals and/or organizations that could provide financial support.

Several participants credited John Delaney, the University president, with the strategic vision to seek out external supporters to the organization and continue to build on the relationships, making these external efforts one of his top priorities. Participant 3F asserted:

I think the resources are a problem. I think as a whole, I really commend our president. President Delaney has done a wonderful job over the years. We really had some rough times in spite of the fact that tuition has been increased, not laying off employees at the University, and kind of doing the most that we can do with our resources

At the time of the present study, President Delaney recognized and dedicated a building to the A. C. Skinner family for their land donations that made the UNF campus a reality. The A. C. Skinner family was prominent Jacksonville landowner and developer (University of North Florida, 2013m). In addition to the Skinner family, Ann and David Hicks, Betty and Tom Petway, and Adam W. Herbert were also recognized for their contributions and support to UNF but also to the community UNF served. Each family had a University building named after them (University of North Florida, 2013b). Participants felt confident the president was leading the



institution in a positive way and that the president's past political role as mayor of the city of Jacksonville was in part responsible for his engagement with the top individuals and organizations in the region.

From reviewing the accountability processes at the subunit level and from the University level, it was clear the processes are cumbersome and often overlapping. Faculty and staff involved in this study anticipated accountability requests to increase as more demands are expected from the current and future stakeholders. The level of support to fulfill the demands for accountability came at a great expense to the institution not only in tangible costs but also in the stress added to members of the organization. Faculty and staff were taxed with additional demands beyond the expectations of the faculty and staff roles, often moving the priorities to comply with the expectations. Even though UNF had four administrative level full-time staff members responsible for processing and reporting data and an executive director of assessment overseeing the process, much of the information needed at this level came from data reported by faculty and administrators at the program and college level.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on presenting rich and thick descriptions of the accountability processes in the three subunits of the embedded case study, Elementary Education, Didactic Program in Dietetics, and Graphic Design and Digital Media, and returning to the main unit of focus, the University. Participants in each subunit identified the priority in stakeholders in order to respond to the demands imposed by each. At the subunit level, the emphasis remained with the professional stakeholders that include programmatic accrediting bodies and professional organizations. In the Elementary Education program, faculty and staff had to respond to demands

from a number of stakeholders that controlled program approval and funding. The program's existence was contingent on keeping the stakeholders satisfied with the data provided as evidence of quality programs. At the subunit level, the universities assessment process was viewed as an extra process that programs had to comply with as part of the accountability process but different from the programmatic accountability requirements. From the University level perspective, the University's internal assessment and accountability processes yielded the necessary data to satisfy the demands of the stakeholders identified at this level.

Challenges with meeting the demands of the diverse stakeholders existed at all levels of the University and were specific to demands on time and resources. The processes were cyclical, and programmatic accountability requirements were not necessarily aligned with university requirements.

Participants at all levels valued the accountability processes as long as these processes provide valuable insight that could help improve or inform the practices at the University. Unfortunately, most of the reporting required at the University level was viewed as strictly as a requirement with no value. Programmatic accreditation and regional accreditation feedback were of most value to the members of the organization.

In Chapter 5, I will provide a review and update on the background to the study. I will also answer the present study primary research question and discuss the major conclusions from the study. Conclusions will be addressed referencing the theoretical framework used for the study. Additionally, I will make recommendations for both practice and research.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion and Recommendations**

The present study focused on the contemporary phenomenon of accountability in higher education. Specifically, the present study was a descriptive embedded case study on the accountability processes at the University of North Florida, a regional university in Northeast Florida. The timing of the research coincided with the pending reaffirmation of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the law governing federal financial aid.

Because of the reaffirmation of the HEA, discussions on what accountability meant in higher education had increased. President Obama in the February 12, 2013, State of the Union Address following his reelection reminded Congress to consider value, affordability, and student outcomes in determining who gets access to federal financial aid and called on Congress to include measures of value and affordability as part of the accreditation process. As an alternative, Obama suggested a new accrediting system be developed that would focus on performance and results. The request to reconsider the current accreditation process created concerns among representatives from higher education institutions and accrediting bodies including the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the “national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation” (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2013). At the core of the concerns was the increased federal oversight on higher education institutions especially considering higher education has historically been a self-regulated enterprise.

In alignment with the Obama’s request for more accountability, the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training chaired by Representative Virginia Foxx (Republican from North Carolina) had held hearings on the issues of accountability and

transparency for students, families, and taxpayers. During these hearings, stakeholders from colleges, universities, research and policy groups, and students representing colleges and universities had spoken about the challenges of the current accountability system and the need for clearer information without increasing the demands on institutions to produce more data. The main focus of the committee had been on finding ways to simplify the very complex process of federal financial aid programs for the benefit of students and parents. In response to the hearings, Representative Luke Messer (Republican from Indiana), introduced the H.R. 1949 Improving Postsecondary Education Data for Students Act (IPEDS Act). The focus of the IPEDS Act was on identifying what information was already available, what information was missing, and what was needed to improve the process for the benefit of parents and students. According to Representative Luke Messer, “We need to get rid of unnecessary data that just creates confusion and more burdensome reporting requirements for institutions” (Education & The Workforce Committee, 2013a). The act was approved on May 22, 2013, by the House of Representatives and had bipartisan support (Education & The Workforce Committee, 2013c).

The present study focused on crafting a rich and detailed description of the accountability processes at the University of North Florida based on the descriptions and documents provided by faculty, staff, and administrators. In addition to the data collected, additional data were obtained from credible and reliable, publicly available resources. The ultimate goal of the study was to answer the primary research question: How is a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States substantiating the quality of undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates? I conducted a total of 16 interviews with participants from three tiers at the institution: program, college, and university. The Elementary Education program, the

Didactic Program in Dietetics, and the Graphic Design and Digital Media programs were selected as the subunits of study because of their different accountability requirements. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Elementary Education program had the most extensive of the accountability process, the Didactic Program in Dietetics followed with accountability specific to the accrediting body and the institution, and the Graphic Design and Digital Media was the least extensive as the program was accountable only to the institution.

In Chapter 4, I presented the descriptions of each subunit's processes and concluded with the accountability processes as viewed from the top tier, the University administrators. Within the descriptions of the processes each program followed, I presented the information on stakeholders and challenges specific to each subunit in order to provide a clear picture of each subunit. Following the subunit descriptions, I focused on describing the process from the perspective of the representatives at the University level and complemented that perspective with the findings from the subunits to create a holistic description of the complex process at the institution.

In this chapter, I will focus on providing the answer to the main research question. I will also discuss the limitations of the study, the major conclusions from the study, and implications and recommendations for practice and future research. The conclusion will focus on describing how the theoretical frameworks selected for this study, Easton's political system model (1965) and Scott's institutional theory model (2008), served as the foundation for making sense of the data collected and arriving at the conclusions for the study.

