ACCREDITATION IN THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES: INFLUENTIAL CULTURAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

ACCREDITATION IN THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES:
INFLUENTIAL CULTURAL PRACTICES

by

Nathan M. Tharp

Too many California community colleges struggle with accreditation. From 2003-2012, 62 of the 112 colleges were placed on some form of sanction, 40 of them more than once. Unfortunately, there has been little research into what institutions can do to achieve better results. This study addressed this gap by comparing cultural practices at two colleges that had been placed on sanction five or more times (X schools) and two that had never been placed on sanction (Y schools). It was a qualitative comparative case study. Data were collected via interviews with participants who spanned a range of positions, tenure, and degree of involvement with accreditation. Data were analyzed using activity and grounded theories.

Differences between the X and Y schools emerged under the themes of division of labor, motivation, and integration. Under division of labor, participants at the X schools reported more often that institutional roles were not universally agreed upon nor abided by, that there were higher levels of conflict related to the division of labor, and that progress was made in spite of these conflicts. Participants at the Y schools reported more often that roles were clearly defined and abided by, that there were lower levels of
conflict, and on tools for resolving conflicts. Interestingly, both X and Y schools reported little difference with the division of labor with regards to accreditation-specific activities. Under motivation, participants at the X colleges reported more often that accreditation had not been universally interpreted as important, the motivation for accreditation activities was externally sourced, and accreditation-related processes had not been consistently enforced. Participants at the Y colleges reported more often that accreditation was seen as important, motivation was internally sourced, and accreditation processes were consistently enforced. Participants at both X and Y colleges reported that the notion of a critical mass was important to sustaining motivation. Under integration, participants at the X colleges reported that contact with accreditation processes was variable, that accreditation-related processes had not historically had integrity, less on interconnecting activities, and that there were fewer resources available. Participants at the Y colleges reported that there was more ongoing contact with accreditation processes, that processes were considered to have a high level of integrity, that individuals and groups were interconnected with regards to accreditation, and that substantial resources were available for accreditation.

Based on an analysis of these findings using activity theory, the following recommendations are made to college leaders: 1) define institutional roles and responsibilities and abide by them, 2) resolve conflict when roles and responsibilities are not clear, 3) establish accreditation as important, 4) account for different perceptions of accreditation among groups, 5) reframe accreditation as internally motivated, 6) enforce accreditation activities, 7) maintain a critical mass of motivated individuals and groups,
8) maintain ongoing contact with accreditation processes, 9) develop accreditation tools that align with existing campus rules/norms/customs, 10) maintain the integrity of accreditation processes, 11) interconnect parties across the institution with formal and informal accreditation processes, and 12) prioritize resources for accreditation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Vitae</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions and Limitations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Significance of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The California Community College System</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing Accreditation Research</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps in the Literature</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Theory</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review Summary</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Approach</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study Design</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA</td>
<td>............................................................................................................... 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Management</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Observations</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Quality</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>........................................................................................................ 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of the Findings</td>
<td>........................................................................................................ 147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Studies</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>........................................................................................................... 162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

