

Community College Faculty Experiences with Outcomes Assessment and Its Perceived  
Influence on Teaching and Learning

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore community college faculty experiences and perceptions of outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning. Of specific focus in this study was how community college faculty perceived whether external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes facilitated the improvement of faculty and student performance. This study was conducted through the lens of the constructivist paradigm. The conceptual framework that framed this study was based on prior research confirming an increase in assessment activity at institutions of higher education, an increase in external accountability, an increase in institutional commitment to understanding student learning, faculty perception of assessment as time taken from their students, and low faculty engagement in assessment.

The study institution was a large, rural-serving community college located in the Southern region of Texas. Participants in the study included 12 purposefully selected faculty, six each from academic areas and occupational education programs. Data collection occurred through the lens of the researcher, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field notes. Data analysis was conducted through the constant comparative method, as well as open and axial coding techniques. Trustworthiness in this study was addressed by detailing the procedures and decisions made throughout the research process; as well as rich, thick descriptions of the interview subjects and their responses to address transferability issues. Dependability of the study was addressed during the data analysis phase by coding data initially then recoding the data several

weeks later. Finally, by implicitly stating assumptions and their influence on the research, confirmability of the study was addressed.

The findings of the study indicated that institutions of higher education and their faculty engage in assessment primarily to satisfy accreditation and state coordinating board mandates. In addition, faculty use several assessment methods to collect evidence of student learning in addition to sharing results internally and externally. Other findings included that the participants perceived that faculty experience benefits and challenges when engaging in outcomes assessment, that assessment influences student success and teacher performance, and that there is a lack of time, value, and institutional support to engage in assessment.

The findings of this study lead to several implications and recommendations for higher education practice. The implications for higher education practice included that institutions must continue to enhance current assessment practices to meet changing accountability demands and use external accountability to engage internal constituencies such as administrators and trustees in assessment for improvement. Other implications for higher education practice was that colleges and universities to engage faculty in assessment for improvement and to provide institutional support for assessment. Finally, faculty needs to gain a better understanding of the value of assessment and identify groups of faculty that have better-developed assessment practices. Recommendations for higher education practice is that community colleges must use external accountability demands to foster a culture of assessment and engage faculty assessment focused on improving student learning and teacher performance. Other recommendations for higher

education practice included that community colleges must provide institutional support for professional development of faculty in assessment focused on faculty understanding the value of assessment. Finally, colleges must build a mutual understanding of assessment and assessment results to communicate the value of postsecondary learning.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. are accountable to a variety of stakeholders, including government agencies, the business community, students and their parents, and non-profit agencies (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis, & Kinzie, 2012; Ewell, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Liu, 2011; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011). Stakeholders are less inclined to trust higher education's assertion that students are learning and are calling for more and better evidence of student achievement (Baker et al., 2012; Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014; Lederman, 2010). In addition, rising tuition and operating costs have led stakeholders to demand reassurance of the value of a college education including proof that higher education is preparing students for a lifetime of learning and the workplace in the 21st century (Head, 2011; Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Lederman, 2010; Lewis, 2010; Liu, 2011). Furthermore, all shareholders are asking for greater transparency on the part of colleges and universities in documenting student achievement and preparedness (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Eaton, 2012; Lewis, 2010). Increasing demands for accountability have led to new accountability relationships with each of these stakeholders (Ewell, 2009).

Increases in the federal investment in higher education have led to an increased attention and scrutiny of institutional performance (Eaton, 2012; 2015; Ewell, 2011; Powell, 2013). Consequently, federal policies and practices have expanded to include policies related to assessing performance (Eaton, 2015). The Higher Education Act of 2008 is one example of federal involvement in higher education; it prescribes general

education requirements, curriculum design, and expectations for student achievement (Borden; 2010; Eaton, 2010). For community colleges, the increased number of senior U.S. Department of Education appointments with community college backgrounds is evidence that federal practices are likely to lead to additional federal accountability demands (Ewell, 2011). Undoubtedly, the more significant source of federal influence on institutional practice is the accreditation process.

Regional accrediting agencies, private, nonprofit organizations designed for the specific purpose of accrediting colleges and universities, provide significant accountability demands of higher education institutions (Eaton, 2012; Liu, 2011). Accreditation is the principal means of external quality assurance created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs (Beno, 2004; Eaton, 2012). Eaton (2010) observed, “When the federal government makes demands on accrediting organizations, the intent is to influence the behavior of institutions” (p. 21). All six regional accrediting agencies require institutions to engage in assessment practices (Ewell, 2011; Head, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Liu, 2011). Furthermore, institutions wanting to be eligible for over \$100 billion in federal student aid are required to maintain accreditation (Eaton, 2015; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Consequently, institutions ranked regional and program accreditation as the primary reasons for gathering assessment information (Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014).

States provide a significant portion of funding for public higher education institutions; hence, they have strong accountability relationships with colleges and

universities (Bowles, 2014; Ewell, 2011). State legislators, motivated by increased competition for state funds, have placed greater accountability demands on institutions of higher education (Alexander, 2000; Malandra, 2008; McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Powell, 2013; Zumeta, 2011). Traditionally, states have allocated funds on the basis of enrollment, supporting the importance of accessibility in higher education (Hillman, Tandberg, & Fryar, 2015; Jones, 2013; National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2015). However, enrollment-based funding models provide little incentive for institutions to help students graduate and are poor indicators of institutional performance (Hillman et al., 2015; Miao, 2012; NCSL, 2015). Incentivizing college completion instead of or in addition to college access has become the latest trend in funding models for appropriations (Miao, 2012). Newer state funding policies, referred to as performance-based funding systems, intend to gain greater policy effectiveness by allowing multiple paths for institutions to demonstrate performance (Hillman et al., 2015). At the time of this study, 32 states had adopted performance-based funding systems that directly link allocations to institutional performance (McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Miao, 2012; NCSL, 2015).

Accreditors and the government are not the only entities seeking greater accountability from higher education; third party organizations are also demanding greater evidence of student and institutional performance (Eaton, 2012; Ewell, 2009, 2011; Hillman et al., 2015). Third party policy organizations include those involved in national initiatives such as the American Association of Community College's Voluntary Framework of Accountability(VFA), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the

Lumina Foundation's Complete College America project (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Rabovsky, 2012; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014). Complete College America, a nonprofit advocacy organization, was formed in 2009 and began lobbying state governments for higher education reforms particularly in developmental education (Rabovsky, 2012; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014). A coalition of community college organizations founded the VFA to collect information for external stakeholders on measures of institutional effectiveness (Ewell, 2011; Liu, 2011; Nunley, Bers, Manning, & Bumphus, 2011). These third party organizations have steered efforts to draw attention to issues such as college completion and often advocate for the adoption of performance-based funding policies (Hillman et al., 2015). In addition to third-party organizations, an increased national focus on degree attainment has elevated media attention on higher education (Ewell, 2011; Leveille, 2006). Higher education growth and rising costs have led the press to present their perspectives on the world of higher education (Leveille, 2006).

Colleges and universities have additional accountability relationships with the taxpayers and employers in the communities they serve (Kuh et al., 2015). Taxpayers often demonstrate their accountability relationships with colleges and universities via local board elections and financial support (Ewell, 2011). However, a rise in the cost of a higher education intensified concerns, on behalf of taxpayers, about affordability and the value of a college education; taxpayers expect a return on their investment (Eaton, 2012; Ewell, 2011; Kuh et al., 2015; Lewis, 2010). Likewise, employers within community college service districts receive direct services from community colleges via short-term

contract training and employee literacy training, thereby adding another dimension of stakeholder accountability (Ewell 2011; Kuh et al., 2015; Lederman, 2010). Employer accountability demands stem from dissatisfaction with the critical thinking and writing skills of graduates (Head, 2011, Lewis, 2010; Liu, 2011; US Department of Education, 2006). Employers, taxpayers as well as other stakeholders of higher education agree that greater completion rates while maintaining low costs is critical to the nation (Kuh et al., 2014)

External accountability demands from accreditors remain the primary drivers of assessment for institutions of higher education, however internal accountability demands stemming from commitment by faculty, staff, and institutional leaders to improve student learning and completion are also on the rise (Kuh et al., 2014; Liu, 2011; Nunley et al., 2011; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011). Accordingly, assessment has become an important practice for internal stakeholders such as students who learn, faculty who teach, and administrators who are responsible for accreditation (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Students learn from what is assessed, not from what lecturers assert is important (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 2013). Through information shared about performance on tests or assignments, students can evaluate their achievements and address any needs pertinent to their success (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Correspondingly, faculty in higher education want to do the best possible job to help students learn, and faculty need feedback from the assessment process to do so (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Royal, 2010; Suskie, 2009). Assessing student and institutional outcomes enable higher education practitioners to explore student learning openly, discuss what assessment results mean, and create plans

for action (Brown et al., 2013; Ewell, 2009). Contemporary approaches to assessment are used equally to help faculty improve teaching and learning as well as to assign grades to individual students (Suskie, 2009).

Outcomes assessment has a dual purpose in American higher education (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Borden, 2010; Ewell, 2008). Ewell (2008) describes these purposes as the improvement paradigm and the accountability paradigm of outcomes assessment. In the improvement paradigm, assessment is used to improve the teaching and learning process (Ewell, 2008; Borden, 2010). The accountability paradigm occurs when assessment is used to satisfy accountability demands from higher education policymakers and the public (Ewell, 2008). When weighing whether these paradigms can coexist, Banta (2007) argues that it is unfortunate that higher education practitioners perceive that the type of assessment that can guide improvements in student learning is misaligned from the kind of assessment being discussed by higher education policy makers. Banta (2007) further states, “It is assessment for accountability, not improvement that stakeholders outside the academy are proposing” (p.10). Assessment practices in higher education present both opportunities and challenges.

Higher education faculty have expressed resistance to demands for greater evidence of student achievement because they perceive the requirements as driven by external entities (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Kuh et al., 2014; Whittlesey, 2005). Assessing students requires the involvement of all faculty in generating and using student learning measures, yet, pressuring faculty to set measurable objectives compounds their reluctance to set performance targets for which they can be held accountable (Banta & Blaich, 2011;

Cohen et al., 2014). Outcomes assessment requires administrators and faculty to work together to identify learning outcomes in conjunction with teaching, and assessment strategies (Dietrich & Olson, 2010; Suskie, 2009); however, when administrators and faculty work together to develop assessment plans the accountability and improvement paradigms diverge. Because institutional support often hinges on image and not on data, external pressure for outcomes assessment opposes administrators' need for positive results (Cohen et al., 2014). Faculty involvement is critical to the assessment process because, without it, the connection between assessment and learning, teaching, and institutional improvement is weak (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

A decline in public confidence in higher education and with community colleges, in particular, has led greater accountability demands for these institutions to substantiate institutional performance and value (Gardner & Milliken, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014; McKeown-Moak, 2013). Federal and state-level agencies are placing progressively stronger importance on accountability, creating a demand for quality outcomes assessment, with evidence of student achievement (Liu, 2011). A majority of institutions of higher education have answered the call to implement assessment practices (Kuh et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2014).

In 2014, Kuh et al. (2014) published the results of a study conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) in the spring and summer of 2013. Provosts from 1,202 regionally accredited institutions in the U.S. were asked to participate in the survey, which found that 84% of institutions responding to the survey,

which had a 43% response rate, reported having adopted stated learning outcomes for all their undergraduate courses. The study also found that the top drivers of assessment on college and university campuses are accreditation, improving student learning and institutional quality, state mandates, president or governing board mandates, and state coordinating board or legislative mandates (Kuh et al., 2014). Cohen et al. (2014) have argued that accountability demands have had a positive impact on outcomes assessment on community college campuses:

Calls for greater accountability from the federal government, from state legislatures, and in particular from philanthropic organizations putting large sums of money toward efforts that they believe will increase completion and student success —have made assessment of student progress and outcomes standard practice on community college campuses. (p. 418)

Though many community colleges have implemented outcomes assessment to some extent, they continue to face several challenges in doing so (Nunley, Bers, Manning, & Bumphus, 2011). First, faculty involvement in assessment is essential to improvement; without it, assessing student learning weakens the connection between assessment and learning, teaching, and institutional improvement (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014). In their study, Kuh et al. (2014) found that provosts rated faculty ownership and involvement as top priorities in advancing the assessment agenda in both improving teaching and learning and enhancing institutional effectiveness.

Students present another issue concerning outcomes assessment in community colleges. At community colleges, students might enroll in a single course, to obtain a

specific job skill, to earn a promotion, to earn an associate's degree or certificate, or simply to complete enough courses to transfer to a four-year institution (Nunley et al., 2011). In fact, many community college students can achieve their educational goals without completing a program of study, thus making assessment of their learning particularly difficult (Bers, 2004).

Institutions of higher education are increasingly underscoring outcomes assessment of student learning for accountability and improvement (Ewell, 2011; Suskie, 2009). Assessment can facilitate the improvement of teaching, learning, and decision-making as well as validate teaching and learning efforts by demonstrating accountability to external audiences (Suskie, 2009). Eaton (2010) noted that faculty members wanting to sustain the values of “institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and peer and professional review” (p. 2) must strengthen outcomes assessment for accountability purposes. Suskie (2009) has added that student learning is the core of many community college missions; therefore, the assessment of student learning is a major component for demonstrating institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, the results of outcomes-based assessment can facilitate communication of the value of postsecondary learning, and show the extent to which the missions of community colleges are integrated into their programs and services (Gardner & Milliken, 2013).

Overcoming the challenges to outcomes assessment requires a multitude of strategies. Ewell (2011) argues that community colleges should embrace accountability demands and “adapt them to their own circumstances to meet legitimate calls for accountability, and use the resulting information to get even better” (p. 35). Shareholders

involved in assessment should use results to guide academic programs, institutional planning, accountability reports, and to communicate externally (Malandra, 2008). Similar to Malandra (2008), Suskie (2009) encourages community colleges to use the systematic evidence garnered through assessment to link the outcomes-based assessment cycle to strategic planning, budgeting, and resource allocation processes. Making frequent use of evaluation results also facilitates the improvement of assessment methodologies, instruments, and reporting formats (Malandra, 2008).

Gardner and Milliken (2013) recommend the creation of a shared conceptual framework to ensure the sustainability and relevance of the assessment process. The framework should be guided by faculty and administrator input to provide direction for the assessment process, to ensure institutional mission drives the process, and to systematically evaluate and modify the process (Gardner and Milliken; 2013). Finally, it is critical for internal stakeholders asking for assessment for accountability purposes, to reduce faculty apprehension towards assessment by underscoring that the methodologies faculty are using already meet the expectations for assessment (Suskie, 2009). In higher education, outcomes assessment serves to support enhancing teaching and learning processes and to satisfy external accountability demands (Bresciani, 2006; Ewell, 2011). Faculty involvement in assessment is essential to the improvement and accountability processes (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and

learning. Outcomes assessment is the process of articulating intended outcomes in regards to a program's services or student learning; purposefully planning activities so that the outcomes can be achieved; implementing methods to identify whether end results have been attained; and finally, using the results to promote improvement (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie, 2009). Of specific focus in this study was community college faculty perceptions of the influence of external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to engage in assessment on the quality of faculty and student performance. It is important for practitioners of higher education and their institutions to understand how to engage faculty in outcomes assessment to meet external accountability demands and use the assessment process to improve teaching and learning (McCullough & Jones, 2015). Though there is little research on faculty experiences with assessment, Kuh et al. (2014) point to increased faculty involvement, additional professional development of faculty, and wider use of assessment results by faculty as being keys to advancing outcomes assessment in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

The four research questions guided this study were:

1. How do community college faculty describe their experiences with outcomes assessment?
2. How do community college faculty describe the reasons for conducting outcomes assessment?
3. What do community college faculty perceive are the benefits of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?

4. What do community college faculty perceive are the challenges of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?

### **Significance of the Study**

Outcomes assessment serves to answer internal and external calls for accountability. Assessment for improving the teaching and learning process (Ewell, 2008) satisfies the internal demands for institutional commitment to gain a clearer understanding of student learning outcomes (Kuh et al., 2014; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011). Simultaneously, assessment helps institutions respond to accountability demands from higher education policymakers and the public (Ewell, 2008) by facilitating the use of results of outcomes assessment to communicate the value of postsecondary learning (Gardner & Milliken, 2013). Faculty involvement is critical to both improvement and accountability purposes (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014). This study is significant as it explores community college faculty perceptions of how assessment driven by external calls for accountability can facilitate improvement in the classroom. Research has shown that faculty often view improvement and accountability as parallel processes, with no convergence to solutions related to both paradigms (e.g., Ewell, 2009). Faculty is committed to their students' learning, yet they perceive assessment as externally motivated and regard it as time taken from their devotion to students (Banta & Blaich, 2011).

Banta (2007) has contended that there is a misalignment among the assessment for accountability paradigm and the assessment for improvement paradigm. Banta (2007) claims that the type of assessment higher education practitioners consider beneficial in

promoting improvement differs from the type of assessment demanded from higher education policy makers. Ewell (2009) further adds that the differences between the two paradigms of assessment are exaggerated and that current assessment approaches do not fully conform to either one. In contrast, Liu (2011) observes that institutions are already using outcomes assessment for a variety of purposes including accreditation requirements, responding to accountability demands, determining student readiness for college, evaluating programs, informing strategic planning, and modifying general education curriculum. However, faculty involvement in assessment is critical to improving teaching and learning and to meeting accountability demands (Kuh, 2014). Faculty, however, find it difficult to make a direct connection between the results of outcomes assessment and their instruction (Liu, 2011). Furthermore, concerns that assessment could be used to influence faculty evaluations negatively compounds faculty resistance (Lederman, 2010). Danley-Scott and Tompsett-Makin (2013) have added that lack of interest, lack of investment, or lack of incentive contribute to low faculty involvement in assessment. By studying faculty perceptions of outcomes assessment, this study aimed to identify additional, specific barriers to faculty participation in assessment.

This study aimed to explore means to increase faculty participation in assessment. The study's findings were particularly relevant to institutions striving to sustain the progress of outcomes assessment on their campuses. Finally, this study intended to explore decision making among community college leaders attempting to create an

institutional environment that values gathering and using outcomes data as integral to fostering student success and increasing institutional effectiveness.

### **Summary of Conceptual Framework**

This study was framed by the relationship between concepts found in the review of the literature. First, prior research confirms that institutions of higher education in the U.S. are accountable to a wide range of external stakeholders (e.g., Ewell, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011), as well as to an internal institutional commitment to gain a clearer understanding of student learning (e.g., Kuh, et al., 2014; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011). Next, the literature shows that accountability demands have led to increased assessment activity at institutions of higher education, including an increase in the number and variety of assessment tools (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Liu, 2011). Finally, prior research shows that low levels of faculty involvement are attributed to lack of interest, lack of institutional investment, or lack of financial incentive (e.g., Banta & Blaich, 2011; Danley-Scott & Tompsett-Makin, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014).

Increased faculty engagement is beneficial to institutions of higher education and their faculty. Liu (2011) observes that institutions engage in outcomes assessment for a variety of purposes including responding to accountability demands and accreditation. Each of the six regional accrediting agencies requires institutions to engage in assessment practices (Ewell, 2011; Head, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Liu, 2011). Failure to maintain accreditation indirectly results in loss of federal funding. Accreditation is a eligibility requirement for over \$100 billion in federal student aid (Eaton, 2015; Kuh &

Ikenberry, 2009). The goal of assessment should be to use these accountability demands to strengthen internal assessment for improvement (Kuh et al., 2015).

Faculty engagement is critical to using assessment to promote improvement and meet accountability demands (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014). Institutions want faculty to be more involved in assessment (Scott & Danley-Scott, 2015) for accountability and improvement. Faculty devotion to student learning is unquestioned; however, they perceive assessment as externally driven and regard it as time taken from their students (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Assessment for improvement involves finding out whether students learned, then using assessment results to improve teaching and learning (Bers, 2008; Hauer & Quill, 2011; Kuh & Ewell, 2010). Engaging in assessment can facilitate collaboration between administrators and faculty in program development, course objectives, teaching, and assessment strategies (Dietrich & Olson, 2010; McCullough & Jones, 2011; Suskie, 2009). Faculty engaged in assessment can decide what students in their courses should learn, then make decisions about student attainment of the required knowledge and skills (Kuh et al., 2015). Finally, strengthening assessment practices helps faculty sustain academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and peer and professional review (Eaton, 2010).

The tenets of external and internal accountability, increased assessment activity, and low faculty engagement serve to underpin this study. They helped determine how institutions of higher education can use accountability demands to reinforce assessment activity designed to influence the quality of teaching and learning. Specifically, the inquiry explored how faculty described their experiences and whether accountability

demands, assessment for improvement of teaching and learning, and levels of institutional support influenced their engagement in assessment. Because faculty participation in assessment is a fundamental component of assessment for accountability and improvement, the concept of how to effectively engage faculty was a basis for the conceptual framework that guided this study.

### **Summary of Methodology**

Qualitative research methods were used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups attribute to outcomes assessment. Based on the purpose of this study, a phenomenological research design guided the study to address four research questions intended to gain insight on faculty perceptions of outcomes assessment. A constructivist worldview allowed the for exploration of the human part of a story by relying on the participant's experiences with outcomes assessment (Creswell, 2014; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The setting for the study was a large, rural-serving community college located in South Texas (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). A total of 12 purposefully selected participants were chosen for the study. Using maximum variation strategies, participants selected included six from academic areas and six from occupational education programs.

Data collection in this study occurred through the researcher, interviews, and content analysis of documents related to assessment (Bailey, 1996; Creswell, 2014). Data analysis in this study included transcribing interviews, typing field notes and optically scanning material (Creswell, 2014). Open and axial coding were used to analyze data and sought verification of themes by constantly comparing what was learned

to emergent themes throughout the data analysis phase (Bailey, 1996; Mertens 2015). Trustworthiness in this study was addressed by detailing the procedures and decisions made throughout the research process (Bailey, 1996).

### **Assumptions of the Study**

The following assumptions guided this study:

1. Participants provided truthful and honest responses during the interviews.
2. Participants in the study had a basic knowledge of external and internal accountability demands placed on the institution and its stakeholders.
3. Bias or prejudice of participants was acknowledged and did not influence the research study.
4. Participants' perceptions of outcomes assessment may only apply to their institution.

### **Limitations to the Study**

The limitations of the study are as follows:

1. Due to resources and the geographic locations of the community colleges in Texas, the researcher has limited ability to travel to institutions throughout the state of Texas, so the study was conducted at one institution within South Texas.
2. The study institution was a large, rural-serving community college and the results may not be transferrable to institutions of a different size.
3. Data was collected from a single institutions so findings may not be transferrable to institutions in other geographical locations.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were used throughout the study and are operationalized as follows:

**Accountability.** Accountability refers to the pressure for higher education to demonstrate institutional effectiveness, largely driven by external forces such as federal and state government, accrediting bodies, students, and the public demanding that colleges and universities be held responsible for their product (Head, 2011).

**Assessment.** Assessment is the ongoing process of establishing clear expected outcomes, ensuring that there are opportunities to achieve those outcomes, systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine whether the expectations are met, and then using the results to understand and improve (Suskie, 2009).

**Accreditation.** Accreditation is a process created and employed by institutions of higher education as an internal and external quality review by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. The accreditation process has existed in the U.S. for more than a century, emerging from public health and safety service concerns (Eaton, 2012).

**External Accountability.** External accountability includes accountability from state government, the federal government, accreditors, service area and employers, and various third-party players (Ewell, 2011).

**Institutional Effectiveness.** Institutional effectiveness is a measure of the extent to which an institution is accomplishing its mission and major strategic or institutional

goals; student learning is a major component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness (Suskie, 2009).

**Internal Accountability.** Internal accountability for institutions of higher education refers to accountability demands from within the institution. Internal accountability includes demands from faculty and staff, administrators, and governing boards (Kuh et al., 2014).

**Outcomes.** Outcomes are benefits for the recipients of courses, programs, or service measured at any point during a course, at graduation, or at any point after (Manning, 2011).

**Outcomes Assessment.** Outcomes assessment is the process of articulating intended outcomes in regards to a program's services and student learning, purposefully planning activities so that the outcomes can be achieved, implementing methods to identify whether end results have been achieved, and using those results (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie, 2009). Outcomes assessment serves the dual purpose of improvement when it is accomplished by faculty and administrators acting within the parameters of the teaching and learning process and accountability when evidence is gathered to satisfy external demands that institutions be held accountable for their product (Ewell, 2011).

**Student Learning Outcomes.** NILOA (2015) defines student learning outcomes statements as clearly stating the expected "knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education" (NILOA, 2015, para. 1). NILOA (2015) has further clarified that clear student learning

outcomes statements are specific to an institutional or program level, clearly expressed, understandable and communicated, updated regularly, and receptive to feedback.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduces the issue of outcomes assessment as a problem in practice in higher education. Though it is a problem in all types of institutions, this study focuses on the issue from the perspective of community colleges. In this study, outcomes assessment is defined by process and purpose. The outcomes assessment process includes formulating expected results, planning activities so that the outcomes can be achieved, implementing collection methods, and using the assessment results (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie, 2009). Outcomes assessment serves the dual purpose of improvement and accountability. When faculty accomplishes outcomes assessment and administrators acting within the parameters of the teaching and learning process, outcomes assessment serves to promote improvement (Ewell, 2011). When the evidence gathered is used to answer calls that institutions be held accountable for their product, outcomes assessment serves for accountability purposes (Ewell, 2011).