### **Substantiating the Quality of Undergraduate Programs**

The primary research question asked how a regional comprehensive university in the Southeast United States is substantiating the quality of undergraduate professional programs and the success of graduates.

At the time of the present study, the University of North Florida substantiated the quality of its undergraduate professional programs in different ways depending on the specifications or expectations of the diverse stakeholder groups. UNF's stakeholders were critical for the survival of the institution, and the challenges faced stem from having to meet the expectations for legitimacy as defined by each type of stakeholder. The best way to answer the primary research question for the present study was by looking at UNF as a set of structures and activities. In Chapter 2, I introduced Scott's institutional theory as one of the frameworks for the present study. Scott's theory focused on cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative structures as the foundation to justify legitimacy of institutions. I adapted Scott's institutional theory model to explain the complexities and contending issues among the process of accountability at UNF. Table 7 illustrates the main structures and how UNF stakeholders can be grouped under each structure.

Following, I will discuss how the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structure types are represented at the University of North Florida and how the institution managed the demands of the diverse stakeholders.

Table 7

*Regulative, Normative, and Cognitive Structures at UNF*

Principal Dimensions	Structure Types		
	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-Cognitive
Stakeholders	Federal government BOG BOT DOE FDOE	SACS Program accrediting agencies VSA	Faculty Students Staff Parents & prospective students Donors Alumni Special groups Local community BOT
Indicators	Rules Laws Sanctions Incentives	Certification Accreditation membership	Common beliefs Isomorphism
Basis of Legitimacy	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Culturally supported, Conceptually correct
Main Reporting Approaches	Actuarial data	Actuarial data Student surveys Direct measures of student learning	Other indicators (faculty, facilities, diversity of programs)
Main Tier Responsible for Reporting	Tier 1 University Tier 2 College	Tier 1 University Tier 2 College Tier 3 Program	Tier 1 University Tier 2 College Tier 3 Program

*Note.* Adapted from *Institutions and Organization: Ideas and Interest* by W. R. Scott, 2008. Reproduced with permission of SAGE.

## **Regulative Structure**

According to Scott (2008), “regulatory processes involve the capacity to establish rules, inspect others’ conformity to them, and, as necessary, manipulate sanctions—rewards or punishments—in an attempt to influence future behavior” (p. 52). At the time of the present study, Tier 1 university level personnel were concerned with meeting the demands of the stakeholders represented under the regulative structure, primarily the federal government, BOG, BOT, and the FDOE. There were steep penalties associated with not meeting the demands by these stakeholders, usually in the form of monetary sanctions and/or loss of program approval.

The primary reporting approach for the regulative structure was in the form of actuarial data. This information was reported via a series of documents submitted to each of the agencies per agency-specific requirements. At the time of the study, much of the data was reported on performance indicators such as retention, graduation rates, time-to-degree rates, student debt, and in the case of the Elementary Education program, first-year employment data. However, the federal government and the state government were considering additional indicators such as employment rates and salaries as part of performance-based funding across all programs.

Tier 1 university level personnel were primarily concerned with managing the regulative structure. However in specific cases, such as the case of the Elementary Education program, Tier 2 college level personnel in the COEHS were also responsible for managing the process relating to teacher preparation programs.

For the most part, Tier 3 participants other than participants in the COEHS were somewhat unaware of the details associated with the regulative structure other than acknowledging a connection between funding and the government, but participants did not seem



to be concerned with what the connection meant for the specific programs or if there were a connection at all.

### **Normative Structure**

Considering the increased involvement of the federal government oversight over higher education at the time of the present study, specifically how accrediting agencies were required to monitor compliance with federal regulations, it was necessary to view the regulative and the normative structures at UNF as “mutually reinforcing” (Scott, 2008, p. 53).

According to the information published in the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations of Accreditation*, published by SACS (2012b, p. 38), institutions were required to document compliance with federal regulations as part of their accreditation requirements. UNF was SACS accredited at the time of the study and had to comply with those requirements.

Normative structures focused on the process and how things should be done. UNF had to meet SACS’s very prescriptive set of standards in order to be accredited and to maintain the accreditation, which are requirements of the BOG. Five years prior to the present study, UNF completed the SACS reaffirmation visit recommendation-free. At the time of the present study, Tier 1 representatives were beginning to compile information for a fifth-year interim report, including updates on the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) among other required compliance items. The fifth-year interim report was added to the SACS 10-year accreditation cycle in response to the United States Department of Education requirement.

Programmatic accreditations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetic (ACEND) were also prescriptive and required Tier 3 participants to submit yearly reports to

remain compliant with the accreditation body. Accreditation reaffirmation visits were on a 7 to 10-year cycle. Both of the programmatic accreditations required specific outcomes to be met in the programs. Data used for these reports came from faculty teaching in the programs. Course syllabi were developed with learning outcomes aligning with the standards specified by the accrediting bodies.

The BOG required all programs offered at state-funded institutions under BOG's purview to seek accreditation regardless of whether the accreditation was required for graduate licensure and placement. At the time of the present study, the Art and Design department was making resource changes to prepare to apply for accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD). NASAD accredits institutions and all programs related to art and design offered at the institution. In the case of UNF, this would include all the programs in Art and Design including graphic design, and Art Education in COEHS.

To comply with the normative structure, data on the quality of the programs were reported in the form of actuarial data, student surveys, and direct measures of student learning. The University's assessment plan using the ALCs was the main source of information for reporting to SACS. This plan incorporated an abbreviated version of the student-learning assessment requirements of the programmatic accrediting bodies. The ALCs process only required that one learning outcome to be assessed on a four-year cycle while the programmatic accreditations required for all learning outcomes to be assessed on a yearly basis.

At the time of the present study, UNF was a member of the Voluntary System of Accreditation (VSA). This organization represents public institutions and provides data via the College Portrait of Undergraduate Education, a tool designed to help prospective students and

their parents with their college selection research. At the time of the present study, the College Portrait was the only resource tool available for parents and students showing data beyond the actuarial data. VSA recommended for institutions to also report on direct measures of student learning. UNF voluntarily reported results of the ETS® Proficiency Profile, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE®), and the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE®) by providing a link to the specifics on the UNF website. In addition, a link to the ALCs was provided for prospective students and their parents.

Normative structures involve all tiers at the University. For the most part, Tier 1 administrators managed compliance with SACS and the VSA. Tier 2 and Tier 3 managed compliance with programmatic accreditation.