1. Simplification of Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness..........................43
2. Participant Summary........................................................................................................95
3. Coding Table....................................................................................................................104
4. Summary of Codes............................................................................................................105
5. Code Consolidation...........................................................................................................107
6. Differences Related to Division of Labor..........................................................................110
7. Differences Related to Motivation....................................................................................117
8. Differences Related to Integration....................................................................................129
9. Summary of Similarities and Differences Between X and Y colleges............................146
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Number of Not-sanctioned vs. Sanctioned Colleges ..................................................3
2. Trend in ACCJC Actions ..........................................................................................4
3. Distribution of Sanctions Among Schools ..............................................................5
4. Activity Theory Triangle .......................................................................................9
5. United States Regional Accrediting Commissions .............................................18
6. First Generation Activity Theory Triangle ..........................................................78
7. Second Generation Activity Theory Triangle .....................................................79
8. Engeström’s Model of Third-Generation Activity Theory ................................81
9. Parallel Nested Activity Systems .........................................................................81
10. Overall Methodological Approach .....................................................................85
11. Stratification Sampling Results for Site Selection ............................................94
12. Comparison of Contact with Accreditation Over Time ..................................131
13. Influence of Campus Division of Labor Conflicts on Accreditation Activities ..149
14. Influence of Parallel Activity Systems on Accreditation Motivation ............151
15. Norms vs. Tools Conflict .....................................................................................153
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The California Community College System is the largest higher education system in the United States. It is made up of 112 schools in 72 districts and serves over 2.5 million students (California Community College Chancellor’s Office [CCCCO], 2012). The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) accredits each college. ACCJC is a sub-commission of the Western Association of Schools (WASC), one of seven federally-recognized regional accrediting commissions for higher education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2012). After an initial accreditation, colleges must have their accreditation reaffirmed every six years. This process includes a self-study, a site visit by a team of peers, a recommendation by the visiting team, and an action by the ACCJC. The ACCJC can reaffirm a college’s accreditation, placing it sanction, or withdraw its accreditation (ACCJC, 2012).

Accreditation is not mandated, but it is essentially required because colleges without it do not have access to federal financial aid and their academic credits will not qualify for transfer to other colleges.

The process of accreditation has been problematic for many California community colleges. According to materials publicized on the ACCJC website, the commission has taken 283 actions from June 2003 - January 2012 (ACCJC, 2012). One hundred forty-nine (53%) of those actions have been to place colleges on warning, probation, or show cause (ACCJC, 2012). During that time, 62 (55%) of the colleges
have been placed on some form of sanction.

Despite the high number of sanctions there appears to be little research into how to prevent them. Studies have examined participant perceptions of accreditation in community colleges in the Southwest United States and found that administrators and faculty support accreditation activities, albeit for different reasons (Harbour, Davies, & Gonzales-Walker, 2010; Sandmann, Williams, & Abrams, 2009; Skolits & Graybeal 2007; Todd & Baker, 1998; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Other works divulge accreditation “best practices,” but the findings are not based on defensible evidence (Kern 1990; Wood 2006). Finally, studies have found that accountability data are not effectively used in accreditation processes because institutions lack the resources to manage them effectively (Morest & Jenkins, 2009; Dowd, 2005). Unfortunately, they do not link research findings to accreditation results. The existing research will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

This study intends to fill three primary gaps in the research. First, it examines the relationship between institutional practices and accreditation outcomes. Second, it compares practices between schools that have regularly had their accreditation reaffirmed and those that have been repeatedly placed on sanction. Third, it focuses on the California Community College System.

Problem Statement

Too many California community colleges struggle to maintain their accreditation. From June 2003 to January 2012, 62 colleges were placed on accreditation sanction at some point- 51 colleges were not (see Figure 1). This is a problem for several reasons.
Firstly, responding to accreditation sanction diverts critical resources from other campus operations. ACCJC requires reaccreditation every six years, but colleges that do not succeed must put significant effort into follow-up reports and site visits. The result, ultimately, is that our taxpayer-funded resources are diverted to accreditation processes rather than more direct educational activities.

Figure 1. Number of not-sanctioned vs. sanctioned California community colleges from Jun 2003 - January 2012 (ACCJC, 2012)

Secondly, the number of sanctions is increasing. As indicated in Figure 2, the portion of the total actions taken by ACCJC that are sanctions is trending upwards. In seven of the last nine accreditation cycles more than half of the colleges reviewed were placed on sanction. Since the 1980s, stakeholders ranging from citizens to policy makers have called for colleges and universities to be held more accountable for producing student-learning outcomes (Dowd, 2005). Nowhere is this trend reflected more clearly than in the accreditation standards. Colleges that aren’t meeting today’s standards are at risk of losing the confidence of policy makers and the public. As the number of colleges on sanction across the system increase, perceptions of the system as a whole are also
negatively impacted.