This proposed study sought to explore the experiences of community college faculty with outcomes assessment. Specifically, the study sought to investigate whether faculty perceived assessment for accountability supporting assessment for improvement. In addition, the study sought to determine the extent to which accountability demands have influenced assessment practices for community colleges and how community colleges can address challenges to outcomes assessment. Guided by four research questions, the study intends to gain insight on faculty perceptions of outcomes

assessment and employed qualitative research methods in its approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to outcomes assessment. Lastly, any assumptions and limitations that may have a bearing on the study are explicitly stated.

### **Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

Chapter II presents a review of literature within the context of outcomes assessment in higher education and articulates the conceptual framework of the study. Chapter III will detail the methodology and research design for the study. Chapter IV will report the study's findings. Chapter V will present a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for higher education, in addition to recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Chapter II presents a review of the literature on the development of outcomes assessment in higher education. The review of literature is organized into the following six sections: 1) Overview of community colleges, 2) overview of outcomes assessment in higher education, 3) overview of external and internal accountability demands in higher education, 4) overview of state governance relative to outcomes assessment, 5) strengths and challenges of outcomes assessment in higher education, and 6) the conceptual framework that frames this study.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning.

#### **Overview of Community Colleges**

A community college is any non-profit institution that is regionally accredited to award degrees, diplomas, and certificates (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2014). The mission of community colleges has historically been one of providing access to a higher education focused on educating students for the workforce as well as preparing them for four-year schools (Banta, Black, Kahn, & Jackson, 2004; Bowles, 2014; Cohen et al., 2014). Community colleges are often defined by their curricular functions which include courses in general education or liberal arts for academic transfer, workforce education, continuing education, developmental education, and community service that enable individuals to gain human capital (Bowles, 2014;

Cohen et al., 2014; Jepsen et al., 2014; Myran & Ivery, 2013). Community colleges are at the center of academia, industry, and local government, and playing a substantial role in economic development and college preparedness (Bowles, 2014).

### **Occupational Education in Community Colleges**

Vocational, occupational, or career and technical education, are terms associated with curricula leading to associate degrees, or certificate intended to prepare students for employment and career advancement (Cohen et al., 2014; Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Myran & Ivery, 2013). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (2016), five million students enrolled in occupational programs in Fall 2014. Bowles (2014) adds that workforce development and readiness is where community colleges have the greatest social impact. Community colleges are better situated to meet community workforce needs and are adapting curriculum to fit the evolving knowledge and skill requirements of the workplace (Bowles, 2014; Myran & Ivery, 2013). Jepsen et al. (2014) found that earning credits at a community college even without completing a degree has a positive effect on earnings. Furthermore, earning an award such as an associate's degree or certificate increases likelihoods of employment (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen et al., 2014).

### **The Transfer Function of Community Colleges**

Community colleges were initially established to provide access to higher education via transfer coursework for students that might not be eligible for highly selective colleges or for those students that might work and need to take courses close to home (Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). The transfer function

describes the progression of moving a student's academic credits across different institutions (Senie, 2016). Cohen et al. (2014) describe the transfer function of community colleges as student flow and the liberal arts curriculum. Student flow refers to providing education at the for students moving through the American educational system, and the liberal arts curriculum includes foundational components such as the humanities, sciences, and social sciences (Cohen et al., 2014). The goal of the transfer function is to ensure equal completion rates among students that begin at a community college compared to those who start at a university (Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Senie, 2016).

Unfortunately, the likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree is lower if that student begins their postsecondary education at a community college (Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Mullin, 2012; Senie, 2016). Several reasons for this gap in success exist, and some can be equally attributed to community colleges as well as to the universities. As open access institutions, community colleges allow students to explore different associate degrees or transfer pathways (Baker, 2016; Senie, 2016). State policies are in place to ease the transfer of credits; however, often community college students pay the penalty in the form of loss of credits when they transfer to a university (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Mullin, 2012; Senie, 2016). Hesitation from universities to recognize the value of education provided by the community colleges contribute to low transfer rates and success (Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Senie, 2016). As a result of the loss of credits, students who transfer from a community college to a four-year university have a lessened probability of completion (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

### **Overview of Outcomes Assessment**

Though current demands on higher education for accountability seem to be new, there is a long history of assessment in higher education (Powell, 2013). Shavelson, Schneider, and Shulman (2007) pointed to several eras of assessment in higher education including the following: 1) the origin of standardized tests of learning in the early 1900s, 2) the assessment of learning for general and graduate education in the mid-1900s, 3) the rise of test providers in the mid to late 1900s, and 4) the era of external accountability from 1979 to the present. Ewell (2008) had marked 1985 as the beginning of assessment as a formal topic of policy in the U.S. when the first national convention on the topic was held. In 2005, a report by U.S. Department of Education pointed to a lack of accountability mechanisms that measure the college students' success (Liu, 2011; Powell, 2013). Margaret Spellings, then U.S. Secretary of Education, formed a Commission on the Future of Higher Education, charged with investigating four areas of higher education: access, affordability, quality and accountability (Lewis, 2013; Liu, 2011; US Department of Education, 2006). Among the several recommendations made by the commission was a call for increased accountability in higher education, particularly regarding assessing student learning outcomes (Millett, Payne, Dwyer, Stickler, & Alexiou, 2008; Nunley, Bers, Manning, & Bumphus, 2011). A decade after its release in 2006, the implications of the Spellings Commission's final report continue to impact policies of accreditors, state policymakers, and institutions of higher education. The report arguably accelerated outcomes assessment activity in community colleges (Liu, 2011; Malandra 2008). Since its release, many community colleges have implemented

learning outcomes assessment to some extent; however, they continue to face several challenges in the area of outcomes assessment (Nunley et al., 2011). When discussing the issue of outcomes assessment in higher education, Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, and Kinzie (2014) claimed that “assessment of student learning keeps climbing upward on the national higher education agenda” (p. 3). Among the reasons for the continued pressure to assess outcomes are external accountability demands for colleges to substantiate institutional performance and value and internal accountability demands for increased evidence of student achievement (Gardner & Milliken, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014; McKeown-Moak, 2013).

### **Defining Assessment**

Outcomes assessment is a planned, systematic process during which higher education stakeholders articulate expected outcomes for a program’s services and student learning (Bresciani, 2006; Hauer & Quill, 2011). Stakeholders then purposefully plan activities so that the intended outcomes can be achieved. Methods for determining whether the expected outcomes have been attained are then developed. Finally, those involved in the assessment process use the results to plan improvements. Suskie (2009) further added that the assessment process must be a continuous cycle. In the final step of the assessment process, results are used to review and modify the process itself; then the cycle begins again.

When outcomes are used to assess student learning, they are referred to as student learning outcomes. Student learning outcomes are statements specifying what students will be able to do or demonstrate upon completion of an assignment, course, or program

(Dietrich & Olson, 2010; Hauer & Quill, 2011). Outcome statements often identify knowledge, skills, attitudes, values or behaviors that students are expected to demonstrate (Dietrich & Olson, 2010; Hauer & Quill, 2011). The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), an organization established in 2008 to help higher education institutions productively use assessment data, has defined student learning outcomes statements as a combination of these ideas. NILOA (2015) defined student learning outcomes statements as clearly stating the expected “knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education” (NILOA, 2015, para. 1).

### **Purpose of Outcomes Assessment**

In higher education, assessment serves two seemingly different purposes (Banta, 2007; Ewell, 2008; Kuh & Ewell, 2010). Assessment serves to answer accountability demands and serves as a basis for promoting improvement. Ewell (2008) has claimed that assessment for improvement purposes came from the institution-centered approach of the mid-1980s and assessment for accountability is derived from early state mandates. Unfortunately, the kind of assessment that academic leaders perceive will guide improvements in student learning is not what is being suggested by policy makers (Arnold & Marchese, 2011; Banta, 2007). Assessment for accountability, not improvement, is the focus of external calls for accountability (Banta, 2007; Borden, 2010).

On the one hand, outcomes assessment serves many functions when it is used to promote continuous improvement. Primarily, outcomes assessment functions as a forum

for administrators and faculty to collaborate in program development, course objectives, teaching, and assessment strategies (Dietrich & Olson, 2010; McCullough & Jones, 2011; Suskie, 2009). The assessment process also serves to validate student attainment of the intended learning outcomes (Crespo et al., 2010; Nunley et al., 2011). When focused on quality improvement, assessment also involves not simply finding out whether students learned, but also using assessment results to improve teaching and learning, thereby forming a continuous and ongoing process (Bers, 2008; Hauer & Quill, 2011; Kuh & Ewell, 2010).

Assessment for accountability, on the other hand, documents institutional compliance with federal and accreditation demands (Ewell, 2008; Liu, 2011). The federal government requires that institutions provide evidence that they are achieving whatever learning goals they have established to meet their mission (Eaton, 2015; Suskie, 2009). In addition, all regional accrediting associations stipulate outcomes assessment as a criterion for accreditation of post-secondary institutions (Banta, 2007; Provezis, 2010). Alongside regional accreditation agencies, specialized accrediting organizations have also increased their focus on assessment (Suskie, 2009; Whittlesey, 2005). However, planning and implementing assessment to establish what students have learned presents challenges when balanced with whether the assessment is intended for improvement or accountability (Banta, 2007; Suskie, 2009).

### **External Forces Driving Outcomes Assessment**

Kuh et al. (2014) published the results of a study in which provosts from 1,202 regionally accredited, undergraduate-degree-granting, two- and four-year, public, private,

and for-profit institutions in the U.S. answered a national survey about assessment practices at their institutions. The survey conducted by NILOA in the spring and summer of 2013 had a 43% response rate. The study was a follow-up to survey carried out by NILOA in 2009 and published by Kuh and Ikenberry. Of the 1,202 respondents to the 2013 survey, 725 also participated in the 2009 study allowing for appropriate comparison of the results (Kuh et al., 2014).

Kuh et al. (2014) found that 84% of the 1,202 respondents reported having adopted stated learning outcomes for all their undergraduates and that the average number of assessment tools used by these institutions had increased from the study conducted four years earlier. According to Kuh et al. (2014), the top drivers of assessment on university and college campuses were accreditation, improving student learning and institutional quality, state mandates, president or governing board mandates, and state coordinating board or legislative mandates. Though external accountability demands remain the prime driver of assessment, another significant finding of the study showed that external forces now appear less dominant in promoting outcomes assessment than internal demands such as program review and process improvement (Kuh et al., 2014).

### **Spellings Commission Report**

In 2005, then United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, formed the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Ewell, 2011; Malandra, 2008). Known as the Spellings Commission, the membership consisted of business industry and higher education leaders (Eaton, 2010). The Spellings Commission's charge was to

develop a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education to meet the needs of the country's diverse population and address the economic and workforce needs of the country's future (Bers, 2008; Eaton, 2010; Malandra, 2008). Over the course of a year, the Spellings Commission deliberated over the state of the country's higher education system and generated a report of their findings. The Spellings Commission's Report (SCR), *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* was released in September of 2006 (Malandra, 2008; US Department of Education, 2006). The report focused on access, affordability, quality, accountability, and innovation. Relevant to outcomes assessment, the report's findings stated that "postsecondary education institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes" (US Department of Education, 2006, p. 25). The report also stated that accreditation agencies need to allow "comparisons among institutions regarding learning outcomes" (US Department of Education, 2006, p. 25). The SCR (2006) recommended that colleges and universities become more transparent with student success outcomes and share this information with students and their families. To achieve greater accountability in regards to learning outcomes, the SCR recommended two possible routes. The first recommendation was to develop and implement a standardized test to measure value added. The second recommendation was for new federal guidelines for accrediting bodies to help develop standards of institutional comparison (Douglass, Thomson, & Zhao, 2012; McClure, 2007). The use of national standardized test results to compare institutions was widely rejected by institutions and their faculty (Banta, 2007; Douglass et al., 2012).

The SCR was especially critical of accrediting organizations and their processes. The report claimed that accrediting organization processes failed to 1) adequately address student achievement, 2) encourage innovation, and 3) inform the public about academic quality (Eaton, 2010). The SCR's findings also influenced the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008. Over a hundred new rules or reporting procedures for institutions of higher education and accreditation were included in the act addressing various aspects of accrediting agency accountability (Eaton, 2010; Kaplin & Lee, 2014). These provisions for greater accountability meant a greater federal interest in the academic area and an expanded oversight of accrediting bodies (Eaton, 2010). In looking ahead at the implications of the HEOA, Kaplin and Lee (2014) argued that HEOA will push accreditation away from its traditional role as a peer and professional review toward a role of scrutinizing institutional compliance with federal priorities.

### **Accreditation and Assessment**

Eaton (2010) observed, "When the federal government makes demands on accrediting organizations, the intent is to influence the behavior of institutions" (p. 2). According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2015), six regional accrediting bodies in the U.S. have over 8,300 member institutions. Since the 1980s, institutions of higher education have recognized the need to assess student learning, and accrediting organizations have required reporting on the quality of the education their member institutions provide (Ewell, 2011). However, the extent of accrediting agencies' mandates on outcomes assessment before 2005 was limited to reporting on resources and other inputs into teaching and learning (Suskie, 2009). U.S. Department of Education

regulations have shifted to mandate that accrediting organizations encourage institutions and programs to have outcomes assessment plans that focus on student learning and examine their educational effectiveness (Whittlesey, 2005). Regional and program accreditation remain the primary forces driving assessment; however, the focus of accreditation mandates of outcomes assessment has shifted more towards outputs such as student achievement (Kuh et al., 2014; Whittlesey, 2005).

Kuh et al. (2014) published the results of a study in which provosts from 1,202 regionally accredited, undergraduate-degree-granting, two- and four-year, public, private, and for-profit institutions in the U.S. answered a national survey about assessment practices at their institutions. NILOA conducted the survey by in the spring and summer of 2013 and had a 43% response rate. The study found that specialized accreditation was the second highest reason that institutions of higher education engage in assessment practices. Specialized accreditation involves a regular review and assessment of programs within institutions. Programs must affirm quality for students and for the colleges and universities in which these disciplines are taught to receive accreditation from their specialized accreditors (Komives & Smedick, 2012). Whittlesey (2005) studied 65 specialized accrediting bodies and found that all of them required assessment of student learning to grant program accreditation. Whittlesey (2005) further found that many specialized accrediting agencies facilitate the assessment process by suggesting the content areas or learning outcomes to address. Ewell (2011) validated the results of the Whittlesey (2005) study, finding that specialized accreditors in the United States fall into two groups: 1) those that accredit programs leading to practice in a licensed profession

and are fairly prescriptive about assessment and 2) those that have gradually augmented their requirements for evidence of student learning.

### **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools**

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) is the regional accrediting body for 11 Southern states. It accredits institutions of higher education that award associate, baccalaureate, masters, or doctoral degrees. SACSCOC accredits over 800 institutions including 163 in Texas, 65 of which are community colleges (SACSCOC, 2015a). The process for accreditation through SACSCOC involves a collective analysis and judgment via 1) an internal institutional self-evaluation, 2) an external peer review, and 3) a reasoned decision made by SACSCOC Board of Trustees (SACSCOC, 2012a). After an institution gains initial accreditation, a reaffirmation process occurs every 10 years with a Fifth-Year Interim Report required midway through the accreditation cycle (SACSCOC, 2015b). The requirement of a Fifth-Year Interim Report was developed in response to the U.S. Department of Education's mandating accrediting bodies to monitor institutions continuously and have a mechanism for reviewing multiple sites initiated since last reaffirmation (SACSCOC, 2015b). Institutions must respond to approximately a hundred standards and requirements in a compliance certification, several of which are relevant to institutional outcomes assessment (SACSCOC, 2012a).

SACSCOC partitions the standards required for accreditation into three subgroups: core requirements, comprehensive standards, and federal requirements. Institutions seeking initial or continued accreditation must demonstrate to the SACSCOC

Board of Trustees that they engage in assessment by demonstrating compliance with the standards (SACSCOC, 2012b). Accreditation standards calling for outcomes assessment can be found throughout each of the subgroups.

Core requirements are foundational requirements that establish basic expectations for member institutions be addressed at the institutional level (SACSCOC, 2012a). Core Requirement 2.5 calls for the institution to engage in ongoing planning and evaluation that incorporates a systematic review of outcomes (SACSCOC, 2012b). Core Requirement 2.12 requires that institutions develop a quality enhancement plan that identifies key issues based on institutional assessment and focuses on learning outcomes.

Comprehensive standards are specific to operations of units and programs within the institution and establish a level of accomplishment expected of all member institutions (SACSCOC, 2012a). Comprehensive Standard 3.3 requires that institutions identify expected outcomes, assesses whether outcomes are achieved, and provide evidence of improvement based on the results. It requires assessment of educational programs, administrative support services, student support services, and community or public services within its mission (SACSCOC, 2012a). Comprehensive Standard 3.5.1 asks the institution to identify college-level general education competencies and assess the extent to which students have attained them. Finally, Federal requirements are mandates that SACSCOC reviews in accordance with federal regulations outlined by the U.S. Department of Education (SACSCOC, 2012a). Federal Requirement 4.1 mandates that institutions evaluate success with respect to student achievement, consistent with its mission (SACSCOC, 2012a).

## **State Governance of Higher Education in Texas**

Similar to how the federal government uses accrediting bodies to influence institutional behavior, the Texas State Legislature uses the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) as a vehicle for institutional change. Pursuant to the Texas Constitution (1991), the Texas Legislature meets for 140 days in regular session beginning on the second Tuesday in January of each odd-numbered year. The Texas Legislature has two houses, the House of Representatives and the Senate, each of which has higher education committees that make recommendations to the legislature in the form of bills referred. The THECB works with colleges and universities to implement the laws on their campuses once bills relevant to higher education become law.

The THECB is the state coordinating board governing Texas public institutions of higher education. Pursuant to Texas Education Code (2013b), the board consists of nine members appointed by the governor with representation from all areas of the state. In accordance with Texas Education Code (2013c), the board represents the highest authority in the state in matters of public higher education and is charged with ensuring efficient use of resources, evaluating progress of a long-range master plan, collecting and making data accessible to stakeholders, making recommendations to improve the process for student transfers, and administering financial aid and other grants to achieve the state's long-range goals.

In recent years, the Texas Legislature and the THECB have been increasingly active in outcomes assessment at institutions of higher education (Malandra, 2008). In 2011, The Texas Legislature enacted House Bill 9 (2011) establishing the process and

methodology by which the THECB is to work with institutions to establish outcomes-based funding. Also in 2011, The THECB revised the state's core curriculum by establishing six core objectives and nine foundational component areas defining the essential knowledge and skills that students need to be successful in college and their careers (THECB, 2011). Simultaneously, the THECB's Learning Outcomes Project addressed essential student learning outcome statements in the published list of courses approved for general academic transfer offered at community colleges in Texas (THECB, 2015). These policies and regulations set forth by Texas higher education policymakers are meant to facilitate outcomes assessment at the institutional, program, and course level.

### **Performance-Based Funding in Texas**

Performance-based funding is a system that directly or formulaically links state appropriations to specific performance measures on various indicators (McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Miao, 2012; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014). States have historically allocated funds based on enrollment, reinforcing the importance of access to higher education (Jones, 2013; Miao, 2012; National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2015). However, enrollment-based funding models are insufficient indicators of performance as they provide little incentive to improve college completion (Miao, 2012; NCSL, 2015). The implementation of performance-based funding can be mostly attributed to limited state government funds, leading to higher education competing with other state priorities for adequate financial support (McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Zusman, 2005). In Texas,

Texas House Bill 9 (2011) implemented a performance-based funding system for community college.

In an effort to increase student access to higher education, student success in higher education, and to encourage institutional innovation in developing student support services, Texas adopted performance-based funding in 2011 (Texas House Bill 9, 2011; Texas Senate Bill 1 2013). The performance-based funding system in Texas allocates 10% of formula funding depending on student success points earned from a three-year average of student performance in various metrics. Senate Bill 1 (2013) delineates the metrics. The metrics include the following: 1) successful completion of developmental mathematics, reading, and writing; 2) completion of the first college-level courses in mathematics, reading, and writing; 3) completion of 15 and 30 semester credit hours; 4) transferring after completing 15 semester credit hours; and 5) graduating with a degree or certificate (Texas House Bill 9, 2011; Texas Senate Bill 1, 2013). Extra student success points are given when the degree is in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, or Allied Health (Texas House Bill 9, 2011; Texas Senate Bill 1, 2013). Further debate by the Texas Legislature has called for performance-based funding to increase to 25% of total state funding for higher education, but, as of now, it remains at 10 % (McLendon & Hearn, 2013). By linking allocations to these metrics, community colleges are pressured into collecting and analyzing data, then making improvements to secure funding. The metrics prescribed by Texas version of performance-based funding are forms of institutional level student outcomes; hence, assessment processes can be

equally used to facilitate institutional responses to SACSCOC Core Requirement 2.5 and Federal Requirement 4.1.

### **General Education and the New Texas Core Curriculum**

Increased calls for accountability on student outcomes from parents, trustees, and the government has led to greater demand for assessment of general education outcomes in higher education (THECB, 2013; Yin & Volkwein, 2010). General education is the core of undergraduate curriculum regardless of major (Allen, 2006). General educational outcomes integrate a professional education and liberal arts for any student completing a college degree (Nunley et al., 2011; THECB, 2013). Developing an effective assessment process for general education outcomes is a particular challenge for colleges (Ohlemacher & Davis, 2012; THECB, 2009). Assessing general education differs from other types of assessment because there is no clear ownership of general education within an institution (THECB, 2009). However, assessment of student achievement of general education outcomes is a significant portion of an institution's efforts to assess student learning. SACSCOC requires that general education be substantial, broad, and coherent in an undergraduate program (Yin & Volkwein, 2010).

The new Texas Core Curriculum (TCC) was designed to aid institutions in Texas with some of the challenges in assessing general education on their campuses by identifying six core objectives that equate to general education outcomes. The purpose of the core curriculum is to ensure that Texas undergraduate students in public institutions of higher education have the essential knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in college, in a career, in their communities, and in life (THECB, 2011). The core

curriculum also serves to facilitate the transfer of lower-division course credits among public colleges, universities, and health-related institutions throughout the state. The TCC identifies six general education outcomes called core objectives: communication, critical thinking, empirical and quantitative skills, teamwork, personal responsibility, and social responsibility (THECB, 2017). The core objectives are distributed among nine foundational component areas. Foundational component areas include communication, mathematics, and life and physical sciences among others. The foundational component areas are aligned with core objectives to help institutions decide which courses belong in which component area. The THECB expects institutions to assess the core curriculum using similar methods described in SACSCOC's comprehensive standard 3.5.1 asks for assessment of general education competencies (THECB, 2017). Institutions must submit a report to the THECB every 10 years in alignment with their reaffirmation schedule (THECB, 2017).

### **Texas and Student Learning Outcomes**

The THECB publishes the *Lower Division Academic Course Guide Manual* (ACGM) and the *Workforce Education Course Manual* (WECM) that list courses that may be offered by community and technical colleges in Texas and eligible for state funding. In addition to listing the course, a brief description of each course is given to guide content. In 2011, the Learning Outcomes Project was created by the THECB to improve the ACGM and statewide course transfer (THECB, 2015). The project developed student learning outcomes for frequently taught courses across the state (THECB, 2015). The THECB enlists faculty from colleges and universities across the

state to participate in the development of student learning outcomes (THECB, 2015).

The ACGM instructs institutions to cover and assess all learning outcomes. The ACGM leaves assessment methods up to the institution, thus allowing for differences in instructional delivery methods. Though identification of learning outcomes is only one part of the assessment process; the student learning outcomes identified in the ACGM can be used in responding to SACSCOC's Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1, which requires educational programs to assess student learning.

### **Internal Forces Driving Assessment**

Kuh et al. (2014) argued that the reasons for the increase in assessment activity are not limited to pressure from external bodies such as accrediting and governmental entities. Recently, institutions are recognizing they need better evidence of student accomplishment, and institutional governing boards are taking a more active role in holding institutions accountable (Kuh et al., 2014). The internal stakeholders of a community college include trustees, administrators, students, faculty, and staff. Community college leaders maintain that access and completion of educational and career goals remain a priority in community colleges; however, community colleges must also develop means for gauging institutional effectiveness (AACC, 2012). In other words, for colleges to respond fully to public demands for accountability, the question of what difference a college education makes must be continually addressed (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges [AGB], 2010). Across the community college sector, trustees, presidents, administrators, faculty, and staff are committed to identifying benchmarks that will help point out ways to improve institutional and student

performance. Though community colleges currently report on their effectiveness using passing rates on licensure exams, job placement rates, and graduation rates, these measures are not representative of the entire student population (Millett et al., 2008). In order to meet accountability demands, community colleges have a vested interest in becoming more transparent in their reporting of student learning outcome results (AACC, 2012). The AGB (2010) urges trustees to be a part of the conversation about student learning by collaborating with institutional administrators to encourage their involvement in assessment of student learning. Finally, student skepticism about higher education's value is rising because of the increase in tuition and student debt leaving students questioning higher education's value versus cost.