### **Cultural-Cognitive Structure**

Faculty, student, staff, prospective students, and parents, donors, alumni, special groups, and the local community represented the cultural-cognitive structure at UNF. Each of the stakeholders shared a common belief based on the quality of the institution, which was constructed from what the stakeholders valued as opposed to prescriptive criteria. The present study did not focus on gathering data from representatives of each of these groups. Only some faculty and staff members were interviewed for the present study.

When speaking of the quality of their programs or the quality of the institution, faculty and staff focused on what was familiar to them. Often participants felt comfortable speaking freely with me about quality at the institution and not only having to respond to the questions using the language of assessment and accountability. Several Tier 3 representatives spoke of the beauty of the campus and the resources available to students in addition to recognizing the

quality of their programs without reference to actuarial data. All participants recognized the quality of their faculty and the faculty members' commitment to students as important aspects of the quality of the education offered at UNF. A few referenced small class sizes and diversity in program offerings. All participants at some point in the interview recognized that ultimately their focus was on serving students.

In addition, Tier 2 and 3 participants expressed a deep concern with building relationships out in the community and serving as spokespeople for the quality of the institution. These relationships have served the institution well and yielded donations and other financial support for the institution.

Viewing UNF from Scott's institutional theory model helped make sense of the data I collected during the present study. Understanding how stakeholders within each structure viewed legitimacy was critical in understanding where the conflicts and stress can occur within the organization and especially within the cultural-cognitive pillar. The individuals interviewed as part of the present study represented only the perspectives of a limited group within this structure, but even then, it was clear that frustration exists at times in responding to the demands of the more prescriptive structures. This leads to the next section where I will discuss the limitations of the present study in more detail.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I identified four main limitations to the present study. First, the present study included a limited number of institutional subunits. Even though the selection of the three professional program subunits was part of the delimitations of the study based on the criteria specific to the

accountability processes of each, the University of North Florida had over 58 unique programs. The study only looked at 3 professional programs.

The second limitation was the timeframe of the study. The IRB approval was received during the latter part of the spring term at the institution. Faculty, administrators, and staff were very busy during the end of the term, and scheduling interviews during that time was a challenge for some participants. Out of the five possible participants who declined or had to cancel appointments, four indicated being too busy as the main reason for declining the invitation or canceling their scheduled appointments. One participant specifically said she would allow one hour of her time for the entire process, and I had to work within those limitations so I would get what I needed. Even for the participants who committed to being part of the study, their availability was limited post interviews. I received no response from four participants about the transcripts sent even after follow-up emails reminding them.

The third limitation had to do with the complexity of subject matter and the questions asked. Some participants did not understand the accountability process well enough to be able to answer the questions as originally phrased. Some participants could speak of the process if it were framed under the concept of assessment but had a harder time with the term *accountability*. I spent some time clarifying and explaining some of the questions in order to help participants understand what was needed, but I believe this prevented obtaining more in depth answers.

The fourth limitation was the number of questions. I tested the time it took to answer the question with someone who had served in all three tiers at a different institution and had served on accreditation committees for a regional accrediting body, and he completed the interview with several minutes to spare. I did not anticipate that some participants would be especially verbose

when providing their answers. I found myself rushing through some of the questions in order to stay within the agreed time frame.

In spite of these limitations, several conclusions can be drawn from the present study.

### **Major Conclusions**

After reviewing the data from the present study, conducting the analysis of the data, and while crafting the detailed descriptions of the subunits and the University accountability practices, I arrived at the following seven conclusions.

#### **Accountability is not a clear concept for Tier 3 program level participants.**

Tier 1 University level and Tier 2 College level participants seemed comfortable using the terms *assessment*, *accreditation*, and *compliance* in reference to *accountability* practices; however, that was not the case with Tier 3 program level participants. During the interviews, Tier 3 program level participants for the most part avoided the term *accountability* and the concept of *stakeholders* when responding to the interview questions. Tier 3 participants spoke of *assessment* as it related to student learning and program evaluation. Tier 3 participants also focused on *accreditation* only if a programmatic accrediting group accredited their programs. Tier 3 participants in Graphic Design and Digital Media focused only on *assessment* in the absence of programmatic accreditation specific to the Graphic Design and Digital Media program. Tier 3 participants did not seem to connect the ALCs assessment with SACS requirements or the BOG requirements. For the most part, Tier 3 participants viewed the ALCs process as a form of compliance. Participants knew they had to comply by providing the information, which “travels up the ladder,” but were not sure what the purpose of the information

was in relationship to the University's accountability plan. Tier 3 participants did not speak of the University's required program review process during the interviews.

**Assessment was a natural process in professional programs.**

Tier 3 participants wanted to know their graduates were employed in their fields after graduating from UNF for their own evaluation of their programs and not just because recording this information is a requirement. Faculty members encourage students to stay in touch after graduation and share what they are doing. With the proliferation of social media outlets, some faculty are using these media as the source of graduate employment and accomplishment information. Faculty still rely on trying to stay in touch with graduates from email lists, but some of the addresses become inactive with time. Despite the fact that the accrediting bodies as well as the institution required assessment, assessment was also a natural part of what faculty do in the classroom. The accrediting body and the University level requirements promote the sharing and discussion of assessment practices among all faculty members in the program. This collaboration leads to discussion about program quality and plans for improvement and eventually impacts curricular changes to meet the demands of the industry and the Northeast region of Florida.

**The problem with accountability is not a problem of lack of data.**

As the present results illustrate, there are many different sources of data available that speak to the quality of the programs at the University of North Florida. From graduation rates, time-to-degree completion rates, and student employment, a number of metrics are used to speak of quality. The information is distributed to comply with the requirements of multiple stakeholders. Many of the stakeholders including the BOG and the federal government claim the data are needed for the purpose of transparency, especially when it comes to information needed

by parents and students to make informed decisions about which colleges and universities to attend. This is the focus of the discussion surrounding the reaffirmation of the HEA. The problem is not the lack of data but knowing what information is important and where to find that information. For the purpose of triangulation, I had to confirm information shared by the study participants by looking up information through a number of documents, reports, and information posted on websites. As versed as I was in knowing what I needed to find, it was difficult to locate the information, not because it was not publicly displayed somewhere on the website, but because success in searching was dependent on having the right terminology.

UNF published data on their website that were repeated on the BOG's website such as ALCs and fact books. Repeating data were not the problem. Actually having the information available through multiple sources is appropriate to reach the audience from multiple angles. Despite the benefits of having information available through a number of resources, duplicate information can tax resources. Assigned personnel is needed to manage the information and make sure the information is distributed through multiple channels and updated when changes are made. Although this is an issue, as it adds labor hours that may not be necessary because the information already exists in a primary location, the more important issue has to do with where the data were located and whether the information is clearly presented for the primary audience.