Figure 2. Trend in ACCJC actions (ACCJC, 2012)

Thirdly, two tiers of colleges are emerging; those that pass through accreditation relatively easily, and those that become mired in an ongoing struggle. Figure 3 demonstrates the distribution of sanctions among the schools. Fifty-one schools have not been placed on sanction and 62 have. However, these sanctions aren’t distributed evenly. Eighty-nine (61%) of these sanctions have been placed on just 21 (18%) schools.

Twenty-one schools have been placed on sanction three or more times. It is logical that schools with more accreditation issues would be placed on sanction more often. However, after adding these sanctions to the regular accreditation visits and midterm reports, some colleges have been in a near perpetual state of accreditation review. One school has had nine accreditation actions taken on it in nine years. As standards evolve, these colleges appear to be caught in a continual state of catch-up and are increasingly at risk of closure.
The problem is widespread and does not immediately appear to be linked to environmental causes. A cursory examination of factors such as college size, geographic location, or population served did not reveal obvious correlations. An urban Hispanic-serving college of 17,000 in the largest city in the state and a remote college in a community of only 14,000 were both on probation recently. Conversely, two similar colleges in the same district have produced different results. Access to the accreditation requirements and support does not seem to be a problem. Both ACCJC and the California Community College Chancellor’s Office provide a wide variety of public and direct resources equally to all colleges. Finally, bias on the part of the visiting team does not seem to be causal. These teams are made up of peers from other colleges, are trained by ACCJC, and use the same publicized rubric and guidelines in their assessment. Team members are screened for conflicts of interest and the follow up teams are different than...
the initial teams.

A point of inquiry could be the practices of ACCJC and WASC. WASC is the only regional accreditor that assigns the accreditation of two-year and four-year institutions to separate sub-commission (CHEA, 2012). No public four-year institutions in California have been placed on warning or probation recently even as the two-year colleges struggle (WASC, 2012). Community colleges reviewed by other regional accreditors also do not experience nearly the same number of problems (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges [ASCCC], 2010).

Although there may be merit in researching WASC and ACCJC practices, it was not the focus of this paper. This is primarily because ACCJC practices aren’t that unusual (CHEA, 2012). ACCJC accreditation standards are almost identical to those for California four-year institutions and colleges in other regions (WASC, 2012). And, although sanctions are endemic, many colleges are getting reaffirmed with what appear to be minimal problems (ACCJC, 2012).

Another point of inquiry could be the California Community College System itself. The system is loosely coupled with a fairly weak central authority in the Chancellor’s Office (CCCCCO, 2012). Most of the responsibility for developing policy and managing operations is held at the local district or college level. This means that the Chancellor’s Office has little influence on accreditation practices other than to support or advocate for the colleges. A stronger Chancellor’s Office could be a solution. However, it is not likely feasible. State policies have granted local citizens control over their community colleges (CCCCCO, 2012) and there are no signs of a requisite large-scale political effort
to undo this. Besides, the purpose of accreditation is to accredit the college, not the system. As a result, this study did not examine the role of the Chancellor’s Office. It is hoped, however, that the findings are useful to the Chancellor’s Office when assisting colleges with accreditation processes.

With these factors in mind, it made sense to look for answers at the college level. Some colleges appear to attain reaffirmation relatively easily while others struggle repeatedly. The purpose of this research was to understand why. More specifically, this study sought to identify practices that influence success. The goal was to inform education leaders and policy makers, improve institutional effectiveness, and provide valid findings for further studies. The intended outcome is to preserve scarce public resources, provide equal access to effective education for all Californians, and maintain the confidence of stakeholders in our higher education system.

**Nature of the Study**

It was hypothesized that the historical behaviors and cultural practices of colleges influence their likelihood of success in accreditation. Certain colleges appear to have integrated a culture of success that spans a wide spectrum of institutional activities, including accreditation, while others have not. It was hypothesized that leaders in colleges that repeatedly struggle cannot simply tackle their accreditation problem without addressing components of the underlying culture. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are some influential cultural practices present in colleges that consistently have their accreditation reaffirmed?
2. What are some influential cultural practices present in colleges that have consistently been placed on sanction?