### **Strengths and Challenges of Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education**

Community colleges face many challenges including diminishing public confidence turning into greater demands for colleges to substantiate institutional performance and value to a variety of stakeholders (Gardner & Milliken, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014; McKeown-Moak, 2013). Though assessment of student learning outcomes is now practiced at most institutions of higher education, there are still many challenges for institutions in regards to assessment (Kuh et. al, 2014).

### **Strengths of Outcomes Assessment**

Kuh and Ikenberry (2009) and Kuh et al. (2014) each conducted surveys of outcomes assessment activity in colleges and universities in the United States in which 725 institutions of higher education participated in 2009 and again in 2013. Their findings concluded that 84% of institutions responding to the survey reported having

adopted stated learning outcomes in 2013, an increase of 10% from 2009. Kuh et al. (2014) found that there is significantly more assessment activity now than in 2009 with the average number of assessment tools or approaches used by colleges and universities increasing by two in 2013 from an average three in 2009. In addition to the increase in the number of assessment tools, their findings also indicated an increase in the variety tools and measures including use of rubrics, portfolios, and other classroom-based assessments as well (Kuh et al., 2014). Finally, 75 % of provosts participating in the study indicated “very much” or “quite a bit” of institutional support for assessment activity. Ewell (2011) remarked that the “contribution of accreditation to the mélange of forces calling on community colleges for more and better evidence of student academic achievement, together with evidence that institutions are using this evidence to make improvements, is substantial” (p. 6). Based on the literature presented, it appears that a strength of outcomes assessment is the volume of assessment activity within institutions of higher education.

### **Challenges to Outcomes Assessment**

The literature reviewed for this study indicated several challenges relevant to higher education and outcomes assessment. The challenges can be classified into four categories: 1) challenges involving faculty, 2) challenges involving students, 2) challenges involving resources, and 4) challenges involving the assessment process itself. This section presents details on each challenge.

**Challenges involving faculty.** Faculty involvement in assessment is essential to the improvement of the teaching and learning process (Kuh et al., 2014). Bers (2008) has

argued that without faculty involvement, assessing student learning weakens the business of learning, teaching, and institutional improvement. Kuh et al. (2014) found that provosts rated faculty ownership and involvement as top priorities to advance the assessment agenda in the improvement of teaching and learning and enhancing institutional effectiveness. However, faculty have expressed resistance to accreditation demands for greater evidence of student achievement (Bers, 2008; Eaton, 2010; Whittlesey, 2005). Faculty commitment to student learning is unquestioned, yet they regard assessment as externally driven and as precious time taken from their students (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Much of the focus of conversations about assessment is on measurement issues; however, encouraging the use of assessment data to guide change is much more about collaborating with colleagues to decide what to improve than it is about measurement (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Hutchings, 2010). Banta and Blaich (2011) added that even the most skillfully collected and interpreted evidence would have no impact unless it engages an institution's faculty, staff, and leaders. Adding to the dilemma is the high number of adjunct faculty teaching in community colleges who find it difficult to understand why assessment is being done, why their courses or students were chosen for assessment, and what they need to do (Nunley et al., 2011).

**Challenges involving students.** At community colleges, students enroll for many reasons. Students might enroll in less than full-time course loads, to enhance their job skills, to earn an associate's degree or certificate, or to complete transfer courses (Nunley et al., 2011). Many community college students can achieve their educational goals without completing a program of study, thus making assessing their learning particularly

difficult (Bers, 2004). The use of standardized tests might provide a solution, but researchers are concerned about the levels of student motivation when there are no consequences for the individual student (Liu, 2011). Liu (2011) added that a lack of student motivation in test taking also leads to inaccurate estimates of student achievement. Furthermore, Nunley et al. (2011) stated that a substantial number of community college students enter underprepared and may not take their developmental courses in sequence, thus adding to the difficulty in measuring student achievement. It is also worth noting that few community college students earn a certificate or degree compared to the overall student population; hence, measuring success based on completers misses the majority of students (Nunley et al., 2011).

**Challenges involving resources.** Many community colleges are small and strapped for resources making it difficult for many community colleges to fund assessment when they may be having difficulty gathering enough resources to teach their students (Nunley et al., 2011). Low resources lead to limited professional support, especially in institutional research (Bers, 2008). Leadership turnover and limited resources weaken support for assessment, making it critical that faculty and staff embed assessment into their core activities (Nunley et al., 2011). Banta and Blaich (2011) noted that assessment professionals do not stay long in their roles as assessment leaders, moving on to other positions leaving successors that are likely to have different views of assessment and thus change directions. Despite this, colleges must create an institutional culture based on gathering and using student learning outcomes to foster student success and increase institutional effectiveness (Nunley et al., 2011).

**Challenges involving the assessment process.** Colleges and universities must effectively use assessment results. Kuh et al. (2014) noted that evidence of assessment is increasing, but has yet to guide institutional actions to improve student outcomes extensively. Banta and Blaich (2011) have added that though much of the assessment debate focuses on measurement issues, the use of assessment data is more about collaborating with colleagues to decide what to improve. Bers (2008) claimed that for those whose focus is on improving quality, assessment is not just about determining whether students learned, but also about using assessment results to improve teaching and learning. Liu (2011) claimed that current assessment practices lack evidence of what achievement of student outcomes will predict. Furthermore, he has added that it is critical for the outcomes measured to be able to predict other important success indicators such as cumulative GPA, degree completion, graduate school application, and job placement. Banta and Blaich (2011) added that another issue with the assessment process is that state mandates pressure campus leaders for immediate action. Banta and Blaich (2011) asserted that collecting and reviewing reliable evidence from multiple sources can take several years, so there must be a multi-year schedule. The key to improving assessment practices is integrating assessment work into the institution's governance and organizational structures (Hutchings, 2010; Kuh et al., 2014).

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on prior research that substantiates that institutions of higher education in America are accountable externally to a variety of stakeholders (e.g., Ewell, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Schmidlein &

Berdahl, 2011) and internally to demands for institutional commitment to gain a clearer understanding of student learning outcomes (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014; Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011). In addition, the framework was based on the research that supports that these demands have contributed to the increase in assessment activity at institutions of higher education including an increase in the number and variety of assessment tools, and institutional support for assessment activity (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014). Finally, the conceptual framework was based on research that though faculty are committed to student learning, they perceive assessment as externally motivated and regard it as time taken from their commitment to students (e.g., Banta & Blach, 2011) and that the lack of faculty participation in assessment is driven by a lack of interest, lack of institutional investment, or lack of financial incentive (e.g., Danley-Scott & Tompsett-Makin, 2013).

Outcomes assessment in higher education has two purposes. First, outcomes assessment serves to facilitate the improvement of the teaching and learning process (Ewell, 2008). Second, outcomes assessment serves to provide community colleges a mechanism to answer external accountability demands (Ewell, 2008). Community colleges are under pressure to create an institutional culture that values gathering and using student learning outcomes data (Nunley et al., 2011). Most institutions of higher education have adopted learning outcomes, and there is a notable increase in assessment activity (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh et al., 2014). Accreditation remains the primary driver of assessment in higher education; however, internal demands for outcomes assessment are becoming just as important in driving assessment (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh et al., 2014). Despite showing that most community colleges have

implemented outcomes assessment practices on their campuses, research has shown that there are many challenges relevant to outcomes assessment in higher education (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh et al., 2014, Nunley et al., 2011).

Faculty involvement in assessment is essential to improvement; without it, the correlation between assessment and learning, teaching, and institutional improvement is diminished (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014). Strengthening outcomes assessment for accountability helps faculty sustain the values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and peer and professional review (Eaton, 2010). Faculty members decide what students in their courses should be able to do, then make decisions about whether each student has attained the required knowledge and skills (Kuh et al., 2015). Faculty, however, regard assessment more as a dictate from outsiders and less one that fulfills institutional needs and priorities of evidence that can be used to promote improvement (Kuh et al., 2015; Scott & Danley-Scott, 2015).

There is a question of whether assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement can coexist and whether the current accountability demands can strengthen assessment for improvement (Banta, 2007, Ewell, 2009). The goal of assessment must be to use external accountability demands to stimulate internal assessment and quality assurance (Kuh et al., 2015). Institutions want faculty to be more involved in assessment (Scott & Danley-Scott, 2015); however, few faculty members feel that there is an appropriate amount of institutional support for opportunities to collaborate with colleagues to develop assessment expertise (Kuh et al., 2015). In addition, faculty resistance stems from apprehensions that assessment results could influence teaching

evaluations (Lederman, 2010). Overall, the lack of assessment policies aligned to common faculty practice has significant implications on the willingness of faculty involvement in student outcomes assessment (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

### **Summary**

The community college mission has historically been one of providing access to higher education. Whether educating students for the workforce or preparing them for transfer to universities, community colleges are central to academia, industry, and local governments. Preparing students to work may be where community colleges have a greater impact on the community; facilitating success at four-year schools is just as important a role of these institutions. Community colleges, however, are increasingly having to substantiate their value to external stakeholders.

Numerous stakeholders have accountability relationships with community colleges. First, the federal government and accreditors funnel their accountability through policies and processes. The Federal government, through recommendations such as those from the Spelling Commission or through policies requiring accreditation for eligibility in federal aid programs, holds accreditors accountable. Consequently, regional and program accreditors all require assessment for initial or continued accreditation. Next, state governments and coordinating boards channel accountability through fiscal measures such as performance-based funding. In Texas, the coordinating board publishes manuals listing courses that are available for state funding in academic and workforce programs at community colleges. Each course is listed with a description of the content and student learning outcomes that faculty must assess. Also, the coordinating board and

the state government revised the state core curriculum to include general education competencies that must be evaluated at the institutional level. Finally, rising costs in tuition and books have led to accountability demands from parents and students seeking evidence of the value of a postsecondary education.

Complementing external accountability demands are pressures from within the organizational structure of institutions to gain a greater understanding of student learning and to use assessment to improve teaching and learning. Local governing boards and administrators are increasingly asking for better evidence of student learning. Accountability is the primary reasons governing boards and administrators are requiring assessment, yet faculty that engages in assessment do so to improve teaching and learning. Because of the internal shift towards engaging in assessment, there has been an increase in the volume of assessment activity on college campuses.

There remain several challenges in advancing assessment practices in higher education. Central to overcoming these challenges appears to be increasing faculty engagement to assessment. Faculty continues to be devoted to their students and need to see the value of assessment in facilitating the improvement of teaching and learning. Faculty maintains that assessment is an externally motivated mandate which they regard as time wasted and need the training to understand.

Chapter III presents the methodology for this study. Chapter III includes the research design used in the study consisting of the type of qualitative study, instrumentation used, and study setting and participants. Data collection procedures and

data analysis processes will be described with strategies for addressing trustworthiness.

The chapter will conclude with the context of the study and the researcher.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Chapter III presents a description of the methodology used to address the research questions for this qualitative study on faculty experiences with outcomes assessment in community colleges. This chapter is organized into seven sections: 1) restatement of the purpose of the study, 2) restatement of the research questions, 3) research design, 4) data collection, 5) data analysis procedures, 6) trustworthiness, and 7) context of the study and researcher.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning. Outcomes assessment is the process of stating intended outcomes, planning activities to provide opportunities to meet the outcomes; implementing methods to measure attainment intended results; and finally, using the results to promote improvement (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie, 2009). Specifically, this study focused on community college faculty perceptions of the influence of external accountability demands and institutional pressures to engage in assessment on the quality of faculty and student performance. It is important for practitioners of higher education and their institutions to understand how to engage faculty in outcomes assessment to meet external accountability demands and use the assessment process to improve teaching and learning (McCullough & Jones, 2015). Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, and Kinzie (2014) point to increased faculty involvement, additional professional development of faculty, and wider

use of assessment results by faculty as being keys to advancing outcomes assessment in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

The four research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do community college faculty describe their experiences with outcomes assessment?
2. How do community college faculty describe the reasons for conducting outcomes assessment?
3. What do community college faculty perceive are the benefits of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?
4. What do community college faculty perceive are the challenges of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?

### **Research Design**

#### **Establishing the Paradigm**

Qualitative research is an approach for investigating the meaning individuals give to a problem based on written, spoken, filmed, and interpreted observations that cannot be easily quantified (Creswell, 2014; Garner & Scott, 2013). The process of qualitative research involves inductively building themes emerging from a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015).

Qualitative research methods are the preferred approach when addressing research questions involving a large number of variables, but a small number of participants to be studied (Garner & Scott, 2013).

Creswell (2014) states that researchers engaged in qualitative research collect data in the field, at the site where participants experience the issue being studied, with the intention of building patterns and organizing the data into increasingly general units of information. Furthermore, Mertens (2015) argues that the goal of qualitative research and researchers is to “turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to self” (p. 236). Creswell (2014) has noted that qualitative researchers bring a worldview to inquiries that influence the methods of the inquiry as well as the specific research methods used to conduct the inquiry.

Qualitative researchers can explain the direction taken in their research study by explicitly disclosing their philosophical worldviews or establishing a paradigm (Creswell, 2014). Philosophical worldviews are the broad orientations about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study (Creswell, 2014). Mertens (2015) has referred to worldviews as paradigms and defines them as a way of looking at the world comprised of philosophical assumptions that guide and direct research. Though categorizing educational and psychological research into a few paradigms is impossible, four paradigms or worldviews that are widely discussed in the literature are post-positivist, constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic paradigms (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015).

In the post-positivist paradigm, the emphasis is on neutrality, experimentation, and generalizability (Mertens, 2015). The deterministic philosophy of a post-positivist lies in identifying and assessing the causes that influence outcomes, such as those found

in experiments (Creswell, 2014). Research under the constructivist paradigm emphasizes interactions with participants to develop rich descriptions of participants constructed reality (Mertens, 2015). Constructivists hold that individuals seek to understand the world and develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2014).

Constructivists acknowledge and disclose their own biases in their research (Creswell, 2014). Transformative researchers focus on issues of power and social justice, human rights, and cultural complexity such as discrimination and oppression (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015). Those who have written about the philosophical assumptions of this paradigm include feminists, ethnic minorities, and disabled persons (Mertens, 2015). Transformative researchers often use mixed methods in their research to develop an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015). Finally, the pragmatist paradigm considers research methods as arising out of actions, situations, and consequences (Creswell, 2014). The pragmatist researcher also employs mixed method designs in matching the research questions with the choice of research methods (Mertens, 2015).

This qualitative study was conducted through the lens of the constructivist worldview. Constructivism is a common approach to qualitative research (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015), and aspires to expose the human part of a story as is the aim of all qualitative research (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Creswell (2014) states that the goal of investigation in constructivism is to rely on participants' views of the situation being studied, which this study intends to do by exploring community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment. Furthermore, the purpose of inquiry under the

constructivist worldview is to understand and reconstruct the experiences that individuals involved in the research process hold (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Through interaction with participants, the researcher intends to reconstruct and develop a rich description of each participant's constructed reality.

### **Type of Study**

Creswell (2012) identifies five approaches to qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case study. Narrative research begins with lived and told experiences from individuals, documents, and group conversations (Creswell, 2012). Narrative researchers underscore place, temporality, and sociality within narrative inquiry, allowing for investigation into researchers' and participants' storied life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Implementing narrative research focuses on relational engagement between researcher and research participants by studying few individuals, gathering data from their stories, recording individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell 2012). Another approach to qualitative research, phenomenological research, is when the researcher describes the lived experiences of participants about a phenomenon culminating in the core of the event for participants having all lived through the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology seeks to discover individual perceptions and meanings of the phenomenon being studied and requires the researcher to suspend his or her perceptions to be able to understand the phenomenon (Mertens, 2015).

Ethnographical research involves the researcher making the decisions about the topic of research and includes studying behavior, language, and practices of a complete cultural group in a natural setting over a period of time (Creswell, 2014; Mertens 2015). In ethnography, data collection involves long-term observations and interviews with people in their everyday lives to gain a better understanding of beliefs, motivations, and behaviors with a goal of producing knowledge or social change (Creswell 2014; Mertens, 2015; Saldaña, 2011). Grounded theory is a systematic inquiry strategy where the researcher derives a generalized theory of a process or practice grounded in the views of the participants (Creswell, 2014; Garner & Scott, 2013). Grounded theory compares two situations or contexts, allowing emergent themes drawn from the collection of data towards theoretical propositions not stated initially in the study (Garner & Scott, 2013; Mertens, 2015).

In case study approach to research, the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case that may be an individual, group of individuals, a single organization or a single event (Creswell, 2014; Saldaña, 2011). Qualitative case study methodology provides researchers tools that permit in-depth examination of complex phenomena within their contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Saldaña, 2011). Case study research facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its setting, using several data collection techniques to allow knowledge of multiple aspects of the phenomenon to be gained (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study research can be conducted within a single setting where there are different experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2012, Saldaña, 2011).

Based on the purpose of this study, a phenomenological research design was used. Phenomenological research studies in education represent researchers describing lived experiences, perceptions, and feelings of participants about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Yuksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Phenomenological research seeks reality from participants' accounts of their experiences and perceptions and produces detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The goal of the researcher in phenomenological research is to describe the phenomenon, to withhold any preconceptions and to remain factual (Groenewald, 2004). This study was guided by common practices in phenomenology research. The focus was on individual experiences, the questions and observations are intended to bring out individual experiences and perceptions, and in-depth interviews were used as the primary method for collecting phenomenological data (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012).

### **Study Setting**

The setting for this study was a large, rural-serving community college located in South Texas (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The community college had two branch campuses and had a combined enrollment of 9,137 students in Fall 2016 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2017b). In fiscal year 2015, 50% of students enrolled at the study institution were in academic programs for transfer, 29% in technical or workforce programs, and 21% in continuing education programs (THECB, 2017b).

The institution is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to award associate's degrees and governed by the

Texas Legislature, THECB, and by a local nine-member governing Board of Trustees. In 2012, the institution was placed on probation for failing to comply with several accreditation standards. All of the standards with which the institution failed to comply were in institutional effectiveness; including a standard that specifically requires assessment of general education outcomes.

### **Participants**

Moustakas (1994) provides guidance on selecting participants stating that the essential criteria for participants in a phenomenological research study include that participants: 1) have experience with the phenomenon being studied, 2) must be interested in understanding the phenomenon, 3) must be willing to participate in the interview process, and 4) must grant the investigator the right to keep record of the interview and subsequently publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. Research subjects must be able to understand the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the research; decide whether to participate; and actively agree to participate in the study (Garner & Scott, 2013).

Participants in this study were community college full-time faculty members at the study institution. According to Tex. Ed. Code § 51.943 (2013a), a full-time faculty member is a person who is employed full-time by an institution of higher education as a member of the faculty and whose primary responsibility is teaching or research. Inclusion criteria for the participants were that they were classified as full-time faculty, had been employed at the study institution for a minimum of three years at the time of this study, and had familiarity with outcomes assessment in their respective disciplines.

Each participant must have had the primary responsibility of teaching academic courses or courses in a vocational or technical field. The inclusion criteria ensure that the participants selected possessed familiarity with outcomes assessment in community colleges, as well as experience with the recent accreditation issues.

### **Sampling**

Creswell (2014) states that in qualitative research, purposefully selecting participants that facilitate the researcher's understanding of the problem and the research question is critical. For the most part, qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling or theoretical sampling, often with a small number of participants selected (Bailey, 1996; Mertens 2015). Purposeful sampling means that the researcher selects information-rich cases, such as individuals and sites, based on the purpose of their involvement in the study because they can purposefully inform an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Guest et al., 2012). The sample is the group chosen from the population to participate in the study and from which data is collected (Mertens, 2015). Sampling can occur at the site level, at the phenomenon level, and at the participant level (Creswell, 2012).

The sample size question is as important a decision in the data collection process as the sampling strategy (Creswell, 2012). Bailey (1996) argues that sample size is critical to field research, stating that too small of a sample can lead to misrepresentative results and samples that are too large can be exhaustive, making in-depth analysis unmanageable. Sample size, however, can also be influenced by the willingness of individuals to participate in the study (Mertens, 2015).

This study used maximum variation purposeful sampling as a sampling strategy. Maximum variation sampling is a type of purposeful sampling consisting of determining criteria that distinguish sites or participants, and then selecting sites or participants that differ based on the criteria (Creswell, 2012). Guba and Lincoln (1989) note that maximum variation sampling that provides the broadest base for achieving local understanding is the best sampling method to choose for constructivists. The variation criteria in this study include campus, discipline or program, community college teaching experience, and, outcomes assessment experience.

Morse (1994) recommends at least six participants for phenomenological studies. Kuzel (1992) recommends sample sizes be chosen according to sample heterogeneity and research objectives, recommending six to eight interviews for a homogeneous sample. Creswell (2014), in contrast, recommends more, stating that five to 25 interviews for phenomenological research studies are ideal. The main consideration when selecting sample size in qualitative research is to select few sites or individuals in the study and collect substantial detail about the sites or individuals studied (Creswell 2012). Based on the literature related to choosing sample sizes for qualitative research and specifically phenomenological research, 12 participants were purposefully selected for this study.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process in qualitative research is a series of interconnected activities intended to gather information to answer research questions (Creswell, 2012). The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research studies (Mertens, 2015; Saldaña, 2011). The researcher collects data through a wide array of

sources, including observing, interviewing, examining records, conversations, documents, and other artifacts in the study setting, or through some combination of these methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mertens, 2015). A qualitative researcher conducts a series of activities in the process of collecting data and must consider the multiple phases in data collection, particularly those that extend beyond conducting interviews or making observations (Creswell, 2012). Data collection methods are guided by the qualitative researcher's preferred approaches yet should not be regarded as rigid guidelines (Creswell, 2012). Data collection procedures in qualitative research can be conducted through observations, interviews, and content analysis of printed or electronic media (Bailey, 1996; Creswell, 2014). Qualitative observation is a form of data collection for field research (Bailey, 1996). The researcher takes field notes on the behavior and activities of individuals at the research site, determining what is important to understand the meanings of the observations (Bailey, 1996; Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative interviews are interactions with participants, via face-to-face conversations, telephone, or in focus groups conducted by the researcher (Creswell, 2014). The three types of interviews most often used by field researchers are unstructured, structured, and semi-structured (Bailey, 1996). Unstructured interviews are akin to conversation and involve little standardization (Bailey, 1996). Structured interviews produce data that are very close to being quantitative and sometimes use pre-coded answers in multiple-choice categories or specific numbers (Garner & Scott, 2013). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher uses an interview guide, with specific questions categorized by topic, but that are not in any specified order (Bailey, 1996).

In qualitative research, the researcher may collect qualitative documents, which may include public or private documents for content analysis (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative content analysis is a research method used to analyze text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative data collection could also consist of qualitative audio and visual materials of content analysis (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative content analysis also includes the interpretation of the content of text data through a classification process of finding themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Phenomenological investigations typically involve in-depth, lengthy interviews as the primary method through which data is collected (Moustakas, 1994). This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from 12 participants. Researchers favoring flexibility regarding how an interview is administered and who prefer to maintain some structure over bounds might select a semi-structured interview format (Bailey, 1996). The interviews in the study were interactive with mostly open-ended questions intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2014) recommended open-ended questioning to help the researcher listen carefully to what people say or observe what people do within the study setting.

Moustakas (1994) recommended that a series of questions be developed in advance of the interview to gain a complete account of the person's experience of the phenomenon. However, these are varied, altered, or not used at all when the participant shares his or her experience (Moustakas, 1994). Conversational norms were used during the interview to both build rapport with the participant and steer the conversation honestly and comprehensively toward the research objectives (Guest et al., 2012;

Moustakas 1994). The interview questions were open-ended to guide the conversation into the topic and to provide opportunities for the participants to share understandings, beliefs, experiences, and points-of-view on the phenomenon (Guest et al., 2012). The interviews were conducted one-on-one to allow the researcher control over the line of questioning and to focus on the content of the participants' responses (Creswell, 2014; Guest et al., 2012). Finally, inductive probing was used during the interview. Inductive probing involved asking questions based on the participant's responses that are linked to the research objectives (Guest et al., 2012).

In addition to semi-structured interviews, this study included review and analysis of documents relevant to the study. Document analysis helps the researcher study a phenomenon with minimal operational disruption to the study setting (Mertens, 2015). Document analysis included the mission statement of the study setting, any documents related to strategic planning, and documentation relevant to student achievement. Document analysis also included a review of accreditation standards, federal, state, and local policy relevant to outcomes assessment.

The researcher's observations during the participant interviews were recorded using field notes and reflexive journaling. Field notes are the written or recorded account of participant observation from which the study's findings eventually arise (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2011). Field notes are continued through data collection to ensure that the researcher can observe a variety of events relevant to the study, from the mundane to the extraordinary (Saldaña, 2011). Observations in field notes must be recorded descriptively to allow the reader to feel as if they see what the researcher sees and to

assure documentation of interaction in a reliable manner for data analysis (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2011).