Some of the information presented on the BOG website linked back to the UNF website page, however that still does not mean that the information is presented in a way that benefits or is useful to the primary audience for the information. Even though the ALCs information is intended to "to ensure clear communication to students of program learning outcomes and their means of assessment, and to ensure continuous review and improvement of program quality," the



information is not easy to find (University of North Florida, 2013j). For example, if someone clicks on the *for students* tab on the BOG website, a dropdown menu displays the item *Academic Learning Compacts*. Clicking on *Academic Learning Compacts* produces a list of links to the State University System universities. This page has no information on what the ALCs are or why ALCs should be important to a student. A student or prospective student would need to know to click through to the University website to read about the ALCs specific to the program of study of interest. On the UNF website, ALCs information is under the OIRA webpage and in some cases it may appear in the program webpage. In the case of the Didactic Program in Dietetics and the Elementary Education programs, the ALCs are listed as a link from the *Program Information* side bar. But in the Graphic Design and Digital Media Program, the information on ALCs is not displayed at all on the program website. A student or a prospective student would need to know what ALCs are and that ALCs were important in evaluating or learning more about a program. An interested student would need to know to go to the UNF OIRA webpage to find information that is not available through the program webpage. Would a student looking for information about a college know to look for it on the BOG website?

But taking this example a step further, even though the information on the ALCs is displayed on some of the programs' web pages, it is listed on a side bar of the page. In the case of the Elementary Education program, if students or prospective students were reading through the information on the main page, students would not know what the ALCs are unless the students were curious enough to click on the link on the right to read the information. If the student would reach the ALCs document, the information displayed, including the mission of the program, may not be clear enough to help them understand the importance of the ALCs. At the

time of this study, the mission of the program was worded differently on the ALCs document and on the program webpage. At the end of the document, users had the option to select more information, however, the selection yielded a broken link. As I described in Chapter 4, the Elementary Education Program is one of the program with the most complex system of accountabilities of the subunits studied. Considering the program has a program leader, a director of assessment, dean, and assistant dean all involved in the process of accountability, the example provided illustrates that the redundancy of the information can lead to oversights.

As illustrated by the example of the ALCs and the College of Education and Human Services, the problem with accountability does not have to do with lack of data. It has to do with redundancy that can lead to mistakes in information and also presenting the data in ways that are meaningful to particular stakeholder groups. What is the ultimate goal of accountability? Is it just an exercise in compliance? Or is it truly a way to ensure quality in program offerings?

**University level assessment requirements in professional programs are compliance exercises.**

Assessment practices at the subunit level are focused on the specific requirements of the primary stakeholder for the individual unit. In the case of Elementary Education program, the assessment is based on measuring student learning against the standards set by the FDOE and NCATE. Participants spoke of the need to meet the expectations for assessment and accountability of both FDOE and NCATE. During the interviews conducted, ALCs assessment was barely mentioned if mentioned at all. While the Elementary Education Program meets the University level requirement, this is a compliance issue as opposed to an assessment issue. Elementary Education participants appeared to view the University level assessment as very

limited compared to the requirements of the FDOE and NCATE, so the focus at the program level is not on the ALCs. The University level assessment is not as comprehensive as the assessment plan they have to follow for accreditation purposes.

In the case of Nutrition and Dietetics, the program leader is responsible to for accreditation as well as the University level accountability process, although the program leader was working with the executive director of assessment to combine the assessment processes. At the time of the present study, the ALCs process was also a compliance exercise, as the focus remained with the requirements from the accrediting body.

Graphic Design and Digital Media participants struggled to understand the ALCs process for many years and viewed it as a compliance exercise. Although at the time of the present study faculty still viewed the process as a compliance exercise, faculty were working to understand how their own internal assessment processes could be translated into meaningful assessments that meet the University requirements.

### **Assessment and accountability practices have professional and personal consequences.**

As I conducted the interviews, it was evident that participants involved with accountability processes at UNF recognized how taxing the requirements were not only for them but, in the case of those in supervisory roles, for their faculty and staff. Because much of the demands for accountability come from external stakeholders, disregarding the demands might have significant consequences. The accountability processes can be cyclical with extreme periods of demands all occurring at once, but for the most part, participants were learning to anticipate and plan on what was coming. It was the last minute requests and constant changes that brought most stress to those interviewed.

Administrators, faculty, and staff continue to invest a significant amount of time on accountability-related issues on top of their already busy schedules. A Tier 3 participant said the demand on her time, had held her back from pursuing promotion, a highly desired accolade in the academic world, as it involves both a salary increase and a change in faculty ranking from associate professor to full professor. She expressed that she was aware that her priorities focused on what was best for the department and the programs, but she had paid the price for years. She claimed that this sacrifice was true for others in similar positions and that the details of the demands and the consequences were often discussed during group meetings.

The limited resources available at the institution do not support the addition of faculty, staff, or administrators to help alleviate the burden on the current personnel. A Tier 3 participant suggested that people go the extra mile for the organization all the time, and the organization is lucky to have a very strong group of committed individuals working that are willing to make the necessary sacrifices for the institution.

Although it is admirable that UNF has staff, faculty, and administrators so committed to the institution, the constant pressure on people's times can take its toll and can be eventually reflected in low morale, burn out, and inaccuracies in reporting. Because external demands are difficult to control, the solution, or at least a step in simplifying the process, must be developed. Looking at the issue of promotion, the Nutrition and Dietetics has appointed a non-tenured faculty to lead the accountability and assessment process, allowing tenured or tenure-track faculty to focus their efforts on their research, teaching, and service. Perhaps allowing tenured faculty to focus on their research and teaching helped the program achieve Flagship status.

**Key stakeholders can change.**

Several participants indicated a concern with the need to be more cognizant of the shifts in funding allocations for state-funded institutions. Tier 1 participants were aware of the intent of the BOG to implement performance-based funding. Two Tier 1 participants described how the concept of performance-based funding was starting to be integrated into the UNF internal assessment practices, specifically the ALCs. Programs leaders and chairs were expected to respond positively to the opportunity to build the case for additional faculty lines based on the results of the program ALCs evaluations. This was a shift in the culture of the institution, where performance-based assessment was not a part of gaining access to additional resources with the exception of the Flagship programs. Flagship programs received budget support for a period of five years with the goal “to become self-sustaining or to have generated external funding support” (University of North Florida, 2013f). Tier 2 and Tier 3 participants shared a concern for continuing to build relationships with the community and external groups as a means to develop external sources of revenue and scholarships for the institution.