3. How do these practices compare and contrast?

The research questions were answered by performing a qualitative comparative case study of four community colleges. Two colleges had been reaffirmed without sanction twice and two colleges had been placed on sanction numerous times. Data was collected through fourteen one-on-one interviews. Data from colleges with similar outcomes was compared first in order to find common practices. The common practices in colleges that have been succeeding were then contrasted against the common practices of colleges that have been struggling in order to find differences. A detailed explanation of the methodology will be presented in Chapter 3. Data collection and analysis were informed by activity theory.

Theoretical Framework

The roots of activity theory can be found in the Russian cultural-historical psychology movement in the 1930s- primarily in the works of Vygotsky, Leont’ev, and Luria (Cole, 1998; Engeström, 2008). The triangle model indicated in Figure 4 often represents activity theory.
**Figure 4. Activity theory triangle**

This figure represents an activity “system” in which a subject acts on an object and consequently produces an outcome. In order to perform an action on the object, the subject must make use of a mediating artifact, or tool, indicated at the peak of the triangle. The artifact, similar to other components in the system, simultaneously affords and constrains the interaction between subject and object. An artifact can be physical, such as a pen, conceptual, such as a procedure, or ideological, such as a value or strategy.

At the base of the triangle is the community in which the activity is taking place. Rules about how the subject interacts within the community are indicated at the bottom left corner of the triangle. Rules include customs, norms, ways of behaving, and expectations and mediate how the other components interact. The division of labor mediates the relationship between the community and the object and is indicated at the bottom right of the triangle. The division of labor reflects how the system integrates with the object how the work of the activity is divided up.

Each of the components interacts with the others, forming a system of relationships and tensions as indicated by the arrows in Figure 4. The entire activity system is then taken as the unit of analysis (Cole, 1998). For this paper, activity theory...
was used to identify culture practices. These practices were defined as recurrent, object-oriented activities within a communal context of rules, tools, and divisions of labor. Activity theory is reviewed in detail in Chapter 2.

**Assumptions and Limitations**

An important assumption of this research was that accreditation is meaningful. On the surface, accreditation is significant to colleges because they cannot function without access to financial aid and credit transfer. More deeply, accreditation is important for establishing legitimacy. It provides a standardized, even if imperfect, method of accountability by demonstrating the ability to deliver effective and equitable education. Even more deeply, the ability of a college to respond to the accreditation demands successfully is in itself a demonstration of effectiveness. Accreditation touches every level of the institution, requiring a high degree of intra-organizational coordination and leadership. Independent of the content of accreditation, a college that can succeed at such a complex activity has numerous tools as its disposal for responding to internal and external stimuli.

Other key assumptions were adopted in order to link the theoretical frame and methodology to the research questions. The first was that colleges can be considered to have cultures. The second was that enough information about their cultures can be identified through interviews and the analysis of documentation to generate useful findings. The third was that even though colleges are independent and have distinct cultures, there are enough similarities between them and in their accreditation activities to effectively compare and contrast their cultural practices. Finally, practices from one
cultural can inform another- colleges can learn from one another.

This study had limitations of intent and methodology. It focused on colleges and the difference between those with contrasting accreditation results. As discussed previously, it was not intended to be a critique of ACCJC or the California Community College System. This study was also not an evaluation of the overall policy of accreditation. It was assumed that some method of legitimizing colleges will exist and colleges that must be able to respond. That the same standards are adopted for all 4,000+ colleges and universities in the U.S. also lent an acceptable degree of credence to the process for the purposes of the study. It was even hypothesized that if accreditation policies were altered, colleges without cultures of success would continue to struggle.

Several methodological limitations were adopted in order to achieve depth of understanding and breadth of application. First, data was collected from only four colleges- two that have had recent accreditation successes and two that have struggled. Second, data collection was restricted to three or four interviews at each site. Third, data collection took place over a period of two months. Finally, data was analyzed primarily through the lens of activity theory.