A reflexive journal allows the researcher to make regular journal entries during the research process to record methodological changes and the reasons for making them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The journal includes reflection in regards to research questions as well as documenting decisions made to resolve problems, issues, or ideas encountered in data collection (Merriam, 2009). In addition, Mertens (2015) notes the importance of using this process to compile supporting data for conclusions and interpretations.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis focuses on meanings rather than on quantifiable phenomena. It involves the collection of numerous data on a few cases, in-depth analysis without any predetermined categories or directions, and utilizes the researcher as the primary data analysis instrument (Schutt, 2014). The process of coding is often used to identify portions of the data potentially useful for analysis (Bailey, 1996). Data analysis is often initiated in the field, at the time of observation or interview (Schutt, 2014). The researcher creates a typology or develops themes from the data that are likely to help in understanding the phenomenon (Bailey, 1996; Schutt, 2014). Ultimately, the researcher controls what is learned from research conducted in the field (Bailey, 1996).

Data analysis for this study was conducted according to analysis procedures recommended by Creswell (2014) and Moustakas (1994). Once all the interviews were conducted, data was organized and prepared for analysis. This process includes transcribing interviews, typing field notes and optically scanning material (Creswell,

2014). Moustakas (1994) has stated that the organization of data begins when the researcher studies the material through the methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis. To minimize bias during data analysis, the researcher described personal experiences so that the focus is on the participant's responses (Creswell, 2012).

Constant comparative methods were used throughout the data analysis phase of this study. In qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation are simultaneous, begin early in data collection and may lead to further data collection (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). This iterative process of gathering information and comparing it to emergent themes and categories is called the constant comparative method of data analysis (Creswell, 2012). The researcher sought verification of themes by coding data and constantly comparing what is learned to emergent themes (Bailey, 1996; Mertens 2015). Throughout the data collection and analysis stage, the researcher identified patterns or themes in the phenomenon being studied, then attempted to substantiate, clarify, or disprove these patterns or themes by seeking additional information (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013)

Data analysis was initiated with open coding techniques. Data was bracketed into categories using the text in the transcription to create blocks of data then using a word to represent each category (Creswell, 2014). A process called axial coding was used to choose a category and situate it within a theoretical model (Creswell, 2014). Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as horizontalizing the data and considering every horizon or statement relevant to the topic as having equal value. Finally, the analysis constructed a story by connecting the categories, a process called selective coding (Creswell, 2014).

This process included developing clustered themes, meanings, and descriptions of the experience that may include detailed information about people, places, or events relevant to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Then, a structural description was constructed to reflect on the setting and the context in which the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon were combined to make up the findings of the analysis (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research involves conducting and presenting the study in a manner in which the reader trusts or perceives the study's findings to be convincing and worth taking seriously (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness does not imply that others must agree with the researcher; it means that the reader must be able to see how the researcher arrived at the conclusion of the study (Bailey, 1996). Trustworthiness in a study can be attained by detailing the procedures and decisions made throughout the research process (Bailey, 1996). The concept of trustworthiness possesses an embedded set of evaluative criteria, closely related and interdependent (Bailey, 1996; Mertens, 2015). The criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility is synonymous with internal validity in a study and is achieved when the researcher establishes an accurate relationship between what is reported and the phenomenon being studied (Bailey, 1996). Transferability is similar to external validity, meaning it measures the extent to which a study can be generalized from the sample to a

larger population (Bailey, 1996; Mertens 2015). Dependability is parallel to reliability, which means the researcher must achieve internal consistency among the research questions, data collection, analysis, and conceptual understanding of the study (Bailey, 1996; Mertens; 2015). Finally, confirmability in qualitative research requires that data support findings and that the interpretation of data is not heavily influenced by the researcher's bias (Bailey, 1996; Mertens 2015).

Guba (1981) has identified four aspects of trustworthiness that are relevant in qualitative studies, including truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Similar to credibility, truth-value questions establish the confidence in the truth of the results of the inquiry and the context in which the inquiry was carried out (Guba, 1981). Krefting (1991) recommends prolonging interview time as a strategy to increase truth value. Another strategy for addressing credibility is triangulation which involves validating information collected from different sources for consistency across different sources of data (Mertens, 2015). Applicability, like transferability, refers to how the researcher can determine the degree to which the inquiry has applicability with other subjects (Guba, 1981). When researchers provide dense background information about the subjects and the research context, it allows others to assess how transferrable the findings are (Krefting, 1991). Consistency, parallel to dependability, refers to how the researcher can determine whether the findings of a study would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with similar interview subjects in the same context (Krefting, 1991). Finally, neutrality, synonymous to confirmability, refers to how the researcher can

establish the degree to which the results of an inquiry are attributed exclusively to the participants in the inquiry and not the biases of the researcher (Guba, 1981).

This study used triangulation of data from interviews, document analysis and the review of literature as a strategy to address credibility (Mertens, 2015). In addition, this study used rich, thick descriptions of the interview subjects and their responses to address applicability issues. Consistency of the study was addressed during the data analysis phase of this study. After initially coding a segment of data, the researcher recoded the same data approximately two weeks later and compared the results (Creswell, 2014; Krefting, 1991). Finally, to address neutrality, the researcher implicitly stated assumptions to avoid having them influence the research (Morrow, 2005).

### **Context of the Study and Researcher**

#### **Context of the Study**

Like many community colleges, the study institution is facing increased internal and external accountability demands (Kuh et al., 2014). In 2012, the institution was placed on probation from SACSCOC for failing to comply with several accreditation standards. All the standards with which the institution failed to comply were in the area of institutional effectiveness; including, failure to comply with a standard specifically requiring assessment of general education outcomes.

At the same time, state accountability demands emerged placing more emphasis on outcomes assessment. In 2011, the Texas Legislature implemented a funding formula in which 10% of state allocated funds would be disbursed based on performance on institutional outcomes. Also, the THECB revised the state's core curriculum to include

six core competencies. Institutions must assess these core competencies and submit a decennial assessment report (THECB, 2017).

Internal accountability demands also rose during this time. The college's governing board mandated the institution to provide an annual report on student achievement. This study focuses on faculty perceptions of internal and external accountability demands and their perceived influence on improving the teaching and learning process within the college.

### **Context of the Researcher**

Moustakas (1994) refers to all research participants as co-researchers because the core of the phenomena is derived from participants' experiences, regardless of the researcher's interpretations. Researchers are involved in sustained experience with participants of the study (Creswell, 2014). Through these sustained experiences, the researcher identifies the textural and structural life-stories without including beliefs and assumptions (Mertens, 2015; Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). The role of the researcher influences the entire research process beyond exchanges with participants during the interview process (Pascal, 2010). Qualitative researchers must reflexively and explicitly state their personal background and values that influence any interpretations formed during a study (Creswell, 2014).

The study institution has been a significant part of my life, having grown up in the community served by the institution, having attended the institution as a student, and now having been employed by the institution for over 17 years at the time of this study. My educational journey began at the study institution. I was fortunate to grow up in a home

where education was paramount; my mother earned a master's degree in Mathematics Education and my father a bachelor's degree in Biology. They are both educators. My educational goals were always to attain a degree that would allow me to teach full-time at a community college. My mother taught part-time at the community college, and I would often sit outside her classroom while she taught. It always felt like the right place to teach and learn. Therefore, after earning my high school diploma, I enrolled in the community college and attended for two years. After accumulating enough credits, I transferred to a four-year university where I earned a bachelor's and master's degree in Mathematics, the latter of which allowed me to come back home and teach at the same community college my mother taught.

My career began as a full-time mathematics instructor. I taught every level of mathematics the college had to offer, from developmental education courses to Calculus III. Teaching mathematics remains my favorite thing to do. After about eight years, the Dean of Arts and Humanities asked me to serve as interim department chair for one semester. I did and remained department chair for five years. During my time as department chair, I led the department through many changes, one of which included incorporating common assessments in every college-level course. The assessment allowed the department to measure student achievement throughout multiple sections of the same courses and multiple courses offered by the department.

My success in implementing departmental assessment landed me a role as co-chair of the general education committee. The formation of the general education committee occurred when the institution was placed on probation in part for failing to

comply with an accreditation standard relevant to assessing general education outcomes. In one year, our committee identified general education outcomes, developed a process for assessing the level at which students have achieved the outcomes, and helped the institution get out of probation.

My success with the general education committee landed me on the Curriculum Committee at the institution. As chair of the Curriculum Committee, I led the institution through revamping the core curriculum. I implemented a zero-based core curriculum, meaning that all courses were removed from the core. Each department wishing to have a course in the core curriculum had to then apply for admission. The major part of the application process included an assessment plan in which disciplines had to provide a plan for evaluating student and program learning outcomes.

A reorganization of the college left a vacancy in the Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment (IEA) position. I have been in that position for the last two years. In my time as Director of IEA, I have written a Fifth-Year Interim Report and Documentation for Examining Off-Campus Sites Report for our accrediting agency. I also provide annual updates to the local governing board on student achievement via a student success report card. In performing my duties as the IEA director, I have seen the college make great strides in outcomes assessment in the last two years. However, in writing these reports, I have noticed gaps in the assessment process, especially in regards to using assessment results to drive decisions and lack of faculty involvement. Researching these issues has brought me to the purpose of this study.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study used a phenomenological research design through the lens of a constructivist paradigm to analyze the participant experiences with outcomes assessment. The study used four research questions intended to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups attribute to outcomes assessment. The study institution was a large, rural-serving community college in South Texas. The participants in this study were purposefully selected to facilitate understanding of the problem. Data collection instruments included the researcher, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, and institutional documentation related to outcomes assessment. Data analysis in this study consisted of interview transcription, field notes, content analysis, constant comparative methods, and coding techniques. Trustworthiness was address throughout the research process by detailing any decisions made in regards to the direction of the research. Chapter IV will present the findings from the data collected, organized into themes to highlight the participant experiences with assessment.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

Chapter IV presents the results of the study. The topics discussed include 1) summary of the research design, 2) overview of study institution and participant profiles, and 3) the study's findings. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning. Outcomes assessment is the process of articulating intended outcomes in regards to a program's services or student learning, purposefully planning activities so that the outcomes can be achieved, implementing methods to identify whether end results have been achieved, and finally, using the results to promote improvement (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie 2009). Of specific focus in this study, will be how community college faculty perceive external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes can facilitate the improvement of faculty and student performance. It is important for practitioners of higher education and their institutions to understand how to engage faculty in outcomes assessment to answer accountability demands from external stakeholders as well as internal demands to use the assessment process to improve teaching and learning. Though there is little research on faculty experiences with assessment, Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, and Kinzie (2014) point to increased faculty involvement, additional professional development of faculty, and wider use of assessment results by faculty as being keys to advancing outcomes assessment in higher education. By studying faculty perceptions of outcomes

assessment, this study aims to identify additional, specific barriers to faculty involvement in assessment.

The following four research questions guided this study:

1. How do community college faculty describe their experiences with outcomes assessment?
2. How do community college faculty describe the reasons for conducting outcomes assessment?
3. What do community college faculty perceive are the benefits of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?
4. What do community college faculty perceive are the challenges of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?

### **Summary of the Research Design**

This qualitative research study was conducted through the lens of a constructivist paradigm. A phenomenological research design was used to collect data regarding the lived experiences, perceptions, and feelings from participants about outcomes assessment. The study was framed by tenets found in the literature. The first tenet is that accountability in higher education today external demands to substantiate the value of a postsecondary education. Simultaneously, internal accountability demands to gain a clearer understanding of student learning are rising in college campuses. Next, internal, and external accountability demands have resulted in increased assessment activity at institutions of higher education. However, faculty engagement in assessment remains a challenge which may be attributed to lack of interest, lack of institutional investment, or

lack of financial incentive. Because faculty participation in assessment is a critical component of advancing assessment practices for accountability and improvement, the concept of how to effectively engage faculty forms the basis for the conceptual framework that guided this study

### **Data Collection Process**

Data collection included gathering information through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and documents, as well as, establishing the procedures for documenting information (Creswell, 2014). Before collecting data for this study, approval was obtained from the Texas Tech University Human Research Protection Program (Appendix A).

The first step in the data collection process was to seek approval to conduct research at the study institution. Approval to conduct the study at the institution was attained in two stages: site approval from the President of the study institution and study approval by its research review committee. The site approval was sought via email and included an explanation of the study (Appendix B), along with the Description of the Study document (Appendix C), IRB Approval Letter from Texas Tech University (Appendix A). The request for site approval also included a document the study institution requires potential researchers to submit with details of the proposed study including a problem statement and the purpose of the study. The request also required a description of the characteristics of the sample population, step-by-step procedures on how subjects were selected, and how individually identifiable data collected was protected during and after the study.

After receiving site approval from the President of the study institution, a request to conduct research at the study institution was submitted for approval by its Research Review Committee. The Research Review Committee reviews the details of the study and grants approval to conduct research at the study institution. In addition to the information required for site approval, the request to conduct research at the study institution included information on data and facilities requests, detail on how research findings would be used and disseminated as well as further detail on how participant selection for the study.

After receiving approval from the Research Review Committee, potential full-time faculty participants were identified through a search of the institution's public website. Inclusion criteria for participants included full-time faculty who have experience in assessment of student learning and who had at least four years teaching experience at the study institution. The study institution posts curriculum vitae for each faculty member listing their employment status and years of teaching experience. In addition to reviewing potential participant curriculum vitae, a list of assessment committee membership obtained via the study institution's public website was cross-referenced to identify potential participants who had experience in assessment. After 25 potential participants had been identified, maximum variation sampling was used to purposefully select participants based on the inclusion criteria distinguishing the participants, and then participants were selected based on the areas of expertise. Potential participants were selected across different general education areas and occupational education areas to achieve maximum variation.

An email was sent to identified faculty requesting their participation in the study. The email included a script requesting participation in the study (Appendix E). The email also included a Description of the Study document (Appendix C), IRB Approval Letter from Texas Tech (Appendix A), and documentation of study approval provided by the study institution. In total, 12 faculty members meeting the criteria agreed to participate in the study. The participants included six faculty members from across general education disciplines and six faculty from different occupational education programs. Interview dates and times were coordinated via email with participants.

**Data collection instruments.** The data collection process involved a series of interconnected activities intended to gather information to answer research questions (Creswell, 2012). The researcher and semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection instruments in this study (Mertens, 2015; Saldaña, 2011). Data was also collected through field notes, electronic media, and printed documents.

Documents reviewed from the study institution included the website, accreditation letters, and the strategic plan which included a mission statement, a vision statement, and institutional goals and objectives. These documents were reviewed with the intent to obtain an overview of the assessment culture at the study institution. Documents used for data collection from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) included the *SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation*, the *SACSCOC Resource Manual*, and the *SACSCOC Handbook for Reaffirmation*. Finally, documents from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) used in the data collection process included the *Lower Division Academic Course Guide Manual*

(ACGM) and the *Workforce Education Course Manual* (WECM). The documents from SACSCOC and the THECB were used to collect data relevant to external accountability demands placed on the study institution.

Semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted on-site at the study institution with each of the 12 participants. Comparable interview protocols were followed for each interview (Appendix F). Each participant was given the opportunity to ask questions about the study before the interview. Before the interview began, the participants were reminded the study was voluntary, questions could be skipped, and the interview could be stopped at any time. In addition, participants were provided the opportunity to select a pseudonym to be used throughout the interview and the study process, including on all documentation pertaining to the study. Participants who chose not to select a pseudonym were provided one prior to beginning audio recording of the interview. All participants were informed of and consented to audio recording of their interview. The interview protocol continued with a reiteration of confidentiality, and the participants were notified when the recording began.

The interview consisted of an introduction, casual conversation and a review of the purpose of the study. Each semi-structured, in-person interview, consisted of similar interview questions (Appendix F) and followed a similar format. Probing, elaboration, or follow-up questions were asked when necessary to achieve greater depth and quality of responses. The interviews varied in length, ranging from 37 minutes to 63 minutes depending on the experience in the topic of outcomes. At the end of each interview, participants were thanked for their respective time, and willingness to participate.

## **Data Analysis**

Once all semi-structured interviews were conducted, the data was organized and prepared for analysis. This process included transcribing the interviews, typing field notes, and logging journal entries (Creswell, 2014). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using a third-party transcription service within three to four weeks of each interview. The transcriptions were re-read multiple times and matched with the audio recording to ensure accuracy of the information presented. In addition, the transcriptions were reviewed multiple times for errors and compared to field notes to reveal any inconsistencies. Reflexive journaling in conjunction with field notes was used to note any bias throughout the data collection and analysis process. Finally, field notes, journal entries, and transcripts were read multiple times to gain an understanding of participants' experiences with outcomes assessment. The analysis process included using the constant comparative approach. Data collected from transcriptions and field notes were constantly compared to verify emergent categories (Bailey, 1996; Mertens 2015).

After the data was organized, the transcriptions were converted to tables in a Microsoft Word document. Each transcription table included a column identifying the speaker, a column for questions and responses, and a column for open codes. Open coding initiated with line-by-line reviewing transcripts using an indexing scheme to code significant words, phrases, and experiences. Through open coding, data collected was bracketed into categories using the text in the transcription to create blocks of data then using a phrase to represent each category (Creswell, 2014). In each transcription, the assigned codes were given an index number. A list of codes matching the index number

to the assigned code was logged in the right margin of the transcript. At the end of each transcript, an index was created to track the frequency and location of the codes. The transcripts were reviewed several times to ensure accuracy of coding.

After two weeks, the transcripts were recoded to check for consistency of the codes. Overall, 83 codes emerged from aggregating the results of both open coding sessions. The open codes were combined by either merging similar codes, creating new codes, or removing codes based on frequency counts to form significant statements. As a result, a list of 53 significant, nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements emerged from the data. Each significant statement about how individuals experienced assessment was treated as having equal worth (Creswell, 2012). The codes included phrases such as “faculty engagement in assessment,” “sharing assessment results,” “linking assessment to student success,” and “role of accreditation.”

Once open coding was complete, all 12 transcripts were then imported into a single spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel. After the transcripts had been placed in the spreadsheet, each segment of data was given a number to track its location within the transcript and on the entire spreadsheet. Axial coding was used to identify relationships among the open codes. Open codes were organized by sorting numerous times, grouped, and regrouped until larger units of information with accurate and consistent themes emerged representing the data presented in all interviews. A total of 13 themes resulted from the axial coding sessions. The themes included words or phrases such as “culture,” “assessment activity,” “assessment for improvement,” “time/value,” and “external accountability.”

In the final stage of coding, selective coding was used to construct a relationship between themes (Creswell, 2012). The selective coding categories assumed the form of textural descriptions, such as “participants describe their experience with assessment” and “participants describe the benefits of assessments.” In addition, the selective coding categories assumed the form of structural descriptions such as “participants describe their reasons for assessments” and “participants describe the challenges of assessment.” Data from the transcriptions was color coded using a different color to represent each selective coding category.

Once the coding process was complete, a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions was developed to form the findings of the study. Developing the findings included developing meanings and descriptions with detailed information about experiences of the participants with assessment (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The findings represented the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study conveying what the participants experienced and how they experienced assessment.

### **Study Institution and Participant Profiles**

#### **Study Institution Profile**

The setting for this study is a large, rural-serving community college located in South Texas (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The community college has two branch campuses, with a combined enrollment of 9,137 students in Fall 2016. According to the THECB’s most recent data, in Fall 2015, 50% of students at the study institution were enrolled in academic programs for transfer, 29% in

technical or workforce programs, and 21% in continuing education programs (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2017b). The study institution was accredited by SACSCOC to award associate degrees and governed by the Texas Legislature, the THECB and by a local nine-member governing Board of Trustees.

### **Participant Profiles**

A total of 12 faculty members participated in the study. Each of the faculty members who participated in the study had at least four years of experience in teaching at community college. All 12 faculty members are either currently responsible for assessment of their programs or have had assessment responsibility in the past. The participants varied in teaching fields, six teach in academic or general education areas, and six teach in occupational education program. The profiles of the participants follow.

**Tony** was an instructor in the Mathematics Department, an academic area, with 14 years of experience at the study institution. His typical teaching load was seven to nine courses per semester. Prior to his employment at the community college, he worked in the public school system as an elementary school and high school teacher. He held a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction in Mathematics Education from Texas A&M University, a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Texas A&M International University a Bachelor of Arts from Texas A&M International University, and an Associate of Arts from Laredo Community College. Tony has been the assessment coordinator for the mathematics department for two years.

**Jane** was an instructor in the Physical Therapist Assistant Program, an occupational education area, with eight years of teaching experience at the study

institution. During her employment, Jane served as the program director for her program, giving her primary responsibility for assessment of the program along with her traditional faculty role. She worked in the health service industry for 14 years prior to her employment at the community college. Jane held a Doctor of Physical Therapy from The College of Saint Scholastica, a Master of Science from Texas Woman's University, a Bachelor of Science in Physical Therapy from Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, and an Associate of Applied Science in Physical Therapist Assistant from Laredo Junior College.

**John** was an instructor in the English Department, an academic area, with seven years of teaching experience at the study institution. His teaching load was five to six courses. John held two Bachelor's degrees in English and Philosophy from Indiana University, a Master of Arts in English from Texas A&M University and partially completed a Ph.D. program at the University of Kentucky. For the last two years, John has been a member of the General Education Committee, which is charged with assessing general education competencies at the institutional level.

**Sara** was an instructor in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department, an academic area, with five years of teaching experience at the study institution. Her typical course load included teaching courses in psychology and student success. Prior to teaching at the community college, she held a lecturer position at an area four-year university. Sara held a Doctor of Philosophy in Experimental Psychology from Texas Tech University, a Master of Arts in Psychology from Texas Tech University, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Texas A&M International University, and an Associate of

Science Degree from Laredo Community College. For the past three years, Sara has been a member of the General Education Committee and for the last two years has been serving as the assessment coordinator for the department.

**Angela** was an instructor in the Natural Sciences and Kinesiology Department, an academic area, with five years of teaching experience at the community college. Angela has limited teaching experience outside of her employment at the college. Her course load included teaching lecture and lab courses in Biology. Angela held a Master of Science in Biology from Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Bachelor of Science in Biology with a Minor in Animal Science from Texas A&M University-Kingsville, and an Associate of Science Degree from Laredo Community College. Angela has served as an assessor for the General Education Committee and the last two years has been the assessment coordinator for the Natural Sciences courses and programs in her department.

**Ronald** was an instructor in the Natural Sciences and Kinesiology Department, an academic area, with 17 years of teaching experience at the study institution. Prior to teaching at the community college, Ronald worked predominantly in the import/export industry. His teaching load included teaching activity and lecture courses in kinesiology. Ronald held a Master of Science in Kinesiology from Texas A&M University-Kingsville and a Bachelor of Science in Fitness & Sports from Texas A&M International University. He has served as an assessor for the General Education Committee and the last two years has been the assessment coordinator for the Kinesiology courses and programs in his department.

**Margaret** was an instructor in the Visual and Performing Arts Department, an academic area, with eight years of teaching experience at the community college. Her teaching load included teaching lecture and studio courses in subjects such as Art History and Watercolors. Before teaching full time at the study institution, Margaret was an adjunct at Texas Tech University. She held a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Texas Tech University, Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from Texas Tech University, and an Associate of Science Degree from Amarillo Community College. For the last three years, Margaret had been a member of the General Education Committee. She had recently created a training video intended to help faculty use the General Education Communication Competency Rubric to create their assessment tools.

**Roger** was an instructor in the Computer Technology Department, an occupational education program, with 14 years of experience at the study institution. Prior to teaching at the community college, Roger worked mostly in private industry. His teaching load included teaching an introductory computer course. Roger held a Masters of Business Administration from Laredo State University, Bachelor of Business Administration in Computer Information Systems from Laredo State University, and an Associate in Applied Science in Computer Information Systems from Laredo Junior College. For the past nine years, Roger has been the department chair of the Computer Technology Department, giving him responsibilities for assessing three workforce programs in the department in addition to his faculty role.

**Joe** was an instructor in the Radiologic Technology Program, an occupational education program, with 17 years of teaching experience at the study institution. Prior to

his employment at the college, he worked in the health services industry. His typical course load included teaching courses in the Radiologic Technology Program. Joe held a Master of Science in Health Services Administration from the University of St. Francis, Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences in History from Texas A&M International University as well as several certifications in the Radiologic Technician field. Joe has served on the General Education Committee for four years and is also the program director for his program, giving him experience in assessment of academic and workforce areas.

**Jack** was an instructor in the Protective Services Department, an occupational education program, with 14 years of teaching experience at the study institution. Prior to his teaching position at the college, Jack worked in several law enforcement related jobs. His typical teaching assignment included teaching Basic Peace Officer Training courses as well as traditional lecture courses in Criminal Justice. Jack held a Master of Science in Criminal Justice from Texas A & M International University, a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice from Texas A&M International University, and an Associate in Applied Science in Criminal Justice from Laredo Community College. In addition to his faculty role, Jack has been the program director for the Criminal Justice and Regional Law Enforcement Academy at the institution for the last six years, giving him primary responsibility for the assessment of the programs in the Protective Services Department.

**Bailey** was an instructor in the Nursing Department, an occupational education program, with 20 years of experience at the study institution. She held a Doctorate of Education in Leadership and Curriculum and Instructional Development from the

University of Phoenix, a Master's of Science in Nursing from the University of the Incarnate Word, and a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing from Capital University. In addition to her faculty role, Bailey has held various administrative positions at the study institution including Dean of Health Sciences, Director of Nursing, and Vice President of Instruction. Her experience in assessment was different from other participants because of her various roles at the college. She also serves as an evaluator for the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN).