Although I could not find published information about discussions on a shift for UNF from state-funded to state-supported institutions, in President Delaney’s *2011-2012 Annual Report* delivered to the UNF Board of Trustees, he noted that the Education and General Budget of \$127 million was \$3 million less than the prior year and that student tuition funded 44% of the budget. He said he anticipated that in the upcoming year student tuition would represent 49.7% of the budget, noting “With state funding on the decline and student tuition and fees offsetting the disappearing state dollars, private dollars are becoming an even more important part of our operations” (University of North Florida, 2013j, p. 21). The need for external funds is an issue

that everyone at the institution is aware of and has added additional stress to the members of the institution.

**No single measure captures quality.**

The measures to represent quality in higher education are flawed because these measures do not tell the entire story about what quality means at an institution or in a specific program. No single measure speaks to the quality of an institution. The best an institution can achieve is a series of measures supported with sufficient explanation to help present a more comprehensive picture of an institution and/or programs.

Unfortunately, if the goal of the federal government and the SUS is transparency for the benefit of parents and students who are looking at making a decision about which college to attend, the data that were reported via IPEDs may only be presenting a very narrow picture of what quality means in each institution. The reported graduation rates are calculated on students who started at the University as freshman. Graduation rates do not include success measures for transfer students. Time-to-degree completion also presents a narrow perspective in the absence of information on the demographics of the student body. At the time of the present study, UNF was transitioning from being a predominantly commuter school to a destination school. The institutional goal was for students to enroll as freshman and complete their degrees at UNF. Student loan debt is another measure used to speak of an institutions quality; however, as Participant 1 maintained, this is not a problem at UNF as the institution has as a very low tuition rate compared to other regional state universities.

Quality is a concept that means different things to different people. The burden on reporting a full picture of what quality represents at UNF falls on the institution. For compliance

sake, there is the need to report on the metrics specified such as graduation rates, time-to-degree, and student-loan debt need to be reported, but the institution must find ways to present a more comprehensive picture through the media available to the institution.

The seven major conclusions provide insight into key areas of the accountability discussion specific to the University of North Florida and present information that can lead to opportunities for further practice and research.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

After completing the present study and reflecting on the information learned from each of the subunits and the University participants, I have five recommendations for practice.

#### **Develop a series of staffing models to manage accountability processes.**

One of the delimitations of the study was the limited number of programs I selected for the subunits. As I have described in Chapter 4, each of the three subunits has a unique system for their assessment and accountability practices from which comprehensive models could be developed. Perhaps the models could be proposed for other units with similar accountability needs. Each model should suggest staff and faculty appointments if needed based on the volume of the work and be detailed enough to cover the technology available for the recording and reporting of the data for accountability processes.

For example, the College of Education and Human Services has a college level director responsible for assessment and accountability demands of most programs within the college. The person in this position, with the support of the deans, helps manage the accountability processes specific to the Elementary Education program among all other programs in the College. With the

number of stakeholders involved in education-related disciplines, this model works for the College of Education and Human Services.

Another example could be the model that is used in the Nutrition and Dietetic program where a faculty member appointed to manage the process does not hold a tenure-track position. This model would seem to be appropriate for most programs with minimal stakeholders. In addition, a combined model between the one from the COEHS and Nutrition could actually serve the COEHS where in addition to the staff position, there is non-tenured track faculty appointed to work with specific programs instead of adding additional responsibilities on tenured or tenured track faculty. This approach could help streamline the process of accountability and help reduce some of the internal stress the organization experiences.

**Develop a required training program.**

The institution has all the right components to have an accountability process that is more streamlined than what I observed during the present study. The institution had invested in technology, specifically software, to help with the data management and sharing of information. Unfortunately, the attempts to facilitate training made by the Executive Director for Assessment have not yielded the results intended, as evidenced by the findings of the present study. The information and the technology are available, but faculty, administrators, and staff may be too preoccupied to learn to use the software because of limited time or just by not paying attention to the information shared.

UNF has the technology and the resources to develop online learning modules to facilitate training in the area of assessment and accountability. Perhaps a more interactive presentation of the information with some form of completion report requirement may help bring



the information to each individual in a more accessible way. Perhaps this could be tied to performance-based funding initiatives that would be top down from the University level, to the college level, and the program level.

**Develop an integrated reporting process.**

As discussed before, at the time of the present study, the program in Nutrition and Dietetics was beginning to work on integrating the ALCs and their accrediting body student-learning outcomes. This should become the standard practice for all programs. Communication should be initiated with all programs holding a program accreditation to encourage shifting student-learning outcomes to match those of their accrediting body. This process should become the standard for the institution. If a program is already looking at 15 student-learning outcomes for the purpose of their accrediting body expectations, and are using that data to inform their program decisions and have a plan for continuous improvement, there should not be an abbreviated format to report for the ALCs.

**Develop a communication culture within and among departments.**

Although I am recommending a more centralized approach to accountability practices within each unit, I do not mean that the person in that role would be the sole person responsible for the entire process. They would be the managers and facilitators of the process but should collaborate with program chairs and faculty to determine the best practices specific to the program. Communication is critical across all faculty members within a department including chairs and program leaders, and eventually with the deans. The process of assessment should be the result of discussions among peers to discuss what is truly relevant and important to specific programs.

The institution should promote of a culture of sharing information across programs specific to accountability and assessment practices. This would promote best practices to be established, and it would possibly avoid some of the stresses the process generates.

**Develop a clear and cohesive message on the quality of the programs at UNF.**

As the background of the study and the information reported during the present study has confirmed, the message about quality is mixed. In an attempt to respond to the specifics of all stakeholders, the message has become fragmented and often meaningless. Data presented without additional information on how to use the data or make sense of them can be problematic. Institutional leaders should invest time in doing an audit of all the information that is available on the website and develop a strategic plan that is logical in delivering the information to the corresponding stakeholders in a way that is simple and easy to navigate. If the information is intended to be for parents and students, language should be used that communicates relevant information to that particular audience. Focus groups could be used to gain the necessary perspective of the type of information needed by parents and students. Compliance type of information should be provided through the channels already established such as the College Portrait and IPEDS.

Technology allows for the same information to be shared in multiple locations without the need for recreating content or copying and pasting. Having one central source for information without duplication of information would help avoid the issues of multiple versions and possibility of wrong information being left on the site because someone forgot where it was posted.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Following are the recommendations for future research based on the topic of accountability. The recommendations extend beyond the University of North Florida to include other universities as well as accrediting bodies.