The findings are limited. They reflect the researcher’s interpretation of statements made by fourteen individuals at four colleges. Results from this study cannot be simply generalized across the remaining 112 California community colleges nor taken as universal truths. The findings will have to be interpreted at local levels in order to derive meaning. The comparative nature of the study provided a degree of triangulation that controlled for some of the individual campus contexts, but not all. There was no attempt
to “prove” that specific cultural practices lead to accreditation success. This study simply identified practices that two successful colleges have reportedly engaged more often than two struggling colleges have. The intent was to further inform leaders, assist in shaping local and systemic policies, and provide a basis for future research.

**The Significance of the Study**

This research provides the most significant findings for college leaders who are, or will be, participating in accreditation. These leaders will be able to use these findings to inform their practices and develop new practices that can better enable accreditation success. In California alone, this applies to 112 community colleges. However, findings from this research may apply outside of the California Community College System to the more than 4,000 colleges in the U.S. that participate in regional accreditation (CHEA, 2012).

This study can also inform accreditors and policy makers. ACCJC and the Chancellor’s Office provide significant resources to colleges in order to assist them with accreditation. Recommendations from this research will help the development of more tailored resources and services for colleges in need. Policy makers may also use findings from this study to assess current accreditation standards and policies.

This research began to address a critical gap in our understanding about what enables some colleges to succeed with accreditation while others struggle. It is hoped that this study serves as a basis for future research. The methodology was unique in being a qualitative, comparative case study of four institutions. There had been broad-based quantitative studies of the perceptions of accreditation and case studies of single
institutions. However, neither method adequately addressed the differences between colleges nor how specific practices might influence accreditation results. The value in this study’s methodology was that it allowed for an examination of these differences.

Conclusion

The mission of the California Community College System is to provide equal access to all Californians in order to support economic growth, global competitiveness, and our democratic ideals. When our colleges struggle, we all lose. Taxpayer dollars are being spent on repetitive accreditation processes rather than educating our students. Colleges are at risk of losing the confidence of the citizens they serve. Because some schools have been performing well with regards to accreditation, it was logical to examine the differences between them and schools that have been struggling. This study is the first to qualitatively compare multiple California community colleges with the goal of producing research-based findings related to accreditation.

Chapter 2 is a review of the existing literature and is divided into several sections that cover the California Community College Systems, ACCJC, accreditation, existing research related to accreditation, gaps in the existing research, how this project addressed those gaps, and activity theory.

Chapter 3 is an explanation of the methodology and is divided into four sections. The first section explains the qualitative approach of the project. The second describes the case study design. The third details how data sources were identified. And the fourth explains the role of the researcher.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings and is divided into five sections. The
first section details the data management procedures. The second describes how the data was analyzed. The third presents the findings. The fourth lists some supplemental observations. The fifth demonstrates evidence of quality.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This literature review is divided into seven sections. The first section explains the history, role, and status of the California Community College Systems. The second is a summary of the procedures and policies of ACCJC. The third is a review of the history, role, and current status of accreditation. The fourth is a review of existing research related to accreditation. The fifth identifies gaps in the existing research. The sixth demonstrates how this project addressed those gaps. The seventh is an explanation of cultural historical psychology and activity theory.

The California Community College System

The California Community College System is the largest higher education system in the world (CCCCO, 2012). It consists of 112 colleges in 72 districts and serves more than 2.5 million students. The system was developed under the California Master Plan for Education in 1960 (State of California, 1960). It served to consolidate and differentiate the numerous junior colleges that had emerged across the state during the earlier part of the 20th century. Under the Master Plan, three tiers of higher education were established. The first is the University of California system, which is comprised of research institutions and is the primary provider of doctoral degrees for the state. The second is the California State University system, which provides four-year undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees. The third is the California Community Colleges system, which provides two-year degrees, preparation for transfer, career and technical
education, and life-long learning (State of California, 1960).