**Dora** was an instructor in the Child Development Department, an occupational education program, with 33 years of teaching experience at the study institution. Her teaching load included courses such as Educating Young Children, and Home, School, and Communities. Dora has limited work experience outside of the community college. She held a Master's of Science in Early Childhood Education from Laredo State University and a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Home Economics from Southwest Texas State University. In addition to her faculty role, Dora has served as the Department Chair of the Child Development Department for 17 years. She has primary responsibility for assessment of the program.

## **Findings**

### **Experiences with Outcomes Assessment**

The first research question sought to describe the community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment. The analysis of data collected to address this research question produced the following distinct themes: 1) faculty used a multitude of assessment methods to collect assessment data, 2) faculty have been exposed to

assessment for considerable lengths of time, and 3) assessment results are shared to varying extents.

**Assessment methods.** One theme that emerged from data analysis was that faculty used multiple assessment methods to determine whether students are learning in their classes. All the participants supported these findings. Though each participant described methods to assess student learning, the findings differed slightly depending on the participant's program type. Participants in occupational programs had more variety in their assessment methods than their academic counterparts.

***Findings Common to Academic Units.*** In addition to using their own test and exams, Tony's department used embedded assessments they call core projects to assess attainment of general education objectives. He claimed these methods help the department target certain objectives and determine student performance on these objectives. Ronald said students taking courses in his department are exposed to "a battery of lectures, exams, written exams and practical exams" as well as pre- and post-tests. Additionally, students in Ronald's program must demonstrate that they understood the importance of a resistance weight-training program throughout their lifespan on a written assessment. Similarly, Sara claimed her program used several things including exams, pre- and post-tests, along with lab reports to assess student learning. Angela stated that her unit used signature assignments that "correlate with student learning outcomes and so if we do see that students do well on the student learning outcomes they'll, of course, prove to us that they're learning the objectives." John maintained that his unit also uses signature assignments and his colleagues in the department assess

“writing samples at the beginning of composition courses.” In Margaret’s unit, written tests, oral critiques, and student projects are used to assess student learning. When referring to her department, Margaret stated:

We find ourselves doing all of the written, oral, and presentation types of assessment processes because we're visual, so how student present themselves in all those areas allows us to really determine whether or not we're going to test them also.

Margaret claimed these assessment methods are a “visual manifestation of the problem-solving process.”

*Findings common to occupational education programs.* Findings among participants in occupational education programs suggested these programs used a wider variety of assessment methods. Jane, for example, when asked how her program measures student learning, responded:

There are different methods of doing that. Within our program, we do have a program mission. We have goals; there are program goals that we look at. Then there are specific student outcomes that we look at as well. We measure student learning based on, I guess, our goal of making sure that we are going to prepare graduates to be able to sit for a national licensure exam and pass successfully on that first attempt. I guess in the big scheme of things; it would be, how are we doing with meeting these overarching programmatic outcomes, and then the specific student outcomes that we have established.

She added that students in the program are assessed through assignments, written exams, and practical lab exams. She also asserted the importance of the capstone course in assessment explaining that students taking the capstone course had to “create, electronically, a portfolio providing evidence of how they have demonstrated certain components of learning” using “literature or evidence to support our practice of delivering physical therapy.” In his program, Joe used written and oral assignments to assess teamwork, communication, critical thinking, professional, and social skills. Joe’s program also used passing rates on The American Registry of Radiologic Technologists Licensure exam to assess student learning.

Bailey stated that attainment of the seven student learning outcomes in her program is evaluated using rubrics. Each course in the program has a standardized exam measuring attainment of end-of-course outcomes. Bailey also touted the importance of the capstone to assessing student learning. “Actually, they [students] probably go through about 8 to 10 standardized exams in that class,” Bailey added the program employs a consultant to quiz students in preparation for their licensure exam. In her program, Dora used traditional methods such as assignments in and out of class as well as tests covering textbook information, lectures, videos, and readings students have to do. In addition, the capstone course in Dora’s program also featured a unique assessment method.

We also videotape our students. Our program is an occupational education program and students have to do internships. What we do with those students, they do internships their second semester, third semester, and fourth semester.

Their last internship is where we do the videotaping. At that point, they are actually implementing everything they have learned in all of the different child development classes

In this assessment practice, a lab instructor videotapes students and “then they are assessed by their peers as well as the college instructor.” The capstone course also included a written examination with questions coming from every course in the department’s inventory.

Jack’s Criminal Justice program had objectives for each course which “students must be able to comprehend by the end of the course.” They also used three different state licensure exams for “basic piece officer, basic county corrections, and telecommunicators.” The Criminal Justice program used written exams and computer-based software for exit exams in their capstone courses. Roger also stressed the importance of the capstone in assessment for measuring student learning. He stated:

In our Capstone course, which students would take the fourth semester, we try to; it's a comprehensive course that will allow students to then bring in skill sets that were obtained from different courses as part of their curriculum into that single course. A lot of these are project-based, where students will, again, use all the different skills that were part of that program to come up with some type of an outcome, whether it's to build a computer system, build a network, secure a network, things along those lines. It's where they're able to bring together the multiple skills that could only have been obtained from multiple courses that are

part of the curriculum. That's one measure, I believe, that's very effective in really knowing if students obtained the skills that they should have.

Roger elaborated on the importance of assessing students in “combination of hands-on versus just academic or rather, answering questions, lecture-type responses on an assessment.”

***Indirect assessment in the health sciences.*** All three participants in the study from the Health Sciences considered indirect assessment as key to their program’s success. Bailey, for example, stated that her program assessed student learning through the use of surveys. Graduate and employee surveys are completed six months to a year after students graduate. The survey was designed to “include those seven student learning outcomes” and to see if the employer and the graduate felt the student learning outcomes had been attained. Jane’s program also considered student feedback important when she stated that:

Yes, getting that feedback from the student to say, "How else could we improve this?" I've surveyed the students after they've done the freshman year. It's basically the second component of the graduate survey that they get that looks at curriculum. There are some questions based on curriculum, based on program design. Very simple questions like, "What is your perspective?" from the student after they've done the first year, and then six months after they graduate. Now they're out there practicing, "What do you now think as far as the program, curriculum, program design?" and so on. It does drive change. If it's one student

that says something one year, "You give us too many case studies. That's too much work." Then I hear students saying, "I really enjoyed the case studies."

Joe used student questionnaires in his program in conjunction with direct assessment methods. The questions on the survey ranged from questions about teaching methods to questions about textbooks. Joe added: "we assess the books, we assess the teaching technique, how we present the material, the testing, how we test them. Are they happy with how we test them? Can we change?" All these participants noted the importance of these surveys in initiating change to program policy and procedures.

**Length of time conducting assessment.** Another theme emerging from data analysis involves the length of time in which participants were engaged in assessment. Participants reported having engaged in assessment for five to 35 years.

Angela claimed her program began their current assessment practices "probably somewhere between five and six years." Sara also maintained that her unit has been conducting assessment activities since she was employed full-time for the department five years earlier. Bailey stated her program had some assessment for some time, but not until the last six or seven years has assessment of student learning been "working correctly." Tony, Roger, and Margaret approximated assessment practices in their units have been conducted for about 10 years in their department.

Several participants linked the initiation of current assessment practices to accreditation-related events. John, for example, said his department began assessment when the study institution "got in trouble with accreditation." Jane was hired while her program was "having to write a self-study report" in 2008. She recalled having to attend

a workshop for those involved in writing the report and thinking “Oh my goodness, there were all these criteria that we had to provide evidence for program assessment.” Similar to Bailey, Jane claimed that some assessment was being conducted prior to implementing current assessment practices. However, it was shortly after 2008 that these practices were refined. Joe recalled being on accreditation probation in 1999 when he began his full-time employment in the program. Joe maintained that prior to initiating current assessment practices, the program was awarded accreditation for two or three year periods. Since current assessment practices were put in place, “the first time we got an eight-year award, the second time we got an eight-year [award], then it’s been like that ever since.”

A few participants indicated having had prolonged engagement in assessment practices. For instance, Ronald stated that he has been assessing from 1999 to date “with the pre-and post-test on the students that have gone through.” Dora claimed her program has been assessing for 35 years and added they have “always done assessments” through tests, outside field experience assignments, community work, and supervising teachers. Finally, Jack attributed assessment practices to a previous program director. Jack stated, “as far as I know, I would say since when Chief G was here, and so that would be 1996.”

**Sharing assessment results.** A third emergent theme that resulted from the data analysis was that participants shared their assessment results in varying degrees. Though all participants supported this theme, the findings indicated a difference in the level of sharing by program type.

***Findings common to academic units.*** Tony acknowledges that in his unit, assessment results are communicated during convocation week at the beginning of the Fall and Spring semesters. The results are shared with faculty in the department and are used to revise assessment processes. Tony adds that once results are shared, “we start discussing what objectives can be targeted for the next assessment.” Angela’s unit had a similar timeline for sharing results, saying:

Well, within our department, results are discussed twice a year, which are at the beginning to the fall semester and then of course at the end of the spring semester because we collect data in the fall and the spring and then combine the data, and that's what gets reported at the end of the year, at the end of the academic year.

Of course, we share that with faculty over departmental meetings

Angela also stated that these results are shared periodically with the Dean of Arts and Sciences. Margaret’s unit shares results more frequently. She stated that her unit all sits together at department meetings at least every other week to share assessment results.

A few participants reported limited sharing of assessment results. John’s unit shared results with faculty in the department but added “it's pretty brief. They're not really in depth.” Sara’s unit shares assessment results only at committee meetings. She also stated that the results are then submitted to the department chair but not discussed. When asked if anyone else sees their assessment results, she admits “no, we don’t share.” Ronald claims that assessment results in his unit are individual and “are only shared with the student themselves.”

***Findings common to occupational, educational programs.*** Participants from occupational education programs reported sharing their assessment results with a wider variety of stakeholders and use sharing results to add value to assessment. Bailey stated that assessment results for her program are communicated to the nursing advisory board, as well as their national and state accreditors at least once a year. Roger's programs shared their results in department meetings as a way to try to "ensure success and graduation." Roger adds:

We have relatively small cohorts that we can pretty much monitor and track. We see the numbers dwindling, if that's the case, as the students continue to progress. We start off with a strong group. If we started off with a very large group and by the time we get to semester three, it's gone, then we definitely start to examine why.

Similarly, Dora's program used their sharing sessions as a department to discuss programmatic improvements. Dora said:

We all got together to create the final exam because different instructors teach different courses, so because the final exam is comprehensive of the program, we needed to bring in questions that were relevant and that were open ended and covered the whole course. All the faculty, we're a small department, so that makes it easier as well, but all the faculty got together, and we worked on that final exam. We get together at the end to discuss how the students did and what we can do to perfect, to improve the scores.

Joe's program used the results in an assessment report which is shared with their "communities of interest." They also share assessment results with their accrediting agency as well as post them online.

Finally, Jane and Jack described their well-developed practices for sharing results.

Jane stated:

Our goal is to meet once a month with the faculty. The PTA program is a small department because it's only a program of three people: myself, and two PTA faculty. We meet once a month, formally. The reality is that informally, there's always stuff going on. Our offices are right next to each other. The other two faculty share an office space, so it's constantly like whatever. Then we try to document that and capture that in our monthly meetings. Yes, there, we share the results of our programmatic assessment. Not only share the results but also get feedback and discuss, based on what the results are... Then in our advisory board meetings, we do share the results of the programmatic assessment. That typically occurs in the fall semester because I have to wait for some data to come in. Specifically, graduate and employer surveys, to then share those findings with the advisory board, and of course with the dean.

In Jack's program lead faculty meet weekly with the program director to review outcomes and measurements. These meetings had a preset structure which included evaluating feedback from students on test questions. Jack stated:

At the end of the second exam, we allow the class to review the exam and challenge any questions that may not be viable. We have them open their books

and look at it to see if it's a valid question based on the measurable outcome. If it's not on this outcome, this is not a valid question or the law changes; it is repealed so it should be removed. We validate our test questions based on that. Assessment results in Jack's program are also shared with an advisory board.

**Summary of experiences with outcomes assessment.** This section addressed three themes that emerged from the data analysis process related to how community college faculty describe their experiences with outcomes assessment. The first theme that emerged was that faculty are using a wide variety of assessment methods to collect and analyze evidence of student learning. Participants in academic units claimed they are using assignments embedded into their courses to assess course learning outcomes as well as attainment of general education objectives. Those participants in occupational education programs listed licensure exams and capstone courses as being their primary methods for assessing whether their students are learning. Participants from the health sciences also stressed the importance of using indirect measures such as graduate and employer surveys to initiate programmatic change. All participants stated using more than a single method to assess student and instructor performance.

Another emergent theme from data analysis was that faculty have been engaged in assessment activity for more than five years. Of the 12 participants, five stated that they have engaged in assessment for less than 10 years. Three participants stated their units had been formally assessing student learning for 10 to 15 years. Four of the participants have engaged in assessment for more than 15 years. Additionally, three of the

participants linked the origin of their current assessment practices to being placed on probation by a specialized or regional accreditor.

Finally, the third emergent theme that resulted from analyzing the data collected for this study was that sharing assessment results plays a diverse role in participant's experience. Participants in academic units share their assessments minimally with other faculty within their departments. Participants in occupational education programs are accountable for their assessment results to a greater number of external stakeholders. Many of the participants touted the role of sharing assessment results in stimulating discussions on programmatic improvements.

### **Reasons for Assessment**

The second research question sought to describe how community college faculty described their reasons for conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, two themes emerged: 1) Accreditation is the top driver of assessment practices, and 2) The state coordinating board has a substantial influence on assessment practices.

**Influence of accreditation on assessment practices.** One major theme in participants describing their reasons for conducting assessment was the influence that accreditation has on assessment. All the participants supported these findings. Institutional accreditation is awarded by the Southern Association of Community Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Occupational education programs also have specialized accreditors which grant accreditation for a program

within the college. Each of these accrediting bodies impacts assessment practices on campus.

Many of the participants shared similar views on the influence accreditation has on assessment practices. Sara stated, “I think that's the reason we do that is for SACS[COC]. I think that's the only reason we do this.” Furthermore, in discussing the reasons administration engages in assessment, Sara added, “Our chairs have always emphasized, all the chairs we've had since I started. I'm sure their way is because of SACS[COC].” Margaret remarked that a large part of her unit’s assessment also “comes from some of the criteria that are required for SACS and for our institutional effectiveness, Gen Ed. That allows us also within the department to decipher what we feel is important whenever we're teaching our students.” She added that accreditation, in particular, the probationary status, exposed areas that needed improvement. Margaret went on to tout the importance of accreditation in documenting institutional processes and evidence of learning. Joe proclaimed:

My assessments go hand in hand with academia... since we have to assess all of the core and therefore it shows for SACS[COC] and every other department of education that we're assessing our programs effectively. We do it on a yearly basis, and this promotes transparency. Which is what all schools need to promote.

Joe also added that “very little assessment was being done here at the school” before the institution was placed on probation by SACSCOC, but admits “we are getting better, we're not there yet.” Angela admitted that accreditation played “a major role” in assessment practices at the institution, but added:

I think we've learned a lot from SACSCOC. In my opinion, I think we should have been doing this a long time ago. I don't know exactly where the process was not completed or done by all the departments or the institution. As I told you, I came on board, in general, five years ago, so I don't know exactly what was going on before. How were we surviving? What kind of reports were we creating?

Angela continued to add that accreditation has an effect “in what we assess and how much we assess also I guess in the activity. The volume of activity as far as assessment is concerned.” Tony affirmed that “SACS[COC] plays a big role on the assessment part. That’s integrated into our core activity projects.”

Several participants regarded accreditation as providing a guide to more effective assessment practices. Ronald, for example, stated that accrediting bodies provide guidelines in addition to requiring assessment of student learning outcomes and student success rates. John added that accreditation helps units “realize that we needed to organize our assessment process and be able to show a clear line between outcomes and assessments and aligning with goals also.” Jack maintained that accreditation “forces you to be more organized and structured and really look at what's being taught, how is it being taught and how is it being evaluated.” Dora affirmed that SACSCOC plays an important role in what her program does for assessment. She claimed that in the Child Development Program “we've always assessed,” but added that she perceived accreditation more about providing evidence that they were doing so.

Jane claimed that accreditation is a routine part of their program, asserting, “That's just our life. That's normal for us to know that we have to provide evidence that

we are fulfilling these criteria. It pushes you to try to be a better program.” Bailey agreed with Jane’s view on assessment and accreditation saying that her program has engaged in assessment for some time and that SACSCOC helped “the whole institution focus on the big picture of [having] outcomes, measures.” She added that “hopefully it gives us the quality education we’re looking for, for our students.”

Roger had similar but slightly unfavorable views of accreditation and assessment. When asked if accreditation influenced his assessment practices, he responded:

Yes, sir. Unfortunately, we have to, and this goes for every area. I get assessed. I get evaluated. I evaluate and assess my faculty. I think institutions likewise have to have that watchdog, if you will, likewise always ensuring quality, always ensuring compliance. Because unfortunately, if that was not the case, then I don't believe we would all be doing what we needed to do to provide the standard that is necessary, the rigor to have our students really succeed in their studies.

Roger later added to his views on the importance of accreditation saying, “it is the lifeline of our institution.”

**Role of the state coordinating board in assessment.** Another theme in participants describing their reasons for conducting assessment was the role of the state coordinating board in influencing assessment practices. All the participants supported these findings. The THECB oversees all public post-secondary education institutions in the state. The THECB publishes two manuals that list courses, course descriptions, and student learning outcomes for courses offered at Community Colleges. The ACGM lists academic courses and the WECM lists courses for occupational education programs.

Angela perceived that the “THECB has implemented a lot of the assessment procedures that SACS[COC] now recommends.” She spoke positively of the student learning outcomes listed in the ACGM claiming:

It's a good representation of what they need to learn in the class, yes. I would say more so because of the experience I had teaching general psychology. Yeah, exactly what the outcomes recommend. It's very important for the student to know definitions, theories. The experimental process or the research method process in psychology of course. Yeah, I agree very, very much. Very closely with the learning outcomes.

Ronald claimed that student learning outcomes listed in the ACGM act as a guide for their unit and they try to “use it [the ACGM] as a tool to make sure we are on the right track.” Joe touted the THECB’s guidance:

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board is very good also at providing training for us. We meet maybe every...one to two years. The program directors meet, and therefore we set standards for the classes that we're teaching, set the guidelines, the student learning objectives. Makes it all uniform, we make it all uniform for the state of Texas and this is what we'll be put into our catalogs and student learning objectives and once again, like I said, they give us training also, they give us support and training as to how we're going to employ all of this into our assessment and into our programs.

Contrary to Angela, Margaret did not always agree with the THECB, but agreed with Ronald and Joe in that the ACGM provides “a guideline that all of us must follow.”

Margaret also added that faculty in her unit network with other faculty from community colleges in hopes of aligning assessment methods so that the program can “meet what needs to be done with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for community colleges.”

Tony claimed the THECB plays “a big role on the assessment part” of assessing general education objectives. Tony added that for student learning outcomes “we have to follow the ACGM.” Dora stressed the impact of the THECB on her program’s courses and assessment methods

I think they play a very important role because aren't they the ones that do the outcomes for the courses? We have to make sure that our students are meeting the course outcomes that are identified by the coordinating board. Therefore, we have to have the different resources to assess that those outcomes are being met. That is why we do the tests. We do outside assignments. We do the actual internship where they have the hands-on demonstrations. They do activities and all kinds of things. Again, every course reflects the outcomes identified through the coordinating board.

John also suggested that the THECB’s “job is to look out for the quality of education that the students are receiving.” John proclaimed that the THECB:

Definitely, it has influence. They're the ones that are sort of dictating these objectives, and then we need to follow these objectives, and it has influence. What influences them in choosing certain objectives, I don't know that, but they do influence. I mean, the whole fact that we're following these guidelines that we

do and making sure we're aligning correctly with what they deem to be important is kind of a great telling of their influence overall.

Several participants perceived the THECB's bearing on assessment as broader than simply course learning outcomes. Jane claimed that in her program, the THECB currently has a bigger influence on their curriculum. The THECB recently forced all associate degree programs to be capped at 60 credit hours. Jane added that the student learning outcomes listed in the WECM are often insufficient saying, "in addition to the three or four that WECM might have on there, there's an additional 11 to 15" that must be tied to standards set by their program's accreditor. Roger maintained that like SACSCOC, the THECB acts as an "overlooking body" that ensures compliance with certain standards. In addition, he added that there is a disconnect among faculty and the THECB and hopes that "it was a little bit more faculty-inclusive."

Bailey and Jack downplayed the effect of the THECB on their program's assessment practices. Bailey claimed that "for assessment, they [the THECB] tend to focus more on the academic area." However, she added that the THECB's core competencies such as communication and teamwork, are all incorporated into the nursing program. Furthermore, "they [the THECB] don't require at least from the [nursing] programs, yearly reports, and things like that like the other groups do." Jack said he wishes his program had "more of a guide from the coordinating board." Jack also asserted that student learning outcomes in the ACGM "are not clear or not all the courses have course outcomes." Jack added, "we would have to sometimes look at them and then establish our own."

**Summary of community college faculty reasons for assessment.** This section addressed two themes that emerged from the data analysis process related to how community college faculty described their reasons for engaging in assessment. The first theme that emerged was that accreditation is the top driver of assessment practices at the institution. Participants in the study claimed that accreditation influenced assessment methods, the volume of assessment activity, and faculty involvement in assessment. The study's participants viewed accreditation as providing a guide to more effective assessment practices. Many of the participants also cited the study institution's probationary status with SACSCOC as a catalyst for a shift assessment culture at the institution.

The second theme that emerged was that the state's coordinating board has a substantial influence on assessment practices. Because the THECB publishes student learning outcomes for both academic and occupational education courses, many of the participants described the governing body as highly influential in assessment. Similar to perceptions of SACSCOC, participants also viewed the THECB as a guide for more effective assessment processes. Two participants, however, viewed the THECB's influence on assessment as minimal.

### **Perceptions of the Benefits Outcomes Assessment**

The third research question sought to describe how community college faculty perceive the benefits of conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, two themes emerged: 1) Faculty perceived

that assessment could affect student success and teacher performance, and 2) Assessment benefited improvements in curricular practices such as curriculum alignment.

**Assessment and its influence on student success and teacher performance.**

The major theme in participants describing the benefits of outcomes assessment was the influence that assessment has on student success and teacher performance. All the participants supported this theme. As with describing experiences, there was a difference in how participants described the benefits of using outcomes assessment depending on their program type. Participants in occupational education were able to articulate the benefits and give concrete examples of how assessment practices benefited their unit.

*Experiences common to academic units.* Tony clearly stated, “I assess my students is to improve student success within the mathematics department.” Tony also said that assessment helped him identify what students are learning in the classroom, what he “or the rest of the team in the math department ... need to do different.” He added that every faculty member has their teaching style but, admitted that sometimes that style must change depending on assessment results. Tony summed up his views on the benefits of assessment by saying “assessment is a big part of our department in having that student success.” Margaret when asked if she felt assessment of student learning outcomes is important, answered simply “Yes. Definitely.” Ronald’s statements focused exclusively on student success. “Student success is my goal,” Ronald proclaimed. He added that assessment guided his unit in preparing students for their practical and written exams. The goal of their assessment effort was to prepare students for transfer and teacher certification exams. Unlike Ronald, Sara admitted that

assessment in her unit is done mainly for accreditation purposes, but “obviously, we want our students to learn.” She added:

I guess it's just for a faculty member; I think assessment is just to make sure the student's learning, to make sure that they're learning all those student learning outcomes and just making sure that we do teach them from the beginning to the end, that they did learn something.

Angela declared that the benefits of assessment are seeing that seeing that “students met all the outcomes and this will now be something that they’ve learned, they’ll apply wherever in their field, in the profession.” She also said that if students do not perform at benchmark levels, she makes pedagogical changes like adding more examples or providing study guides. She summarized her experiences with using assessment to improve student and teacher success by saying:

Well, the way I see it, I'm a very data driven person. How do you know that the student really learned what they're supposed to learn without proof, without results, without data? So, yes. For example, psychology instructors would get together, and we would develop objectives, outcomes that we thought were important to the class and put our minds together and develop these because we are so-called the experts in the field.

John’s description of his experiences of the benefits of using outcomes assessment differed from the other academic participants. Unlike some the other participants, John did not see the benefits of assessment for himself but understands how it could be beneficial for others.”

I can see how it could be important...For my class specifically, they're [learning outcomes] not really that important for my classes. I don't even tailor my classes around them. It just seems to be that I kind of hit those things anyway. I think most instructors do. But I guess for the instructors that don't, maybe they [learning outcomes] have their place.”

Despite his perceptions of outcomes assessment, John maintained that faculty “really want their students to, definitely to have a quality education.”

*Experiences common to occupational educational programs.* Jane told of her experience of assessing her program when she began in 2008. She used assessment data to make some changes to her program and as a result licensure pass rates increased “from a 20% to 70%.” Part of Jane’s assessment included gathering feedback from students. She, in turn, used the results “to guide some of the changes that we made, as far as the sequence of the curriculum was concerned.” She also acknowledged that she engages in assessment partly because of a sense of responsibility. She said she feels that faculty “are the gatekeepers to determine whether or not these students are going to be able to progress to that next level.... To me, in the end, that's rewarding when we see that our students are doing well.”