#### **Study of the perspectives of liberal art program representatives on accountability practices.**

One of the limitations of case study methodology and specifically of the present study was that the study captured a single point in time of the phenomenon of accountability at the University of North Florida. One of the delimitations of the study was that the study focused on three professional programs at the University. At the time of the present study, UNF had over 58 programs including liberal arts and professional programs. While the findings of the present study reflected a wide range of accountability practices and challenges, the study did not look at a representative sample of all programs at UNF including liberal arts programs. The perspective of liberal arts program representatives would be especially of interest since the outcomes of the liberal arts curriculum are usually not job focused.

#### **Study of the differences and similarities in standards of quality education across regional accrediting bodies.**

The challenges of accountability processes are not isolated to the University of North Florida, these challenges extend across all post secondary institutions as discussed in the background to the present study. Further research is needed to better understand the complexities associated with accountability processes specific to the quality of the programs offered across institutions of higher education. A proposed way to study the accountability processes across institutions would be by conducting research looking at the differences and similarities among

the standards for educational quality across all six regional accrediting bodies. This study would help develop an understanding of what educational quality means across accrediting bodies. This would set a foundation from which to build additional research depending on the findings, as the findings would reveal either a shared view of what academic quality means or a fragmented view of what academic quality means across agencies.

**Study of accountability processes at different universities representing all regional accrediting bodies.**

Following the study of standards of quality or even concurrently, additional research could be conducted to find out what types of processes institutions representative of each regional accreditation are following to meet the demands for academic quality. The study could potentially reveal commonalities in processes and differences.

**Study of accountability processes at the program level (representing professional and liberal arts programs) and university level accountability processes.**

Following studies looking at the differences and/or similarities among regional accrediting bodies, it would be interesting to study a sample of liberal arts and professional programs within each of the universities studied and the processes each program uses to speak of academic quality. A comparative study between the findings of the institution level accountability practices and the program level accountability processes would yield information on the connection between the processes or perhaps a disconnect between the processes as discovered during the present study. It is important to mention that due to the limitations of the present study, the findings from the present study cannot be generalizable.

The above mentioned studies would provide insight into the different perspectives of the accountability discussion, from the accrediting bodies' needs, the institutions' practices in response to the requirements of the accrediting bodies, and from the program level perspective as they respond to the institutional needs.

**Study of faculty and administrators perceptions on how does assessment fits into the accountability issue.**

One of the conclusions from the present study indicated that Tier 3 participants did not feel comfortable discussing accountability and preferred discussing assessment practices. It would be interesting to research faculty and administrators perspectives on the role of assessment in accountability across institutions to determine if the findings from this study are consistent across faculty and administrators at other institutions.

**Study of what prospective students and their parents look for when selecting a college or university.**

At the core of academic quality accountability discussions for public institutions is the need to be accountable to taxpayers because taxpayer moneys are funding federal financial aid and other types of funds available to post secondary institutions. But more specifically, academic-quality accountability discussions have to do with providing information to prospective students and their parents so that students can make well-informed decisions on what college to attend. The research associated with the IPEDS Act proposed by Luke Messer, which was pending approval at the time of the present study, would yield helpful insight on the information that currently exists, the benefit of the available information, and what gaps exists in the available information (Education & The Workforce Committee, 2013c). The information

generated from this investigation would be a positive step in understanding the needs and opens the possibilities for further studies. Additional studies would need to look at the connection between the information needed and the information generated by institutions in response to the accrediting bodies' academic-quality standards to identify any inconsistencies.

While the information gathered from the IPEDS Act would be helpful, there is the opportunity for a study investigating the variables considered by parents and prospective students as they research and select a college or university to attend. This information would yield valuable insight on what is at the core of the college selection process. Perhaps, the perceived needs of prospective students and their parents are not aligned with the information they value in making the important decision of selecting the right college or university.

Research in the area of academic quality accountability will need to be on going as the standards for academic quality will continue to shift depending on demands from stakeholders. In the case of academic quality of professional programs, quality will continue to be determined by the changing needs of the workforce. Educational leaders have a responsibility to continue the dialog and research on how to improve the internal academic quality accountability processes so that the processes are not taxing to those individuals involved and that the processes yield information that is meaningful and practical for those who need it. In addition, educational leaders should communicate their findings to other educational leaders in peer institutions as a way to expand the conversation and collectively find more efficient and meaningful practices for the benefits of all stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

At the time of the present study, the Higher Education Act was up for renewal. The members of the House Education and the Workforce Committee were holding regular hearings seeking feedback from educational stakeholders on issues associated with the reaffirmation of the Higher Education Act. The focus of many of these hearings was on the need for greater transparency and accountability on the part of higher education institutions but testimonies presented were indicating that there was a large cost associated with meeting all the demands for greater accountability. While the focus of some of the testimonies were on financial cost there were other factors adding additional stress to higher education organizations. The present study findings indicated that there are issues (stressors) beyond financial cost that need to be considered when viewing the accountability practices including taxing demands on faculty and administrators involved with accountability processes. Even though the present study is not intended to be generalizable to other institutions, the demands imposed on UNF are not significantly different than the demands imposed on other publicly-funded higher education institutions.

For the present study, I used two theoretical frameworks, Easton's political system model (1965) and Scott's institutional theory model (2008), to view the issue of accountability at UNF. Viewing the data collected through the lenses of these two models, allowed me to see the accountability phenomenon at UNF as a complex political system with established structures and activities to respond to the demands imposed by the environment. UNF was an open system coping with the demands from the environment in which operates in order to survive and remain legitimate in the perspective of the stakeholders.

According to Scott (2008), institutions need legitimacy in order to survive, and this comes from legitimacy as defined by the different stakeholders. Legitimacy is the social acceptability and credibility of the institution. As mentioned before, UNF meets the criteria for legitimacy as defined or required by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures. The institution has become “isomorphic” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 352) within the environment in which it operates, basically meeting the expectations of each of the structures as expected by the different stakeholders.

However, there was a major collision on the internal views of the accountability process between the perceptions of the Tier 1 participants and the perceptions Tier 2 and 3 participants. In order to view this issue, it is important to separate the cultural-cognitive structure stakeholders into internal and external stakeholders. Tier 1, 2, and 3 participants all demonstrated a keen interest in meeting the demands of the external stakeholders, however, issues were identified with the internal stakeholders specifically Tier 3 stakeholders.

As this study has shown, Tier 1 and Tier 2 participants have become preoccupied with meeting the demands of the regulative and normative structures by creating accountability practices specifically assessment practices that are almost ceremonial in practice. Tier 3 participants for the most part viewed the required assessment practices, the ALCs, as strictly a compliance exercise. Tier 3 participants had no personal connection with the processes developed to conform to the regulative and normative structure stakeholders.