Part of Joe’s assessment included student’s professionalism in the workplace. Joe claimed students in his program are expected to exhibit professionalism, politeness, and good communication skills. “We stress that a lot,” adds Joe. Joe asserted the necessity for assessment saying that faculty in his program “need to have a set of student learning outcomes and different assessment techniques. You're not going to flourish, and your

students aren't going to learn all of those outcomes needed for transitioning into the workforce.” He also focused his assessment on being able to “ask ourselves as educators is what we're teaching the right way.” Joe proclaimed that assessment is “number one priority in my case as an instructor assessment is the number one priority because that's how you're going to notice if you're teaching it good.” He also added that “every educator should assess his type of teaching or his teaching techniques to assess for being an effective educator.”

Dora explained how her program used assessment to identify negative effects to student success:

We did this last year for first time, well not the first time, but we did it for the first time where we did discuss which would've been the writing component, and the videotape, demonstrate. We found that the students were able to demonstrate with 100% accuracy based on their video tape and the rubric used for the video tape. However, in the written exam, they didn't do as well. In discussing and talking amongst ourselves, we came to the conclusion that it could be because of the writing skills that our students have.

They have developed an action plan for addressing the threat. Dora adds that her program's development of rubrics has helped faculty in her program be “more consistent in your grading which is part of the assessment.”

Bailey recalls that prior to having articulated learning outcomes, faculty “couldn't identify what were the essential items they needed to cover” often getting absorbed in the “nice to know.” Like many other health science programs, Bailey's program focuses

their assessment on preparing students for success in licensure exams. The program received program reports based on their student's performance on the licensure exams. Based on these reports, faculty in the program addressed specific areas within the curriculum. Bailey recalled a report indicating that students in their program scored low on questions related to mental health. They found similar results in their course based assessment of similar student learning outcomes. The program made pedagogical changes and "increased the student's knowledge level, and that was demonstrated by their standardized exam as well as by them being able to do more scenarios."

Jack asserted that assessment helped his program identify "what do we want as a faculty team, what do we want our students to learn out of a particular block of instruction." When asked about the importance of student learning outcomes assessment, Jack stated:

It's important because if not, then why teach a class if you're not going to measure anything. You're not going to teach a class just to teach a class. We always look at that even though sometimes ACGM provides us with a list of eight to ten outcomes. It should be listed on the curriculum. We always look and add a few more and to see if that's what we need in our area to make sure. You have to measure. If not, that's the structure per teaching. You're going to follow something from the beginning to the end. If the course has no outcomes or measurements and then you'd be going back and forth. You can start in the middle and then go back to the beginning.

Jack added that for all courses he has taught, he used an outline to create a “check sheet at the end to evaluate the skill.”

Roger claimed that assessment helped his programs set “a standard, a minimum standard of what is intended for that particular class.” He argues that without the standard, his programs “could not ensure the quality of the graduate.” Roger affirmed that formalizing assessment process in his programs has also helped them evaluate segments of courses to determine student success instead of using course grades as a measure. Roger adds that outcomes assessment has made his programs more “meticulous in our assessment of the skills that students are obtaining.” Roger perceives that it has “been a definite plus in regards to how we're providing the data that we need.”

**Curriculum alignment.** Another theme in participants describing the benefits of outcomes assessment was the influence that assessment curriculum alignment. A majority of the participants supported this theme.

Participants in the study perceived assessment as helping horizontal and vertical alignment. Sara claimed that establishing student learning outcomes “pretty much keeps our classes aligned. That way there's consistency with the course being taught.” Jane discussed student learning outcomes as providing “a blueprint to the licensure exam.” Jane elaborated on vertical alignment when she added: “if we don't have these student learning outcomes, then how do we know that we're hitting the area that the student needs to have in order to be prepared for that licensure exam?” Roger asserted that without articulated student learning outcomes, “different instructors would emphasize different things and maybe not even stick to what the class was intended to teach.” He said that

alignment within the program is necessary to valid assessment, saying “you can't evaluate the Capstone without taking into account the multiple courses that led to that conclusion of the program, so we all contribute.”

Like some of the other participants, Dora spoke about the importance of having student learning outcomes. When asked if she would still conduct outcomes assessment without accrediting bodies or state governing boards, Dora replied

I think that would have an impact where you are teaching whatever you want.

There's no consistency to the program. There's no consistency to the courses. We have to have that guide so that everybody's on the same page. Especially if you're teaching the same course and you don't have those outcomes. The outcomes are extremely important. I know that when I get the course outcomes, and I am reviewing for a book, it's matching which chapters cover these outcomes. If they don't cover these outcomes, then I can't use that book. I need another book. Or I need supplements to supplement the book because all of those objectives or outcomes need to be met.

Dora also added that without assessment guiding curriculum alignment, “students wouldn't be learning the same thing.” Dora continued with describing her program’s emphasis on sharing so that even adjuncts are aligning their curriculum.

Bailey discussed a broader scope of alignment in her program’s practice of setting student learning outcomes for entire degree programs from “start to the finish of the four-semester and then the three-semester.” They used the same rubric to assess students throughout their progression in the program. Similarly, Margaret described her unit’s

assessment practices as fostering alignment, saying “it may be different course or different subject matter, but the foundations of art are still what aligns all of our courses together.” Margaret added that “no matter what department that you're in, you have to foster across all courses a commonality of what the student is getting.” In John’s unit, their focus on alignment was narrower, focusing on specific assignments. In John’s unit, part of their assessment practice was modifying assignments to “make sure that they're aligning, to make sure certain things are promoted within the assignment.”

Finally, Jack described how assessment helped with aligning their curriculum with others across the state. Jack was part of a state committee that evaluates outcomes and measurements that recommend what “needs to be taught at the basic level for licensure at that level without having any redundancy in the curriculum.” He also discussed the importance of course alignment saying

They have to align. If they're going to stay afloat, they have to align. It's helped us because we're always looking at if there was no measurement, no state licensure and then there would be no need to assess but there is, and that license exam is always going to be there. There has been no talk about no testing on an exam for licensure.

### **Summary of community college perceptions of the benefits outcomes**

**assessment.** This section sought to describe how community college faculty perceived the benefits of conducting outcomes assessment. Two themes emerged from analysis of the data collected to address this research question. The first theme that emerged was that faculty perceived that assessment could influence student success and teacher

performance. Many of the study's participants noted that they engage in assessment to influence student success. Others regarded faculty using assessment as an attempt to improve their own teaching. Participants from occupational educational programs gave tangible examples of using assessment to improve student success.

A majority of the participants claimed that assessment practices in their units or programs are used to drive curriculum alignment. Many of the participants discussed how student learning outcomes are important to aligning curriculum horizontally among different sections of the same course. Two participants described how student learning outcomes are critical to vertically aligning curriculum to increase student success in licensure exams and capstone courses. Another participant described how a state committee that assesses outcomes across multiple institutions facilitates statewide course alignment.

### **Perceptions of the Challenges of Outcomes Assessment**

The fourth research question sought to describe how community college faculty perceive the challenges for conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, four themes emerged: 1) Faculty do not see the value in assessment, 2) Faculty lack a clear understanding of accreditation, and 3) Faculty perceive they need training in assessment, and 4) Faculty perceive a lack of financial support of assessment.

**Value of assessment.** The major theme in faculty describing the challenges of using outcomes assessment was that faculty failed to see the value of assessment and

therefore perceived assessment as not worth their time. All the participants supported these findings.

Several participants cited instructor course loads as preventing faculty from being more engaged in the assessment process. “I need to be teaching less time to be better involved in assessment” stated Jane. She considered time as the only factor preventing faculty from engaging more in assessment. Sara stated that her teaching extra classes interferes with her involvement in assessment “to add this extra stuff, sometimes feels overwhelming.” She adds “it's important, but I think it's just annoying to us.” Joe proclaimed that he “would not hesitate in becoming more involved, but I would first look into my teaching load.” He added that faculty “time is very precious of course, you're going to take some time away by doing assessment.” Angela admitted that faculty are “not very thrilled or excited to look forward on these kinds of assessment.” She added that it is difficult to convince faculty of its importance and faculty in her unit say “it's extra work, we already do enough in the classroom. Why do we have to report on these objectives, outcomes.” Roger claims that resistance from faculty has been from “the extra investment of time, more work.” He expressed his feeling on the challenge of assessment as “Man, something else that you want me to do? Where am I going to find the time now for this? Maybe then if we had some dedicated time to that.”

Some participants correlated the value of assessment to administrative support. “If I’m having trouble for this student to learn in this objective, who’s the one that’s going to hear me out?” Tony asked. He added that he perceives that teacher are aware of the importance of assessment, but having more faculty input into the administrative

processes instead of “waiting to talk to somebody and tell them what’s going on” would increase his perception of the value of assessment. Ronald claimed that he had the administrative support when he first started, “it was embedded in me that it was not only important, to be a good instructor, to get good evaluations, student success, retention, graduation, but it was also embedded to get involved.” He explained that his involvement in assessment was a direct result of this support. Margaret stated that she has heard her colleagues her complain about “document, paperwork, blah, blah, blah,” but adds that her involvement in assessment stems simply from being asked by an administrator to do so, stating “to be asked because you need to feel important.”

Bailey claimed that for faculty it “is easy to say it’s busy work if they’re not doing the process correctly.” Like some of the other participants, Bailey perceived administrative support as key to adding value to assessment; she asserted that it would help “if you have the buy-in from the program director or chair” so they could engage in discussion about the assessment process. Bailey continued saying though “major issue would be with time,” it would be helpful to show faculty that assessment has “value and it’s applicable to what they’re doing.”

Dora and Jack did not perceive time or value as issues that should prevent faculty from being involved in assessment. Jack stated “I think if they want to value what they do and they really love to teach, they’ll embrace [assessment] because that’s part of [being faculty]. If they don’t embrace that, then they need to reevaluate; they’re here for the wrong reasons. Jack asserted “It’s not an issue...we have to evolve, this is not an

additional duty, it's [duties of faculty] changed." Dora equated asking faculty to engage in assessment to working with children.

I wouldn't give them a choice. I know that doesn't sound very nice, but it's just like when you work with children and when you have children. Sometimes you don't give a choice if they don't have a choice. If it's something that they have to do, then you have to do it.

Dora later added, "I feel like we are part of an institution and we all have to contribute."

John's perceptions of assessment were mostly negative. John believes assessment to be "unnecessary" and "just extra work." He elaborated saying "I'm really sort of still trying to work through that myself and how important it really is" and "I don't think I have the time to become more involved in it." He adds that the only way to convince faculty to engage in assessment is to show them:

How something like this actually works. It's actually a benefit to the student that the student actually comes out with a better learning experience...but until it's objectively proven that this is the road other than for accreditation and those kinds of purposes, then you're going to have problems with those people.

**Understanding accreditation.** Another theme in participants describing the challenges for engaging in assessment was that participants lacked a full understanding of accreditation. According to SACSCOC (2017), accreditation means the institution has a mission is appropriate for higher education, sufficient resources, clear educational objectives, and methods for assessing these objectives and demonstrating improvements.

The participants in the study, however, perceive accreditation is concerned with student and teacher performance, transferability of courses, and institutional credibility.

Some participants perceived accreditation means student and teacher performance. Tony stated “Accreditation would be how well the students are succeeding in the classes. How well are the students doing in the classes?” Sara also perceived that SACSCOC “has a lot to do with the way we teach in the class and the way the students learn.” In addition, Sara stated that without accreditation student “credits wouldn't count somewhere else.” Ronald recalled preparing students for the registration process when the institution was on probation and assuring them credits going to be transferrable. Like Sara and Ronald, Margaret perceived the institution needed to maintain its accreditation because “we want our students when they transfer off to be able to use those credits.”

Most participants perceived that accreditation correlated with institution's image or credibility. Angela asserted that accreditation is “very important...If we're not accredited, I think it [the institution] will lose a lot of its credibility. John also maintained that accreditation “means our institution is a real system of education.” Margaret and Jack, both perceived accreditation “validated” the institution. Roger stated, “if we're not accredited, then our status drops tremendously.” Dora's summed up many of the participant's perceptions in accreditation stating “it just gives meaning to why we're here.”

Joe and Jane gave different meaning to accreditation. Joe maintained that accreditation affects student job prospects. “If your program is not accredited, for

example, the radiography program, hospitals tend not to hire graduates from non-accredited programs. They don't like to hire those graduates.” Jane held

I think it holds institutions accountable. That's important because we can just go through the motions of, "Yeah, we're teaching. We're doing this," but I think that that accountability piece just ensures that we're going to be, not only, yeah we know somebody else is going to be checking up on us, but we have to internally make sure that we're checking on ourselves. Making sure that we're delivering that quality whatever it is, whether it be an education or any other area within the institution that it continues to align with whatever the goals of the institution are.

Jane's interpretation of accreditation was the closest to SACSCOC's published definition.

**Professional development.** The third theme in faculty describing the challenges of using outcomes assessment was that faculty perceive that further professional development is necessary to engage faculty in assessment. All the participants supported these findings.

Some participants suggested that engaging faculty in assessment is a matter of getting them involved in committee work. Tony admitted that faculty is not involved much in assessment. He added that “one way I would see it that they could be involved if there was like a type of rotation.” In Tony's views, establishing a rotation of faculty to serve on assessment related committees, and attend assessment related meetings would help faculty become more familiar with assessment practices as well as help refine assessment processes. Ronald agreed with Tony in that he perceived increasing faculty engagement in assessment is a simple matter. “I would think maybe they're just not

asked,” said Ronald, adding “instead of maybe just having one large meeting, with a big group of people and saying if anybody is interested, come visit us, come talk to us, instead of asking them on a one to one.” Jane claimed that faculty “can get a little better insight into” assessment by establishing a rotation in which they would take turns serving on assessment committees. Jane added that faculty will resist engagement in assessment “unless they're asked specifically, or unless they're assigned by their chair, or whatever, their program director.” Bailey claimed that “trying to understand the process assessment” can be daunting, especially for new faculty members. Bailey said that simply requiring them to get involved in assessment will help them overcome their hesitation.

Sara and John elaborated on how working with faculty can help increase engagement. She recalled an assessment related assignment she was given that initially “didn't happen.” She explained the reason for not completing the assignment was a lack of clarity in expectations. Sara added that it took meetings with faculty to underscore expectations and ensure understanding of the assignment before her and her colleagues could complete the assignment. Sara summed up faculty resistance to assessment “they're being hesitant because we didn't know what we were doing.” John speculated, “I think if you look at where the main resistance is coming from and why it's coming and then you try and address that.” He continued to say that his unit is addressing this issue, saying “We're trying to do that now. I mean, with trainings and what not.”

Some participants argued that professional development beyond simply meeting with faculty is needed to get them more engaged. Angela stated

Faculty have a very bad, negative connotation to assessment; I think it's because the way the process is, is sometimes not easy to understand and they get frustrated. If things were to be clear, concise, I don't think we have a problem.

She added that simply meeting with faculty might be enough. Sara proclaims that "hands-on workshops instead of having a meeting" is better way to get faculty more engaged. Margaret explained faculty resistance stating that resistance "is there is because they really don't have a grasp on what is needed." Margaret elaborated on her point about faculty resistance, she stated "because they're left in the dark," and added that simply telling them "what's going on, they feel like they are important to the institution and that their progress that they do has merit" will increase engagement in assessment. Margaret added that "professional development that goes beyond just a lecture face-to-face" is another way to engage faculty. Joe also explained that faculty are resistant to assessment "because they were never exposed to it" and because it has never been "communicated to them how important it is to assess your teaching styles." Joe outlined his ideas for getting faculty more involved

Number one, provide training for them. Number two, provide access to meetings or conferences where the same type of educator meet and talk about assessment techniques. So, provide training, number two is send them to meetings or conferences, number three provide the financial support that they need. You know, you have to plan for going out of town for two or three days and staying in a hotel and what have you. You have to get your budget in order.

Several participants downplayed the importance of professional development in increasing engagement. Dora stated that in her program, assessment is already “embedded, and it's been there forever,” but adds “I really think maybe professional development will help.” Jack argued that faculty have “hostilic [sic] approaches” to engagement in assessment. He continued to discuss the practice in the Criminal Justice department of “forcing” faculty to be involved in assessment to prepare faculty to be able to lead the department if needed. Jack agreed that there's not enough professional development in assessment. Roger also agreed that more professional development would “be good, definitely,” but maintained that resistance to assessment is “more about the time, I think, more so than anything else.”

**Incentivizing assessment.** The fourth theme in faculty describing the challenges of using outcomes assessment was that faculty feel that there are not enough incentives for them to engage in assessment. Most participants supported these findings. There were different opinions among the participants on what type of incentive would get faculty more engaged in assessment.

When speaking of the different types of incentives, Angela summed it up well, saying “Well, with engagement comes recognition I think and with recognition comes monetary incentives so, I think they all tie in too, but first, I need to get involved so engage, and then the others come after.”

Joe, Sara, and Ronald shared similar views on financial incentives. Joe claims “release time, make it available” or if “need be, you have to give them a stipend.” Sara proclaims that “release time and or give me some stipend” would be a way “to motivate

me. I think that would get more people involved.” Ronald claimed that incentives were not necessary to get faculty engaged in assessment, saying his humble beginnings motivate him to get involved. However, when asked what the institution needed to do to get him more involved in the assessment process, his reply was “more release time, more release time.”

Most of the other participants agreed that some type of incentive would increase faculty engagement in assessment. However, they disagreed on exactly which type would work best. John regarded recognition as a motivator only for “the younger faculty maybe.” John also admitted that financial incentives would be beneficial “money is always an inspiration when it comes to things like this.” Jack agreed, stating “if they're part of that trophy generation probably, but I don't think there's too many.”

Bailey disagreed with John and Jack. When asked about recognition as motivating factor, she replied

See, I don't see that, because I think if you look at it, many of the older generation thinks that recognition is a way to get people ‘they are gonna give them a parking place,’ it used to be or, or... to stand out. Most of your younger group really doesn't care whether somebody recognizes them or not. If they're gonna do it, they're gonna do it because they see a value in it.

Bailey went on to add “some people are motivated by money...so, maybe for some of them, it would be that.”

Dora considered it unrealistic to give faculty financial incentives for engaging in assessment. She perceived recognition as a more budget-conscious method for

incentivizing participation. She stated, "I think everybody likes to be recognized and I think just giving them a certificate for helping would go a long way." As far as financial incentives she argued

Again, is that realistic? In our budget, I do not think it's realistic. I could see the monetary if it's above and beyond what they're required to do. If it's part of their teaching, part of their classes, then I don't think it should be monetary. I think that really you don't even need to give a certificate, but if you want to, that's fine. I think that's part of their responsibilities. It all goes back to the context of the assessor and assessing...I just think that everybody should do their part and it doesn't have to be a monetary compensation.

Margaret shared Dora's views on financial incentives pondering "it would motivate them, but I just think that's wrong...why should you be rewarded for doing your job?"

However, when it came to recognition Margaret's point of view was contradictory to Dora's

That's like giving the trophy to everybody. It's like, "What? Why? I don't understand." It's part of the job, right? There should be a kind of accomplishment within yourself saying, "Okay. Well, I have learned this, so I'm able to contribute in this way a little bit more efficiently." Unfortunately, it's almost like saying, "Okay. You did a good job. Here's your lollipop." I don't think it's necessary, but it's nice to have a piece of paper that says, "Oh, I whipped through this" because again you can put that in your tenure pocket. You can put it in a frame upon your wall because then people come into your office and go, "Oh, they have the

credentials or whatever." It might be a small thing, but I wouldn't give them anything more than a piece of paper.

Roger agreed that "Another certificate's not going to make a whole lot of difference." He argued that faculty in his programs "feel that we're already overburdened, overworked, overstressed." Roger later added that "Maybe then if we had some dedicated time to that, release time or at least a monetary incentive, that might be something that would be good."

A few participants did not regard the lack of incentives as a challenge to increasing faculty engagement in assessment. Tony argued that administrative support was a bigger factor in increasing faculty engagement "it's not the incentives." Jane contended "Personally, I don't need recognition. I know that I'm doing a good job." She later added that faculty should not be paid for something that is part of faculty responsibilities. She asserted that their reward should be helping students succeed, saying "Ultimately, we're helping the student to make a better life for themselves because education changes people's lives."

**Summary of community college perceptions of the challenges of outcomes assessment.** The fourth research question sought to describe how community college faculty perceived the challenges for conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, four themes emerged. The first theme was that faculty do not see the value in assessment. Participants in the study claimed that faculty see assessment an additional task and do not have time to do it. Some of the participants cited their already overloaded teaching schedule as a reason why they do not

have time to engage in assessment. Participants also cited lack of administrative support as giving little value to assessment.

The second theme that emerged was that faculty lacked a clear understanding of accreditation as a reason for assessing. SACSCOC defines accreditation in terms of an institution's mission, resources, educational objectives, and assessment. However, participants in the study directly linked accreditation with student and teacher performance. Many participants in the study correlated accreditation with transferability of courses. Other participants connected accreditation with institutional credibility and image. Only one participant had a relatively accurate view of what accreditation is.

The third theme was that faculty perceive they need training in assessment. Participants all claimed that some professional development would help faculty engage in assessment. Some of the participants see faculty lack of understanding of assessment processes as a major challenge. Many of the participants viewed committee work as an immediate resolution to helping faculty understand assessment.

The fourth major theme was that faculty perceived a lack of incentives to participate in assessment. Participants discussed release time, stipends, and recognition as possible incentives. Though most participants viewed incentivizing assessment as a way to increase engagement in assessment, many of them disagreed on the appropriateness of the type of assessment. Two participants said that incentives were not a motivating factor.

## Summary

Chapter IV presented the findings of this study and the themes that developed as a result of analyzing the data collected from the study participants. The first research question sought to describe the community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment. The analysis of the data collected to address this research question produced four distinct themes: 1) faculty used a broad range of assessment tools to gather assessment data, 2) faculty have been engaged in assessment for a least five years at the study institution, and 3) assessment results were shared with varying degrees. The second research question sought to describe how community college faculty described their reasons for conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, two themes emerged: 1) faculty engage in assessment because of accreditation requirements and 2) the THECB has a substantial influence on assessment practices.

The final two questions sought faculty perceptions of the benefits and challenges to engaging in outcomes assessment. The third research question sought to describe how community college faculty perceive the benefits of conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, two themes emerged: 1) Faculty perceived that assessment could be used to improve teaching and learning, and 2) assessment facilitated improvements in curricular practices such as curriculum alignment. The fourth research question sought to describe how community college faculty perceive the challenges for conducting outcomes assessment. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question four themes emerged: 1)

faculty did not see the value in assessment, 2) It was not clear to faculty what the scope of accreditation is, 3) faculty perceived they need training in assessment, and 4) faculty perceived a lack of incentives for participation in assessment.

Chapter V will present a discussion of the findings, including implications of the results of the study for higher education practice, recommendations for higher education practice, and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

Chapter V presents an overview of the study and discussion of the study's findings. The study's implications and recommendations for higher education practice are discussed, followed by suggestions for future research.

#### **Overview of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning. Outcomes assessment is the process of articulating intended outcomes in regards to a program's services or student learning, planning activities so that the outcomes can be achieved; identifying whether end results have been realized; and using results to promote improvement (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie, 2009). Of specific focus in this study was community college faculty perceptions of the influence of external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to engage in assessment on the quality of faculty and student performance. Practitioners of higher education and their institutions must understand how to engage faculty in outcomes assessment to meet external accountability demands, then use the assessment process to improve teaching and learning (McCullough & Jones, 2015). Though there is little research on faculty experiences with assessment, Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, and Kinzie (2014) point to increased faculty involvement, additional professional development of faculty, and wider use of assessment results by faculty as being keys to advancing outcomes assessment in higher education.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on research which confirms that the list of stakeholders demanding accountability from higher education in U.S. includes government agencies, the business community, students and their parents, and non-profit agencies (e.g., Baker, Jankowski, Provezis, & Kinzie, 2012; Ewell, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Liu, 2011; Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011). The conceptual framework was also guided by prior research that substantiates that institutions of higher education are engaging in outcomes assessment to meet internal and external calls for accountability (e.g., Liu, 2011). Finally, the conceptual framework was guided by prior research showing that low levels of faculty involvement are attributed to lack of interest, lack of institutional investment, or lack of financial incentive (e.g., Banta & Blaich, 2011; Danley-Scott & Tompsett-Makin, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014). Because faculty participation is an important part of assessment for accountability and improvement, the concept of how to effectively engage faculty is a basis for the conceptual framework that guided this study.

The following four research questions guided this study:

1. How do community college faculty describe their experiences with outcomes assessment?
2. How do community college faculty describe the reasons for conducting outcomes assessment?
3. What do community college faculty perceive are the benefits of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?

4. What do community college faculty perceive are the challenges of using outcomes assessment to improve teaching and learning?

The setting for this study was a large, rural-serving community college located in South Texas (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The combined enrollment of the study institution's two branch campuses was 9,137 in Fall 2016. Most students at the study institution enrolled in academic programs for transfer; however, a sizable number of students were in technical or workforce programs (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2017b). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on College (SACSCOC) accredits the institution to award associate degrees and governed by the THECB and by a local nine-member governing Board of Trustees.

In total, 12 faculty members meeting the inclusion criteria agreed to participate in the study. Inclusion criteria for participants included full-time faculty who have experience in assessment of student learning and who had at least four years teaching experience at the study institution. The selected participants evenly represented the academic or general education areas and occupational education programs.

Table 1

*Summary of Participant Profiles*

Participant	Years of Experience	Discipline or Program
Participants from Academic Areas		
Tony	14	Mathematics
John	7	English
Sara	5	Psychology
Angela	5	Natural Science
Ronald	17	Kinesiology
Margaret	8	Visual Arts
Participants from Occupational Education Programs		
Jane	8	Physical Therapist Assistant
Roger	14	Computer Technology
Jack	14	Protective Services
Bailey	20	Nursing
Joe	17	Radiologic Technology
Dora	33	Child Development

Table 1 summarizes the profiles of the participants in the study. The information on the table lists the number of years of experience that each participant has in teaching at community college, their teaching discipline, and whether the participants teach in an academic area or an occupational education program.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Experiences with Outcomes Assessment**

Research question one sought to describe community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment. Participants in the study described using several methods to assess student learning. Some of the participants described using basic formative assessment administered through traditional coursework; others explained the importance of summative assessments in capstone courses or licensure exams. Participants in the study also described having experienced some engagement in assessment for at least five years. Also, all the participants stated that they engage in sharing assessment results with internal and external stakeholders. The analysis of data collected to address this research question produced the following distinct themes: 1) faculty used a multitude of assessment methods to collect assessment data, 2) faculty have been exposed to assessment for considerable lengths of time, and 3) assessment results are shared to varying extents.

All 12 participants in the study described their experiences with assessment as including several assessment methods designed to collect evidence of student learning. The experiences described by participants differed by their program-type. Participants from academic areas offered examples of formative assessment methods to support their experiences. Many of the participants from academic areas cited using assessment methods that included homework, quizzes, pre- and post-tests, signature assignments to assess attainment of course learning outcomes as well as general education competencies.

These examples of formative assessment show that faculty in academic areas have embedded assessment into their curriculum at the course level.

In addition to formative assessment methods, participants from occupational education also cited using summative and indirect methods in their experiences with assessment. Unlike academic areas, occupational education programs have capstone courses, licensure exams, and surveys. Several of the participants expressed the importance of capstone courses to their experiences in assessment. Participants described capstone experiences as ways to either collect assessment data or improve assessment results. These experiences included electronic portfolios of student's work, external consultants to quiz students, videotaping students, computer-based preparation and assessment, and hands-on exams. Participants from occupational education programs, particularly those from the health sciences, used indirect assessment in the form of graduate and employer surveys. These participants hailed the importance of survey results in initiating change in their program's policies, and procedures. The findings from academic areas and occupational education programs support the prior research of Kuh et al. (2014) who found that assessment activity among institutions of higher education has increased. The findings also support prior research by Baker et al. (2012) who concluded that embedding assessment is key to engaging faculty in assessment. Though these findings are not new, they continue to support that faculty in institutions of higher education are increasingly engaging in assessment activity.

Analysis of data for research question one also indicated that participants had been engaged in assessment activity for at least five years. In the academic area, most of

the participants reported having assessed student learning for five to ten years. Only one participant from academics has been assessing longer than ten years. In occupational educational programs, however, all the participants stated that they have been conducting assessment for longer than 15 years. The review of the literature did not reveal prior research on a correlation between the time assessment practices have been in place with engagement. This finding highlights the difference in maturity of assessment processes between academics and occupational education at the study institution.

Finally, data analysis of the findings for research question showed that faculty experiences with assessment include sharing results internally and externally. Similar to the other findings in research question one, there was a considerable difference in the experience of participants from academic units compared to those from occupational education programs. Most of the participants from academic units reported sharing results twice a year with a limited audience. None of the participants from the academic areas indicated sharing assessment results beyond their department.

Participants from occupational education programs share their assessment results and use sharing results to add value to assessment. In addition to sharing assessment results with internally with faculty in their department, participants from occupational education programs reported sharing assessment results externally with advisory boards or globally by posting them on the institution's website. Some participants from occupational education programs indicated that the sharing sessions add value to their assessment processes because they are used to discuss improvements in student performance and program success. This finding supports prior research from Baker et al.

(2012) that finds that sharing assessment results is an effective practice in engaging stakeholders in assessment. Though this finding is not new, it supports that faculty view sharing assessment results as part of the experience in outcomes assessment.

Research shows that institutions of higher education engage faculty in assessment to meet accountability demands (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014; Liu, 2011). Additionally, Kuh et al. (2014) found that faculty engagement in assessment and wider use of assessment results are keys to further developing assessment practices. Baker et al. (2012) list promising practices among institutions with developed assessment practices to include engaging faculty, embedding assessment into institutional processes, and sharing assessment results. Faculty experiences with assessment at the study institution show evidence of these practices.

The findings indicate that faculty at the study institution are engaged in good assessment practices. Faculty are assessing student learning through a variety of assessment methods and are sharing results of their assessment with internal and external stakeholders. The findings of this study continue to support prior research (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014) that assessment practices have increased in number and variety at institutions of higher education. Embedding assessments into institutional process and sharing results are considered best practices for institutions seeking to move toward an institutional culture of assessment (Baker et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2014). It is also evident from the analysis of the data that there is a gap in the development of these practices when comparing academic areas to occupational education programs. Whether this gap

can be attributed to the difference in the length of time that assessment practices have been in place is an issue that requires further study.

### **Reasons for Assessment**

The second research question sought to describe the reasons community college faculty engage in outcomes assessment. Analysis of the data collected to address this research question resulted in two themes: 1) Accreditation is the top driver of assessment practices, and 2) The state coordinating board has a substantial influence on assessment practices. Participant experiences with accreditation ranged from the favorable, viewing accreditation as a guide, to the unfavorable, regarding accreditation as watchdogs for the Federal Government. Participants' experiences with state coordinating board centered on the THECB's prescribed student learning outcomes and core curriculum. As with accreditation, participants did not regard the THECB's role as a negative one. They regarded the THECB as a guide to aligning curriculum ensuring similar experiences for students taking the same course.

All 12 participants perceived accreditation as the primary reason for engaging in assessment. Unlike the findings for research question one, the findings for research question two were consistent across program types. Several participants acknowledged accreditation mandates from SACSCOC as having a majority role not only in the reason they assess student learning but also in the design of their assessment methodology. Despite the perceived pressures from SACSCOC to conduct assessment, participants described accreditation mandates in a positive light, as guides to more effective assessment practices. In addition, participants credited accreditation mandates as

facilitating organization and structure to assessment. Other participants described their experiences with assessment and accreditation as routine parts of the job of faculty in higher education. Only one participant perceived accreditation negatively, comparing it to a watchdog organization, but acknowledged accreditation as the primary reason for engaging in assessment. This finding supports the prior research of Ewell (2011), Kuh et al., (2014), and Liu (2011), who also support that accreditation provides a substantial part of the accountability demands from community college. Although some of the literature indicates faculty having a “love-hate relationship with accreditation” (Eaton, 2012, p.23), the participants in the study had a mostly positive perception of accreditation. The findings in this continue to support that faculty regard accreditation as the primary reason for engaging in assessment, yet perceptions of accreditation appear to be favorable.

Participants in the study also perceived the THECB as having an influence on assessment practices. Unlike with accreditation participants in the study understood a direct relationship between what they do to assess student learning and the outcomes listed in the course manuals published by the THECB. All 12 participants in the study mentioned student learning outcomes set by the THECB as having an influence on assessment practice. Some of the participants viewed the THECB positively. As with accreditation, participants considered the outcomes prescribed by the THECB as guides for their courses. Other participants had a neutral view of the THECB’s bearing on assessment, saying the coordinating board had more influence on program policy than on assessment. Still, some of the other participants expressed unfavorable views of the THECB’s effect. One participant described the THECB and SACSCOC as monitoring

organizations, and another claimed that the student learning outcomes are unclear and often must be supplemented with more appropriate outcomes. This finding supports the prior research of Ewell (2011), Head (2011), and Kuh et al. (2014) that also supports that states have significant accountability relationships with higher education. The findings in this study continue to support that faculty regard state coordinating boards as having a direct influence on their assessment practices.

Accreditation was created and is used by higher education as a principal means of external quality assurance (Beno, 2004; Eaton, 2012). Institutions seeking to maintain accreditation must demonstrate to SACSCOC that they engage in assessment (SACSCOC, 2012b). Additionally, some occupational education programs seek accreditation from specialized accreditors which require assessment of student learning as well. The THECB also expects institutions to demonstrate that they engage in assessment (THECB, 2017). The influence that these organizations have on assessment practices is documented by prior research (e.g., Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Kuh et al., 2014) which confirms that regional and program accreditation, as well as state coordinating board mandates, are among the top reasons for institutions to engage in assessment.

Two accountability issues were noticeably absent from the findings of the study. First, the review of the literature found that performance-based funding was increasingly being used by states to place accountability demands on institutions. None of the participants mentioned performance-based funding in their interviews. One reason could be because it is a relatively new policy in Texas having been in place less than five years before the study was conducted. Second, internal stakeholders such as local governing

boards and local administrators were mentioned minimally as reasons to conduct assessment. Prior research (e.g., AGB,2010; Kuh et al., 2014) confirms that these stakeholders also pressure faculty to engage in assessment. Participants perceived minimal pressure from internal stakeholders such as administration and local governing board. One plausible explanation could be that these stakeholders themselves are not involved in assessment. Another could be that participants in the study generally may regard any accountability demands from local governing boards and administrators as coming indirectly from SACSCOC and the THECB. Finally, another explanation could be that participants in the study institution are already engaged in the assessment process so, administrative pressure is unnecessary.

The findings of this study continue to support prior research (e.g., Banta & Blauch, 2011) that faculty perceived assessment as externally motivated. Participants in the study did not perceive accreditation and state coordinating mandates negatively. They viewed the mandates as providing guidance, organization, and structure for effective assessment. Perhaps, this is an intermediate step in the transition from assessment as an external mandate of accountability toward assessment as an internal mechanism for improvement. Institutions want and need faculty to be more involved in assessment (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014; Scott & Danley-Scott, 2015), using external accountability demands is a way to initiate assessment activity. However, the purpose of assessment must be to use accountability demands to strengthen internal assessment practices aimed towards improvement teaching and learning (Kuh et al., 2015).

### **Perceptions of the Benefits of Outcomes Assessment**

The third research question sought to understand how community college faculty perceive the benefits of conducting outcomes assessment. Participants in the study described the benefits of using assessment in their courses and their programs. Some participants provided broad responses describing the use of assessment results to promote change. Other participants were able to provide more specific examples of how assessment helped their program or students. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, two themes emerged: 1) Faculty perceived that assessment could affect student success and teacher performance, and 2) Assessment benefited improvements in curricular practices such as curriculum alignment.

Most participants described the influence that assessment had on student success and teacher performance as the primary benefit for outcomes assessment. Similar to the findings for research question one, there was a difference in how participants described the benefits of engaging in assessment depending on their program type. Participants from academic areas expressed that assessment is beneficial to measuring student success, yet were able to give few examples to support their claims. Participants in occupational education were better able to articulate the benefits of engaging assessment and gave concrete examples of how assessment helped their unit.

Several participants from academic areas were unable to articulate the benefits of assessment beyond acknowledging that assessment is important to student success. Some participants claimed that assessment was critical in measuring student learning and others added that assessment results should influence teaching methods. Missing from their

responses were substantive examples of how participants or their programs have actually used assessment to improve teaching or learning. Finally, one participant responded that he does not see how assessment can benefit him but does understand that it can benefit others.

Participants from occupational education programs were able to cite specific examples of how their programs benefited from using outcomes assessment. Some participants recalled examples of how establishing or refining assessment practices helped get their programs out of probation from their program accreditors. Other examples cited by participants in occupational education programs include using assessment to identify gaps in student preparedness to transition to the workplace and in changes to entrance requirements that negatively affected student success. Some participants cited examples of using student learning outcomes assessment to align with minimum skills that help students succeed and faculty prepare lectures. Other participants claimed that assessment facilitated pedagogical changes to programs based on student performance on licensure exams and course assessments. This finding supports prior research from Banta and Blaich (2011), Ewell (2008), and Kuh et al. (2014) that also supports that institutions of higher education are using assessment to affect teaching and learning. Though participants in occupational education articulated specific examples, all participants viewed assessment as a way to increase student success and program effectiveness.

In addition to participants perceiving that outcomes assessment affect student success and teacher performance, they also perceived assessment helps them align

curriculum in their programs or units. Eight of the participants supported that assessment helps with vertical and horizontal alignment of the curriculum. Some participants stated that assessment helped with aligning curriculum horizontally, across multiple sections of the same course. These participants added that without articulated student learning outcomes different instructors would teach the same courses differently. Other participants touted the role of assessment in vertically aligning their curriculum. Some examples of this included aligning outcomes in courses, throughout programs to increase licensure exams pass rates, and to avoid redundancy for courses taken by cohorts of students for three or four semesters. One participant serves on a state committee that aligns outcomes for the same course across community colleges in Texas. This finding supports prior research from Kuh and Ewell (2010) that supports that community colleges use assessment to align curricula across sectors. The review of the literature did not reveal a great deal of research on the relationship between assessment and aligning the curriculum. However, the findings of the study support that faculty are using assessment to improve teaching and learning through curricular alignment of learning outcomes.

Outcomes assessment serves a dual purpose in higher education (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Borden, 2010; Ewell, 2008). As noted in the findings for research question two, assessment used to satisfy accountability demands from higher education stakeholders is one purpose of assessment (Ewell, 2008). The findings for research question three show evidence of the second purpose, assessment used to improve the teaching and learning process (Ewell, 2008; Borden, 2010). The findings of this study continue to support prior research (e.g., Banta & Blaich, 2011) that faculty perceived assessment as key to

improving student success and institutional effectiveness. When faculty can understand how assessment help with student success and curricular decisions, they are in a better position to take ownership of assessment. Kuh et al. (2014) note faculty ownership and involvement as top priorities in advancing the assessment agenda in both improving teaching, learning, and institutional improvement. Faculty engagement in assessment is critical to advancing assessment practices because, without it, the connection between assessment and improvement is weakened (Bers, 2008; Kuh et al., 2014).

### **Perceptions of the Challenges of Outcomes Assessment**

The fourth research question sought to describe how community college faculty perceived the challenges for conducting outcomes assessment. Despite some of the promising findings from this study, participants described several challenges in their experiences. The challenges described by the participants ranged from intrinsic to extrinsic motivational factors. After analysis of the data collected to address this research question, four themes emerged: 1) Faculty do not see the value in assessment, 2) Faculty lack a clear understanding of accreditation, and 3) Faculty perceive they need training in assessment, and 4) Faculty perceive a lack of financial support of assessment.

Several participants in the study stated that among the challenges for engaging in assessment were a lack of time to participate and lack of perceived value in outcomes assessment. Several participants cited already overloaded faculty teaching schedules as a primary reason that faculty lack time to engage in assessment. Other participants in the study used the phrase “extra work” to describe assessment activity. Bailey, a participant from the nursing program, succinctly argued that if faculty “don’t see the value, then it’s

not worth their time.” Some of the participated claimed that diminished value for assessment could be attributed to weak administrative support. Two participants admit that though faculty lack time for engaging in assessment activity, lack of time is an insufficient reason for not participating in assessment activity. One of these participants regarded assessment as part of the evolution in the duties of a faculty member; the other claimed that faculty should not be given a choice in participating in assessment because it is part of existing faculty responsibility. The dichotomy in attitude towards participating in assessment can be gleaned from the comments of Dora, a participant from the Child Development Program, who stated, "we are part of an institution, and we all have to contribute" and Sara, a participant from the Natural Sciences, who proclaimed “it's just annoying to us.” This finding supports prior research from Banta and Blaich (2011), Kuh et al. (2014), and Liu (2011) that also supports that faculty regard assessment as time taken from their duty to educate students. When combined with findings from research question three, this finding supports that faculty have a high regard for the success of their students, but regard assessment as busy work taking away from their devotion.

In addition to participants regarding a lack of time and value as challenges to engaging in assessment, the findings indicated a lack of complete understanding of accreditation. According to SACSCOC (2017), accreditation means the institution's mission is appropriate for higher education, the institution has sufficient resources, the institution has clear educational objectives, and assesses these objectives and demonstrates improvements. The participants in the study, however, perceived accreditation as concerned with student and teacher performance, transferability of

courses, and institutional credibility. Some participants referred to accreditation as determining what they teach and how students perform in class. Other participants' perceived accreditation to mean whether credits at the study institution are transferrable to other institutions. Half of the participants in the study linked accreditation to institutional image, credibility, or validation. Jane, a participant from the Physical Therapist Assistant Program, was the only participant that linked accreditation to aligning of institutional goals and quality assurance.

This finding supports the prior research of Eaton (2010), who also supports that faculty have an ambivalent relationship with accreditation. Eaton (2010) also stated that faculty who appreciate the accreditation process are the same faculty that tend to participate in writing institutional reports to accrediting agencies. However, it is not clear from the review of the literature whether there is a direct correlation between having a clear understanding of accreditation and being engaged in assessment. Though the findings in this study are not new, they continue to support that faculty regard accreditation as the primary reason for engaging in assessment, yet are unclear of the specific role of accreditation at the institution.

Another theme emerging from the analysis of the data relevant to challenges in assessment was that participants felt that additional professional development was necessary to engage faculty in assessment. Though all the participants supported these findings, different types of professional development were cited. Some participants claimed that the same faculty are involved in assessment every year and that establishing a rotation that would allow more faculty to learn about and become engaged in the

assessment process. A few participants stated that simply asking faculty to become more involved in assessment committee work would help overcome the challenge of the lack of professional development. Other participants provided examples of how working with faculty in problem-solving the assessment process had helped overcome challenges. Several participants argued that having faculty sit in committee meetings is insufficient professional development to get them more engaged. These participants cited examples of professional development intent on providing clarity to assessment methodologies and opportunities to share best practices on assessment with faculty at other institutions. One group of participants all agreed that professional development would help increase involvement, but cite other challenges such as lack of time as a bigger challenge to faculty engagement in assessment. This finding supports prior research from Baker et al. (2012) and Kuh et al. (2014) that also supports that professional development is key to engaging faculty in assessment. Though this finding is not new, it reinforces prior literature that institutional support of assessment is key to faculty engagement in assessment.

Finally, another theme emerging from the analysis of the data relevant to challenges in assessment was that participants perceived a lack of incentive for participating in assessment. Though over half of the participants supported these findings, few agreed on the appropriate type of incentive. Several participants agreed that solely financial incentives would drive faculty to be more engaged in assessment. Other participants agreed that a reward system would motivate faculty to engage in assessment. Those that perceived a reward system would work disagreed on the faculty

demographics for which rewards would be more effective. Some felt it would be more effective for the younger trophy generation faculty; others felt that senior faculty would find it more rewarding to be recognized.

Some participants did not consider incentives should be part of engaging faculty in assessment. These faculty perceived other challenges such as lack of administrative support is a bigger incentive to participate in assessment. Angela, a participant from the Psychology department, made a valid argument for considering incentivizing assessment. She stated, "Well, with engagement comes recognition I think and with recognition comes monetary incentives so, I think they all tie in too, but first, I need to get involved to engage, and then the others come after." This finding supports prior research from Danley-Scott and Tompsett-Makin (2013) that support lack of investment and lack of incentive contribute to low faculty involvement in assessment. Most participants in the study perceived this to be true as well. This finding also reinforces the need for institutional support as key to faculty engagement of assessment.

The participants description of the challenges for engaging outcomes assessment included little or no mention of fear of assessment or resistance to assessment. The review of the literature confirmed that faculty have expressed resistance to demands for greater evidence of student achievement (e.g., Banta & Blaich, 2011; Kuh et al., 2014; Whittlesey, 2005). Though participants were able to identify challenges with assessment, none of these challenges could be characterized as resistance. Participants mostly regarded assessment as necessary for accreditation and valuable in measuring student success. Furthermore, the literature reviewed confirms that faculty resistance is

compounded by the fear that assessment could be used to negatively influence faculty evaluations (Lederman, 2010).

Only one participant mentioned the fear of assessment, but not regarding faculty evaluation. John, a participant from the English Department, had an interesting analogy when he described his fear of assessment. John likened external accountability demands and the resulting pressures to assess student learning using similar outcomes to Kurt Vonnegut's short story *Harrison Bergeron*. In *Harrison Bergeron*, every American is forced to be equal by a Handicapper General. John equated the push for accountability and judging institutional, course, and teaching effectiveness by the same or similar standards across all institutions or courses as analogous to the job of the Handicapper General. John fears that higher education will end up like the society described in the short story. In trying to make everyone equal, John stated "what they ended up doing was lowering the common denominator to stupidity and not allowing certain members of the society to fulfill their capabilities...so as not to offend others and make it more equal."

The findings of the study support prior research (e.g., Danley-Scott and Tompsett-Makin, 2013) that found the lack of interest, lack of investment, and lack of incentives are contributing factors in low faculty engagement in the assessment process. The participants in the study all regarded institutional support in the form of increased professional development and financial support as keys to increasing engagement in assessment. Baker et al. (2012) cited increased institutional support as a promising practice to further developing established assessment process and list examples of

support to include resources for professional development of faculty and having a vision for assessment.

### **Implications for Higher Education Practice**

This study provided insight to faculty engagement in assessment. Because faculty participation in assessment is critical for accountability and improvement purposes, the concept of how to effectively engage faculty served as the basis for the conceptual framework that guided this study. The findings of this study suggest several implications for higher education institutions.

The first implication for higher education practice is that institutions must continue to enhance current assessment practices to meet changing accountability demands. Eaton (2015) warns that the future of accreditation is likely to include greater accountability and transparency. Though prior research (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Liu, 2011), as well as this study's participants, confirmed that institutions are engaging in assessment activity, future accountability demands might make the current state of assessment practices inadequate. Furthermore, sharing assessment results with stakeholders communicates the value of postsecondary learning (Gardner & Milliken, 2013). Participants confirmed that sharing assessment results internally in committee meetings or externally with advisory boards are integral parts of their assessment practices. However, community colleges have a vested interest in becoming more transparent in their reporting of student learning outcome results to meet accountability demands (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012).

Therefore, sharing of assessment results must be to stakeholders beyond those mentioned by the participants.

The second implication for higher education practice is that colleges and universities must use external accountability to engage internal constituencies such as administrators and trustees in assessment for improvement. This implication is critical because failing to create a culture of shared understanding and responsibility for assessment diminishes the value of assessment. Prior research (e.g., Gardner & Milliken, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014; McKeown-Moak, 2013) and the participants in the study confirmed that the primary reason that institutions of higher education engage in assessment is to meet external accountability demands for colleges to substantiate institutional performance and value. However, institutions need to continue to develop assessment practices to meet the goal of assessment, which according to Kuh et al. (2015) is to use accountability demands to strengthen internal assessment for improvement. Assessment has become a responsibility of all internal stakeholders such as students who learn, faculty who teach, and administrators who are responsible for accreditation (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Furthermore, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2010) has urged trustees to work with institutional administrators to encourage a collaborative involvement in assessment of student learning. If community college leaders want to maintain the traditional mission of open access and completion, they must engage in means for gauging institutional effectiveness (AACCC, 2012).

The third implication for higher education practice is institutions of higher education need to engage faculty in assessment for improvement. Participants in the

study and prior research (e.g., Kuh and Ewell 2010) confirmed that community colleges use assessment data for aligning curricula, determining college readiness, improving teacher performance, and making decisions about resource allocations. Community colleges must also use assessment to engage faculty in collaborations with administration in the evaluation of program development, course learning outcomes, teaching duties, and assessment strategies (Dietrich & Olson, 2010; Suskie, 2009). It is important that faculty engage in assessment to decide what students in their courses should be able to do, then make decisions about whether each student has attained the required knowledge and skills (Kuh et al., 2015). Without faculty involvement, the relationship between assessing student learning and improvement of teaching and learning is weakened (Bers, 2008). For institutions and their faculty, failure to strengthen faculty engagement in assessment threatens traditions such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and peer and professional review (Eaton, 2010).

The fourth implication for higher education is that colleges and universities need to provide institutional support for assessment. Prior research (e.g., Danley-Scott & Tompsett-Makin, 2013) confirms that lack of interest, lack of institutional investment, and lack of financial incentive contribute to low levels of faculty participation in assessment. Furthermore, participants in the study cited professional development and incentivizing assessment as types of institutional support that would promote faculty engagement in assessment activity. Institutional support does not have to be costly, assessment policies aligned to faculty practice have significant influence on faculty engagement in student outcomes assessment (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Institutions aspire

to have greater faculty engagement assessment (Scott & Danley-Scott, 2015). However, faculty perceived a lack of institutional support for opportunities to develop assessment expertise (Kuh et al., 2015). Also, there are few incentives and rewards for faculty to engage in assessment designed to improve student learning (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Increased institutional support for initiatives such as professional development of faculty is one of the keys to advancing outcomes assessment in higher education (Kuh et al., 2014).