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to provide a complete picture of the quality of their programs to all stakeholders. The opportunity exists to build a cohesive assessment and accountability plan, which satisfies the needs for the regulative and normative



structure stakeholders while taking into consideration the cultural-cognitive structure internal stakeholders' concerns. Such a plan would make the process meaningful to the internal stakeholders at the institution while reducing the time invested in meaningless practices. This plan would complete the legitimacy profile for the institution as it would satisfy the requirements of all structures and help the organization to operate more effectively with the existing resources.

The legitimacy profile must be consistent and clear from the institutional perspective. Quality must be defined utilizing measures that are meaningful and packaged in ways that are informative and useful in meeting the needs of the stakeholders.

## Appendix A – IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
 1 UNF Drive  
 Jacksonville, FL 32224-2665  
 904-620-2455 FAX 904-620-2457  
 Equal Opportunity/Equal Access/Affirmative Action Institution

### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** April 18, 2013

**TO:** Ms. Trudy Abadie

**VIA:** Dr. Katherine Kasten  
 LSCSM

**FROM:** Dr. Krista Paulsen, Chairperson  
 On behalf of the UNF Institutional Review Board

**RE:** Review of New Project Revisions by the UNF Institutional Review Board IRB#441957-2:  
 "Accountability and quality in higher education: A case study"

UNF IRB Number: 441957-2 Approval Date: 04-18-2013 Expiration Date: 04-18-2014 Processed on behalf of UNF's IRB <i>KLC</i>
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This is to advise you that your project, "Accountability and quality in higher education: A case study" underwent "Expedited Categories 5, 6, & 7" review on behalf of the UNF Institutional Review Board. Your reviewer recommended approval without further modifications.

This approval applies to your project in the form and content as submitted to the IRB for review. All participants must receive a stamped and dated copy of the approved informed consent document when possible. Any variations or modifications to the approved protocol and/or informed consent forms as they relate to dealing with human subjects must be cleared with the IRB prior to implementing such changes. For example, if you plan to make changes to your stamped and dated informed consent form, it will be necessary to submit a copy of the revised form via an amendment so that it can be reviewed and approved prior to use. Once approved, a new stamp and date will be included on the revised consent form so that it can be used. Any unanticipated problems involving risk and any occurrence of serious harm to subjects and others shall be [reported](#) promptly to the IRB within 3 business days.

Your study has been approved for a period of 12 months as of 4/18/2013. If your project continues for more than one year, you are required to provide a completed [Status Report](#) to the UNF IRB prior to 3/18/2014 if your study will be continuing past the 1-year anniversary of the approval date. *We suggest you submit your status report 11 months from the date of your approval date as noted above to allow time for review and processing.* When you are ready to close your project, please complete a [Closing Report Form](#) which can also be found in the documents library called "Forms and Templates" in IRBNet. All records relating to this research shall be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the research.

**CITI Course Completion Reports are valid for 3 years. Your completion report is valid through 7/27/2013. This CITI training will expire before your project comes up for continuing review. Please complete the CITI refresher course before your training expires.** Your reviewer may ask for a copy of your updated CITI completion report at the time of continuing review. The CITI refresher course will be available 60-90 days prior to your CITI's expiration. Dr. Kasten's CITI training is valid through 3/29/2014 and Ms. Vosoughi's CITI training is valid through 4/08/2016.

Should you have questions regarding your project or any other IRB issues, please contact the research integrity unit of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs by emailing [IRB@unf.edu](mailto:IRB@unf.edu) or calling (904) 620-2455. A copy of this document is retained within UNF's records. All records shall be accessible for inspection and copying by authorized representatives of the department or agency at reasonable times and in a reasonable manner. A copy of this approval may also be sent to the dean and/or chair of your department.

UNF IRB Number: 441957-2  
Approval Date: 04-18-2013  
Expiration Date: 04-18-2014  
Processed on behalf of UNF's IRB *KLC*

## Appendix B – Informed Consent

### Informed Consent

Hi my name is Trudy Abadie and I am a doctoral student at the University of North Florida. I am conducting a research study on accountability processes at UNF in order to gain a deep and rich understanding of these processes and the challenges the institution faces in meeting the competing demands imposed by the complex environment in which it operates.

If you take part in my project, you will complete a short survey and take part in an interview. I expect participation in this study will take about 2 hours of your time (approximately 10 minutes to complete survey, 60-90 minutes for interview, and 20 minutes for review of transcripts). Your responses will be used for research purposes and may be quoted in publications. I will be using a fictitious name and using a coding system instead of your actual title to protect your identity. I developed this coding system for my study and it is based on the level of the institution you represent. For example, tier 1 represents participants at the university administrative level, tier 2 represents participants at the college level, and tier 3 represents participants at the program level. However, due to the nature of the study, your identity could potentially be found as it would be possible for someone to search the Internet and attempt to identify the participants based on publicly available information on the institution's website.

Although there are no direct benefits to or compensation for taking part in this study, others may benefit from the information we learn from the results of this study. Additionally, there are minimal risks for taking part in this project. One potential risk to participation could be harm to employment or reputation in the unlikely event of a breach of confidentiality. To minimize these possible risks, I will be providing you with the list of questions prior to the interview for your review. You will have the opportunity to email me or call me to clarify or ask any questions you may have during the process of interviews and transcription review. You will have the opportunity to speak off the record and anything said during that time will not be quoted. You will have the opportunity to skip any questions and edit the transcripts. In addition I am using encrypting software to protect all data transfer and storage (recordings and transcripts). I will provide you with the password that you will need to open and edit the transcript files on the day of the interview.

Participation is voluntary and there are no penalties for skipping questions, editing sections out of transcript, or withdrawing your participation. Thus, you may choose to withdraw from this study, skip any questions you do not wish to answer, or edit sections out of transcript, with no penalty or loss of benefits you would otherwise be entitled to receive.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact me or my professor Dr. Katherine Kasten. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep for your records.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of North Florida's Institutional Review Board Chairperson by calling 904.620.2498 or by emailing [irb@unf.edu](mailto:irb@unf.edu).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Trudy Abadie

Phone:

Email:

UNF IRB Number: 441997-2 Approval Date: 04-18-2013 Expiration Date: 04-18-2014 Processed on behalf of UNF's IRB <i>KLC</i>
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Dr. Katherine Kasten

Phone:

Email:

I \_\_\_\_\_ (print name) attest that I am at least 18 years of age  
and agree to take part in this study.

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

UNF IRB Number: 441957-2  
Approval Date: 04-18-2013  
Expiration Date: 04-18-2014  
Processed on behalf of UNF's IRB *KLC*

## Appendix C – Background Survey

### Survey - General Background Questions

1. Your current job title is \_\_\_\_\_. Is this correct?
2. How many years have you held this position at UNF?
3. In your current position, what is your involvement with UNF's accountability process?
  