The fifth implication for higher education practice is that faculty need to gain better understanding of the value and effect of assessment. Prior research (e.g., Baker et al., 2012) confirms that institutions need to communicate the merits of engaging in assessment practices to their faculty. Participants in the study cited lack of time and value as barriers to further developing assessment practices. Without understanding the merits of assessment, faculty will continue to view assessment as externally motivated (Banta & Blauch, 2011). Though participants in the study did not express resistance towards assessment, prior research (e.g., Lederman, 2010) revealed that faculty resistance stems from apprehensions that assessment results could influence teaching evaluations. Understanding that assessment is more about improving student learning and faculty performance can help faculty appreciate the value of dedicating time to assessment along with reducing faculty resistance based on fear.

The final implication for higher education practice is that institutions need to identify faculty groups have better-developed assessment practices. Failure to have all faculty at a common level of knowledge of assessment will limit meaningful conversation

about how assessment can be used to improve student learning. Among the participants in the study, those from occupational education programs had a greater variety of assessment methods, shared assessment results with a wider variety of audiences, and could give concrete examples of using assessment to improve their programs. Identifying assessment experts on campus can help monitor assessment methodology and program reviews as well as facilitate the growth of other faculty (Baker et al., 2012).

### **Recommendations for Higher Education Practice**

Colleges will continue to face increased accountability demands to demonstrate institutional performance and value as well as evidence of student achievement (Gardner & Milliken, 2013; Kuh et al., 2014; McKeown-Moak, 2013). Many community colleges already engage in outcomes assessment. However, several challenges in the area of outcomes assessment remain (Nunley, Bers, Manning, & Bumphus, 2011). Further development of an assessment culture on college campuses requires faculty involvement, additional professional development of faculty, and wider use of assessment results (Kuh et al., 2014). The results of this study have produced multiple recommendations for higher education practice.

The first recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges must use external accountability demands to foster assessment for improvement of student learning and teacher performance. Institutions are already using outcomes assessment for a variety of purposes, including accreditation requirements, responding to accountability demands, determining student readiness for college, program evaluation, strategic planning, and modifying general education curriculum (Liu, 2011). All 12

participants in the current study confirmed that this was the case. However, the goal of assessment should be to use external accountability demands to strengthen internal assessment practices (Kuh et al., 2015). Institutions of higher education must seek strategies to accomplish this goal. Some of the strategies include embedding assessment into institutional processes and engaging faculty in taking ownership of assessment (Baker et al., 2012). When faculty do not engage in analysis of assessment data, they are likely to lose focus on the relevance of the data to their teaching (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Consequently, institutions need to gather appropriate data that can guide improvement (Kuh et al., 2014) and keep faculty engaged. Establishing a culture of assessment on college campuses may initialize with meeting external demands, but it is sustained when faculty are engaged in data relevant to their instructional activity.

The second recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges must build a mutual understanding of assessment. Assessment is an important practice for internal stakeholders such as students who learn, faculty who teach, and administrators who are responsible for accreditation (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Institutions need to build a better understanding of the needs of their students, the campus climate, and institutional goals for assessment to be effective (Baker et al., 2012). Assessment requires collaboration of administrators and faculty in identifying learning outcomes, teaching, and assessment strategies (Dietrich & Olson, 2010; Suskie, 2009). The purposes of assessment may diverge when administrators and faculty work together to develop assessment plans. Institutional support often hinges on image and credibility, so administrators often need positive results (Cohen et al., 2014). However, faculty need

data that validates teaching and learning. Building a shared understanding of assessment should involve multiple stakeholders across the institution in careful analysis of assessment data to drive changes or improvements (Baker et al., 2012). It is also important to engage stakeholders in conversation to make assessment activity routine, continuous, and linked to value (Baker et al., 2012). Building a mutual understanding of assessment can improve and sustain assessment on college campuses. Consequently, this ensures that assessment not only provides a means to demonstrate accountability but also makes assessment ongoing and produces substantiation of learning and institutional effectiveness (Banta & Blaich, 2011).

The third recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges must continue to engage faculty assessment focused on improving student learning and teacher performance. Prior research (e.g., Baker et al., 2012, Hutchings, 2010; Kuh, 2014; Suskie, 2009) and participants in the study confirm some level of assessment activity on college campuses. The key for institutions of higher education is to continue to push the assessment agenda towards a culture of improvement. Internal stakeholders asking for assessment for accountability purposes can reduce faculty trepidation towards assessment by emphasizing that their current assessment methods are using already meet the expectations for assessment (Suskie, 2009). Assessment should stem faculty questions about learning and the normal work of teaching including curriculum design, classroom activities, formative assessment (Hutchings, 2010). Institutions must use existing motivating factors in assessment and to emphasize alignment assessment to faculty work (Baker et al., 2012).

The fourth recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges must provide institutional support for professional development of faculty in assessment. Prior research (e.g., Cohen et al., 2014) and participants in the study confirm that faculty want more professional development opportunities, release time, and allowances for travel. Professional development opportunities can include a range of activities from committee work to professional organization memberships. Professional development is one key strategy for further developing assessment practices on college campuses (Baker et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2014). Engaging faculty through professional development can help organize institutional implementation of campus-wide efforts to improve student learning by preparing faculty for assessment activity (Kezar & Maxey, 2012). Planning professional development can also facilitate in communicating a vision for assessment and encourage assessment related discussion and collaboration (Baker et al., 2012). Providing professional development ensures that faculty across all disciplines and have a common knowledge and assessment vocabulary (Manning, 2011). Training programs focused on assessment can also be used to increase understanding of assessment goals and procedures (Scott & Danley-Scott, 2015). Professional development of faculty can help address many of the challenges identified by the participants. It would help faculty understand the role of accreditation, the value of assessment, and how to use accountability to stimulate the use of assessment for improvement of learning and teaching.

The fifth recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges engage faculty in assessment by helping them understand the value of

assessment. Though engaging in assessment, prior research (e.g., Kuh et al., 2014) and participants in the study confirm that faculty in higher have yet to embrace the value of student learning outcomes assessment. Measuring the contributions to student success and the extent to which it influences institutional performance determines the value of assessment for faculty (Kuh et al., 2015; Nunley et al., 2011). A key strategy is to let faculty drive assessment efforts with other support staff facilitating the process providing resources (Nunley et al., 2011). Faculty value expertise and need experience in assessment to achieve expertise in assessment (Hutchings, 2010).

The final recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges must share assessment results to communicate the value of postsecondary learning. Participants in the study indicated that they were all sharing results internally and externally with a variety of stakeholders. Baker et al. (2012) recommend that institution share information broadly to internal as well as external audiences. How institutions disseminate results can vary by audience. Internally, results can be shared at faculty retreats or department meetings and externally information can be shared easily using the institution's website (Baker et al., 2012). The nature of the information can also vary by audience. Institutions can share occurrences of good assessment such as examples of program level achievements, general education assessment, or how to scale up successful assessment to the institutional level to represent student learning (Kuh et al., 2014). Community colleges need to be more transparent in their reporting of student learning outcome results to meet public accountability demands (AACC, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Gaining an accurate understanding of faculty experiences with assessment will require future research. The findings of this study suggest several areas of future research including studying the influence of specialized accreditors on assessment practices; a quantitative study correlating length of time engaging in assessment with positive faculty experiences in assessment; the evolution of the role of faculty to include assessment as part of their responsibilities; and identifying high impact practices designed to establish an assessment culture at institutions of higher education.

First, a collective case study involving higher education practitioners can provide in-depth descriptions of experiences with specialized accreditors. Studying the experiences of faculty and administrators that are subjected to double accountability regarding demands from regional and specialized accreditors would help identify effective assessment practices in these programs that can be scaled to other disciplines. The findings of the study indicated a difference in the experiences of faculty in occupational education with assessment compared to faculty in the academic areas. The reasons for this difference were not revealed in the literature or the findings of the study. However, most of the participants of the study from occupational education programs cited specialized accreditors as having an important role in what they do. Many specialized accreditors have gradually increased their requirements for evidence of student learning (Ewell, 2014).

Second, a quantitative correlational study to study the length of time that is appropriate to establish a culture of assessment at institutions of higher education would

facilitate the establishment of timelines implementation of assessment practices. The multi-institutional study could involve faculty and administrators. Through the use of a comprehensive survey, data collected could include information on the assessment methodology, effectiveness of assessment, and maturity of assessment practices. Multivariate statistical methods could then be used to study the correlation between the variables. Participants in the study described the number of assessment methods used and the extent of sharing assessment results. Though the findings of the study did not indicate an explanation for why this is the case, there are indications that participants in occupational education have engaged in assessment longer than their academic counterparts. Collecting and reviewing reliable evidence can take several years so there must be a multi-year schedule to allow time to analyze data and review accomplishments (Baker et al., 2012; Banta & Blaich, 2012).

Third, a narrative qualitative inquiry to study the evolution of faculty roles and responsibilities over the last two decades. The study could include higher education faculty who have 20 or more years of experience and can provide stories of how assessment has been integrated into the faculty role. The purpose of the study would be to determine whether faculty perceive their role has evolved in regards to assessment, may help higher education identify an opportunity to strengthen assessment practices. When faculty sees assessment as part of their responsibility, they are less likely to regard as an additional task. Few participants of the study indicated that assessment had become a part of their regular roles and responsibilities as faculty. Kuh et al. (2014) cited

integrating assessment into the core teaching and learning functions as a key to advancing assessment practices on campus.

Finally, institutions across all sectors of higher education engage in activities designed to get faculty engaged in assessment. A phenomenological inquiry to describe the lived experiences of higher education stakeholders in successfully changing the assessment culture at institutions is necessary to identify which practices have had the greatest influence in changing the culture on campuses. A study describing the characteristics of successfully implemented assessment cultures would help other institutions in attempting to accomplish the same. A thorough description of the characteristics of effective cultures of assessment would contribute to reducing the trial and error involved in trying to establish practices such as professional development activities in assessment. Prior research (e.g., Baker et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2014) confirms professional development repeatedly as one key to advancing assessment practices. However, professional development is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of activities. Participants in the study cited committee work, hands-on workshops, and collaborating with peers at other institutions as some ideas. In times of decreasing budgets, determining where to funnel resources effectively is paramount.

### **Conclusion**

Accountability to external entities for institutions of higher education in the U.S. includes a variety of stakeholders including government agencies, the business community, students and their parents, and non-profit organizations. Though institutions of higher education are already implementing assessment practices and are using

outcomes assessment for several accountability demands, institutions continue to face several challenges in doing so. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning. The study focused on how community college faculty experiences with assessment are influenced by external accountability demands and institutional pressures to engage in assessment.

This qualitative study was conducted through the lens of a constructivist paradigm. A phenomenological research design was used to address four research questions that guided this study. The study was framed by a conceptual framework based on prior research that substantiates that institutions of higher education and their faculty have increased assessment activity, are accountable externally, are accountable internally to understanding of student learning, perceive assessment as time taken from their students, and experience low faculty engagement in assessment. There were 12 faculty participants in the study, six from academic areas and six from occupational education programs. Data collection methods included the researcher as the primary data collection instrument, semi-structured interviews, field notes, reflexive journaling, and document analysis. The researcher employed constant comparative methods with open and axial coding techniques in analyzing data collected. The researcher addressed trustworthiness in this study by detailing the procedures and decisions made throughout the research process.

Overall the findings of the study support that faculty are engaged in assessment activity on campuses, regard accreditation and the state coordinating board as the reasons

for engaging in assessment. Participants in the study described their experiences with using several assessment methods to collect evidence of student learning. Also, the findings indicated that participants have been engaged in assessment activity for at least five years. Participants in the study also described their experiences with assessment as including sharing results internally and externally. The participants cited regional and program accreditation as the primary reason for engaging in assessment, though the findings indicated participants lacked a complete understanding of accreditation. Participants in the study also perceived the state coordinating board as having a significant role in assessment practices. Participants in the study had a clearer understanding of the direct relationship between what they do to assess student learning and the outcomes listed in the course manuals published by the state coordinating board.

In addition to engaging in assessment and the reasons for doing so, the study also found that participants indicated that there were benefits and challenges to engaging in outcomes assessment. Participants described the influence that assessment has on student success and teacher performance as the primary benefit for outcomes assessment. Participants from occupational education programs cited examples of how engaging in outcomes assessment benefited their program. The participants also perceived assessment facilitated curricular alignment. The primary challenge to assessment was that participants perceived that they did not have enough time to engage in and failed to see the value of assessment. The findings also indicated that a lack of institutional support was another challenge. Specifically, participants cited a lack of financial support

for professional development and incentives as challenges to further engaging in assessment.

The findings of this study suggested several implications and recommendations for practice in higher education. The implications of the study centered on the concept of how to effectively engage faculty which served as the basis for the conceptual framework that guided this study. One implication is that institutions must continue to expand current assessment practices including assessment methods and sharing assessment results with their stakeholders to meet changing accountability demands. Another implication for higher education practice is that institutions of higher education must use external accountability to engage internal constituencies in assessment for improvement including administrators and governing boards. The third implication for higher education practice is institutions of higher education need to engage faculty in assessment for improvement. Another implication for higher education practice is that faculty need to provide institutional support for assessment. A final implication is that institutions need to identify faculty groups that have better-developed assessment practices as assessment experts that can help monitor and review assessment practices.

The results of this study have produced multiple recommendations for higher education practice. The first recommendation for higher education practice is that community colleges must use external demands for evidence of student achievement to foster improvement of student learning and teacher performance. The second recommendation for higher education practice is that sharing assessment results to communicate the value of postsecondary learning is an integral part of the assessment

culture. The third recommendation for higher education practice is that building a mutual understanding of assessment will help further develop assessment practices. A final recommendation for higher education practice is that institutions need to provide institutional support for professional development of faculty in assessment.

The findings of the study also identified four areas of future study to gain an accurate understanding of faculty experiences with assessment would require future research. A qualitative study to evaluate the influence of specialized accreditors on assessment practices could help institutions scale best practices among different faculty groups. A quantitative study correlating length of time engaging in assessment with positive faculty experiences in assessment could help institutions establish appropriate timelines. Another qualitative study to evaluate the evolution of the role of faculty to include assessment as part of their responsibilities could help institutions evaluate gaps in faculty engagement. Finally, a qualitative study identifying high impact practices designed to establish an assessment culture would help institutions reduce inefficient implementation strategies and identify more effective ones.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on teaching and learning. The findings of the study were encouraging in that they indicated a change in the culture of institutions from assessment for accountability purpose to assessment for improvement purposes is occurring at higher education institutions. However, the findings also indicate that there are plenty of challenges left. Faculty are still unclear of the purpose and value of assessment and how external accountability plays a role in what

is required. Institutional support for professional development and incentives are key to overcoming these hurdles and advancing assessment.

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## APPENDIX A

### PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE APPROVAL



Jun 7, 2016 10:59 AM CDT

Stephanie Jones  
Educational Psychology Leaders

Re: IRB2016-523 A Phenomenological Inquiry into Faculty Experiences at a South Texas Community College with Outcomes Assessment

**Findings:** This study is approved. Good luck!  
**Expiration Date:** *May 31, 2017*

Dear Dr. Stephanie Jones:

A Texas Tech University IRB reviewer has approved the proposal referenced above within the expedited category of:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The approval is effective from Jun 7, 2016 to May 31, 2017. The expiration date must appear on your consent document(s).

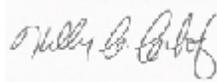
Expedited research requires continuing IRB review. You will receive an automated email approximately 30 days before May 31, 2017. At this time, should you wish to continue your protocol, a **Renewal Submission** will be necessary. Any change to your protocol requires a **Modification Submission** for review and approval before implementation.

Your study may be selected for a Post-Approval Review (PAR). A PAR investigator may contact you to observe your data collection procedures, including the consent process. You will be notified if your study has been chosen for a PAR.

Should a subject be harmed or a deviation occur from either the approved protocol or federal regulations (45 CFR 46), please complete an **Incident Submission** form.

When your research is complete and no identifiable data remains, please use a **Closure Submission** to terminate this protocol.

Sincerely,



Kelly C. Cukrowicz, Ph.D.  
Chair, Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board  
Associate Professor, Department of Psychological Sciences  
357 Administration Building, Box 41075  
Lubbock, Texas 79409-1075  
T 806.742.2064 F 806.742.3947  
[www.hrpp.ttu.edu](http://www.hrpp.ttu.edu)



## **APPENDIX B**

### **REQUEST FOR SITE APPROVAL**

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_

My name is David Arreazola, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Texas Tech University in the higher education administration program that concentrates on community college administration. I am conducting a dissertation study to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on the quality of teaching and learning. Of specific focus in this study, will be how community college faculty perceive external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes, can facilitate improvement of faculty and student performance.

I am requesting your assistance in my study. I have attached a Description of the Study (Attachment 1) that provides specific details about the study and what participants from your institution will be asked to do if they choose to participate. It also includes my contact information. I have also included the IRB Approval Letter (Attachment 2) and IRB Approval (Attachment 3) from Texas Tech University. Finally, I have included the Request for Site Approval (Attachment 4) as requested by [Study Institution]. I am asking for a letter of support that allows me to use your institution as a study site or you can simply fill out page 6 of attachment 4.

If you have any questions regarding this research study, please contact me via email at david.arreazola@ttu.edu or by telephone at 956.251.3477. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie J. Jones, who is supervising this study, at 806-834-1380 or via email at stephanie.j.jones@ttu.edu.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration of participation in this study.

I know your days are busy, but your participation will provide great insight into this study's topic of outcomes assessment in public community colleges. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

David V. Arreazola  
Doctoral Candidate  
Higher Education Administration  
Texas Tech University

## **APPENDIX C**

### **DESCRIPTION OF STUDY**

**Title of Study:** A Phenomenological Inquiry into Community College Faculty Experiences with Outcomes Assessment

#### **What is this research project about?**

This study seeks to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on the quality of teaching and learning. Of specific focus in this study will be how community college faculty perceive external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes, can facilitate improvement of faculty and student performance.

#### **What would you do if you participate?**

In this study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. You will be asked a series of questions about your experiences with outcomes assessment at your institution.

#### **How long will participation take?**

The interview should last no more than 90 minutes.

#### **How can I participate in the study?**

To participate in this study, please send an email stating your willingness to David V. Arreazola or contact him by telephone at 956.251.3477. Please david.arreazola@ttu.edu include in this email your preferred communication method.

#### **Can I quit if I become uncomfortable?**

Yes, you can absolutely quit the interview if you become uncomfortable. The researchers and the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board have reviewed the questions included for the interview and perceive you can answer them comfortably. Participation is voluntary, and it is by your choice to participate in this study. You are free to stop answering questions at any time, skip any questions you do not want to answer, and discontinue the interview if at any time you feel it is necessary.

#### **How will I benefit from participating in this study?**

Participants will benefit from the knowledge that they contributed to a study that aims to advance outcomes assessment practices in community colleges.

#### **How is my privacy protected?**

Pseudonyms will be used to identify participants and their college in the study. None of your personal identifying information will be associated with any data collected.

**I have some questions about this study. Who can I ask?**

If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact David V. Arreazola by email at david.arreazola@ttu.edu or contact him by telephone at 956.251.3477. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie J. Jones, who is supervising this study, at (806) 834-1380 or via email at stephanie.j.jones@ttu.edu. Texas Tech University also has a Board, the Institutional Review Board, which protects the rights of people who participate in research. You may contact them with questions by calling (806) 742-2064. You may also contact them by mail at Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Office of the Vice President for Research, Texas Tech University, 2500 Broadway, Box 41075 Lubbock, TX 79409.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **REQUEST FOR STUDY APPROVAL**

#### **(FROM INSTITUTION'S RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE)**

Dear Research Review Committee

My name is David Arreazola, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Texas Tech University in the higher education administration program that concentrates on community college administration. The dissertation study will explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on the quality of teaching and learning. Of specific focus in this study, will be how community college faculty perceive external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes, can facilitate improvement of faculty and student performance.

I am requesting your assistance in my study. I have attached a Description of the Study (Attachment 1) that provides specific details about the study and what participants from your institution will be asked to do if they choose to participate. It also includes my contact information. I have also included the IRB Approval Letter (Attachment 2) and IRB Approval (Attachment 3) from Texas Tech University. I have also included the Site Approval from the President of the institution (Attachment 4). Finally, I have attached the Research Request Form (Attachment 5). I am asking for your approval to allow me to conduct the study at your institution.

If you have any questions regarding this research study, please contact me via email at david.arreazola@ttu.edu or by telephone at 956.251.3477. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie J. Jones, who is supervising this study, at 806-834-1380 or via email at stephanie.j.jones@ttu.edu.

Sincerely,

David V. Arreazola  
Doctoral Candidate  
Higher Education Administration  
Texas Tech University

## APPENDIX E

### E-MAIL SCRIPT FOR POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Good Morning

My name is David Arreazola, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Texas Tech University in the higher education administration program that concentrates on community college administration. Through a search of your institution's website, you have been identified as a full-time faculty, employed at the study institution for a minimum of three years, and having familiarity with assessment in your discipline.

My dissertation research focuses on exploring the ways in which public community colleges engage faculty in assessment. Outcomes assessment is the process of articulating intended outcomes in regards to a program's services or student learning, purposefully planning activities so that the outcomes can be achieved, implementing methods to identify whether end results have been achieved, and finally, using the results to promote improvement (Bresciani, 2006; Suskie 2009). The dissertation study will explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on the quality of teaching and learning. Of specific focus in this study, will be how community college faculty perceive external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes, can facilitate improvement of faculty and student performance.

I am requesting your participation in my study. I have attached:

- Description of the Study that provides specific details about the study and what you will be asked to do if you choose to participant. The Description of the Study also includes my contact information and steps to take if you would like to participate in the study. If you do not wish to participate in this study, please just let me know.
- Documentation that my study has been approved by Texas Tech University.
- Documentation that the President of the study institution approved my study.
- Documentation that I received approval to conduct research at the study institution

If you have any questions regarding this research study, please contact me via email at david.arreazola@ttu.edu or by telephone at 956.251.3477. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie J. Jones, who is supervising this study, at 806-834-1380 or via email at stephanie.j.jones@ttu.edu.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration of participation in this study.

I know your days are busy, but your participation will provide great insight into this study's topic of outcomes assessment in public community colleges. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

David V. Arreazola  
Doctoral Candidate  
Higher Education  
Texas Tech University

## APPENDIX F

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM

**Title of Study: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Community College Faculty Experiences with Outcomes Assessment**

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Interviewee:

Interviewer: David V. Arreazola

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in this research study. As a review, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore community college faculty experiences with outcomes assessment and its perceived influence on the quality of teaching and learning. Of specific focus in this study, will be how community college faculty perceives external accountability demands and the resulting institutional pressures to assess outcomes, can facilitate improvement of faculty and student performance. It is important that I assure you that your identity will be protected in this study through the use of a pseudonym appointed in place of your name. Your pseudonym will be tied with your input, and at no time will your real name be shared with the data you provide. At this time, what pseudonym would you like to use? (If participant does not identify one, the Co-PI will assign one.) As a reminder, participation in this study is voluntary, questions can be skipped, and we can stop the interview process any time. If you do not have any questions about the study or the interview process, with your permission, I will begin audio recording at this time. Before we focus on outcomes assessment in community colleges, I would like to start with a few questions relevant to your professional background within your institution.

5. Tell me about your experiences teaching in community college.

I'm now going to ask you a few questions about the institution's assessment practices.

6. How does your unit/program assess student learning?

7. Tell me about how your unit/program uses embedded assignments, standardized exams, pre/post-tests, or a capstone courses to assess student learning.

8. How are the results of the assessment shared with others in the program or outside the program?
9. How long has your unit/program assessed student learning?
10. As far as you are aware, have any changes been made to your unit or program as a result of assessment data?

I am now going to ask you a few questions about the reasons your unit/program conducts assessment.

11. How important is accreditation to the institution?
12. How much of a role do you think SACSCOC plays in the implementation of assessment at the institution?
13. Tell me about how any specialized accrediting agency that grants your unit/program accreditation emphasizes assessment?
14. What role do you feel the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board plays in assessment at the institution?
15. What role do you feel the board of trustees plays in assessment at the institution?
16. What role do you feel the administration plays in assessment at the institution?
17. What role do you feel that you as a faculty member play in assessment at the institution?

I am now going to ask you questions about how you use assessment.

18. Tell me about the articulated student learning outcomes (SLO's) for the courses that you teach.

19. How were the SLO's developed?
20. How important is it to articulate learning goals?
21. How do you assess whether students are learning in your classroom?
22. How do you use assessment results to make changes to your pedagogical practices?
23. In what ways, do you feel that assessing student learning has impacted the culture of the institution and impacted faculty involvement in assessment?

I am now going to ask you a few questions about some of the challenges with outcomes assessment.

24. Where does assessment fit into your job responsibilities?
25. Tell me about the differences in what you believe the purpose of assessment is and what you perceive the administrators in your institution believe the purpose of assessment is.
26. Tell me about some of the issues that are preventing you from being more involved in assessment.
27. Tell me how your institution can promote faculty engagement in assessment.
28. Tell me how your institution can facilitate your own involvement in assessment.