4. How many hours per week do you spend on accountability related tasks or issues? *(Please circle one)*  
a. 0-4   b. 5-10   c. 11-15   d. 16+
5. Have you attended or conducted accountability/accreditation process related workshops or seminars at UNF or outside the institution?
6. Have these been useful? If so, how?
  
7. Do you have any experience with the accountability process outside UNF?  
If so, for how many years?
8. Have you served on an accreditation visit as a reviewer or chair?
9. If so, for which accrediting body?

## Appendix D – Interview Protocol

### Sample Interview Questions

#### Interview Questions (Tier 1: University, Vice Presidents and Directors)

1. According to the literature review I conducted for this study, there are contradicting perspectives on the primary goal of undergraduate higher education. In your opinion, what is the goal of undergraduate higher education?
2. How is UNF contributing to this goal?
3. According to the mission of the institution published on the UNF website, UNF is “preparing them [students] to make significant contributions to their communities in the region and beyond” – Is this measured? If so, how?
4. How is it communicated? To whom?
5. Additionally, the mission statement states the institution has a “commitment to student success” –how is “success” defined at UNF? How is it measured?
6. How is it communicated? To whom?
7. Is UNF trying to be a unique institution among the State University System of Florida? If so, how?
8. How is UNF differentiating itself from other institutions in North Florida? (FSCJ, Flagler College, Jacksonville University, University of Phoenix, etc.)
9. With the number of internal and external stakeholders involved in higher education how is UNF managing all of the demands? (show diagram with all stakeholders. Ask if I have missed any.)
10. Is there a priority in terms of which stakeholder you need to satisfy? If so, who would you focus on first and why? Who would follow and why?
11. What are the challenges faced by the administrators at UNF in meeting these demands? (cost, personnel, etc.)
12. From reviewing some of the programmatic accreditation and accountability requirements, there seems to be an overlap in what needs to be reported. If so, how is UNF managing/streamlining the sharing of this information across departments?
13. In your opinion, how effective is the accountability process at UNF in communicating an accurate portrait of the quality of the institution to the diverse stakeholders?
14. For which reports that you submit to outside agencies do you receive response that might be used to improve the accountability process? For which reports do you receive no response?
15. Should the reporting process be simplified? If so, how?
16. Is there anything regarding accountability and assessment at UNF that has not been asked that you would like to add or that you think it is relevant to my study?

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**Interview Questions (Tier 2: College, Deans, Associate Deans, & Director)**

*Same questions as above with wording change to reference the college plus the following:*

1. What process does the College of \_\_\_\_\_ use to keep track of all the programmatic accreditation requirements among all your programs?
2. Some of the program accreditation are not required but highly desired. How do you justify pursuing these, especially considering the human and monetary cost involved?
3. How do you prioritize which department gets to pursue accreditation that is highly desired but not required?

**Interview Questions (Tier 3: Program, Chairs, Program Coordinators, & Faculty)**

*Same questions as Tier 1 with wording change to reference the department plus the following:*

1. In the \_\_\_\_\_ program how is student learning assessed?
2. To whom is this information shared with and how?
3. Your program is currently accredited by \_\_\_\_\_. Your next visit is scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_. How are you preparing for this visit?
4. Are there any circumstances that make the process different from previous visits?



## Appendix E – Confidentiality Agreement

### CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT Transcription Services

I, \_\_\_\_\_ transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Trudy Abadie-Mendia related to her doctoral study on "Accountability and quality in higher education: A case study".

Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Trudy Abadie-Mendia
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Trudy Abadie-Mendia in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F – Extant Data Sources

Following is a list of specific documents, archival records, and physical artifacts that were collected and referenced as part of the data for this study. The three tiers used in the study divide the list. Tier 1 represents the University level, Tier 2 represents the college level, and Tier 3 represents the program level. (Unless otherwise noted, information was gathered from the University website [www.unf.edu](http://www.unf.edu).)

### 1. Tier 1: University

- a. Mission and vision statement
- b. President's message
- c. Accreditation overview, status, timeline, compliance certification, 5<sup>th</sup>-year report overview, disciplinary accreditation
- d. History of the Institutional Effectiveness Committee
- e. Document outlining the changes on the SACS Principles of Accreditation from 2008–2012
- f. Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) College Portrait
- g. ETS® Profile
- h. TracDat® Assessment Software information
- i. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE®)
- j. Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE®)
- k. Pocket fact book
- l. Common Data Set

- m. IPEDS
  - n. Data on peer and aspirant institutions
  - o. Assessment Matters Newsletter
  - p. Florida Board of Governors, Data request system UNF status (shows what is due, submitted, approved)
  - q. Enrollment projections
  - r. Unforgettable Viewbook 2012, Admissions
  - s. The UNF experience description
2. Tier 2: College
- a. Effectiveness and Accountability Report 2009–2010, 2010–2011 (print document)
  - b. NCATE Institutional Report October 2011 (print document)
3. Tier 3: Program
- a. Accreditation information
  - b. Program's mission and vision
  - c. Academic learning compacts
  - d. Curriculum

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, specialization in assessment  
 University of North Florida, Jacksonville, FL (2013)

Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design  
 Savannah College of Art & Design, Savannah, GA (1993)

Bachelor of Arts in Communications/Advertising, Minor: Visual Arts/Graphics  
 Loyola University, New Orleans, LA (1990)

**Professional Experience**

Professor, Graphic Design (2008–present)  
 Savannah College of Art and Design–Savannah, GA

Assistant Professor, Graphic Design and Digital Media (2006–2008)  
 University of North Florida–Jacksonville, FL

Professor, Graphic Design (2004–2006)  
 Savannah College of Art and Design–Savannah, GA

Academic Department Director (2003–2004)  
 The Art Institute of Tampa–Tampa, FL

Chair, Graphic Design Department (2002–2003)  
 Professor, Graphic Design (2000–2003)  
 Savannah College of Art and Design–Savannah, GA

Freelance Graphic Designer and Consultant (2000–present)

**Presentations**

*Let's Have a Live Crit! – An Introduction to the Importance of Current Technology in  
 Distance Courses*, 6th Annual Designs on eLearning Conference, Savannah, GA, 2010

*The Changing Faces of Graphic Design*  
 Museum of Contemporary Art, San Juan, PR, 2010

*Using Parallel Analysis to Determine the Number of Components to Extract in  
 Principal Component Analysis*, 2009

Mid-South Educational Research Association Conference (MSERA), Baton Rouge, LA  
*High-Stakes Portfolio Assessment in Undergraduate Graphic Design Programs*  
 Measuring Unique Studies Effectively Conference (MUSE), Savannah, GA, 2009