Although it’s very existence and ongoing funding is a result of statewide policy, the community college system is extremely decentralized. There is a statewide California Community Colleges Chancellor’s office. However, this office has little authority over individual colleges apart from allocating and certifying state apportionment funds. Instead, it is charged with empowering colleges and advocating at the state level (CCCCO, 2012). Each of the 72 community college districts has their own locally elected board and the bulk of operational policies are developed at the local level. In addition, like other higher education institutions, community colleges are bound by federal policies including accreditation (ACCJC, 2012). The result of these various influences is that community college leaders must respond and be accountable to policies at local, state, and national levels simultaneously.

Accreditation

Accreditation is a method used in the United States to: 1) assure quality, 2) provide access to government funding, 3) generate stakeholder support, and 4) facilitate credit transfer for educational institutions (CHEA, 2012). There are three types of accreditation: regional, national, and programmatic (CHEA, 2012). Regional accreditation is the broadest form of institutional-wide assessment and is conducted by one of six regional accreditors (See Figure 5) (CHEA, 2012). Regional accreditation covers all types of institutions, including public, private, non-profit, and for-profit institutions. Regional accreditation is not mandated, however, without it, most institutions could not function because they would lose access to federal financial aid
funds and other institutions or employers would not recognize their academic credits.

*National* accreditation focuses on certain types of schools, such as independent, religious, or career-oriented institutions. There are eleven recognized national accreditation commissions (CHEA, 2012). *Programmatic* accreditation is concerned with specific academic programs, such as architecture or medicine. If a school wants to prepare students to be eligible for professional licensure, the department may have to participate in the appropriate programmatic accreditation. There are 69 recognized programmatic accreditors (CHEA, 2012). Although findings from this study may apply to national or programmatic accreditation, the focus is on *regional* accreditation.

**Roots of Accreditation.**

The roots of regional accreditation can ultimately be traced back to the United States Constitution, which left matters of education to the states and people (Brittingham, 2009). When combined with the country’s entrepreneurial spirit, this laissez-faire cultivated the formation of numerous and diverse institutions. By the late 1800s there were nearly 1000 colleges and universities in the United States and more diversity among them than in many countries even today (Brittingham, 2009). Deregulation, entrepreneurship, and institutional diversity gave rise to a unique system for ensuring quality and legitimacy. The United State system of accreditation is singular on three axes: 1) it is self-regulatory, 2) volunteers perform the bulk of the work, 3) and participating institutions are expected to engage in self-assessment (Brittingham, 2009).

The earliest regional accreditation commissions were formed in the latter 19th century by groups of relatively established institutions, such as Harvard University (New
England Association of School and Colleges [NEASC], 2010). These commissions were made up of member institutions and funded through dues. Their primary purpose was to identify legitimate colleges (Brittingham, 2009). The first commission to be formed was the NEASC, in 1887. The Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges (MSASC) was formed in 1889; the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCA) and the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACS) were formed in 1895; the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC) was formed in 1917; and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) was formed in 1926. These remain the six regional accreditation commissions in effect today. These organizations cover the regions indicated in Figure 5.

![Figure 5. United States regional accrediting commissions (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2011)](image)

Although well-known institutions initially established the commissions, relatively quickly, the criteria for membership and quality assurance began to evolve to accommodate expansion (Brittingham, 2009). As membership increased, tensions
between adherence to a strict set of standards and institutional diversity emerged.

Initially, commissions focused on minimizing the number standards in order to allow for institutional differences. However, rudimentary requirements, such as the number of books in the library, were not useful for larger more established schools that had long since institutionalized them. In response, the NCA developed a mission-oriented approach to accreditation in the 1930s. Standards became aspirational rather than simply baseline (Brittingham, 2009). By the 1950s, the remaining commissions adopted similar approaches and the core components of today’s accreditation process were codified: 1) a mission-oriented approach, 2) an institutional self-study, 3) a peer review consisting of a site visit and recommendations, and 4) a decision by an accrediting commission (Brittingham, 2009).

**Accreditation Oversight.**

In the mid 1900s, larger institutions were inundated with an increasing number of programmatic accreditation requirements in addition to regional requirements (Brittingham, 2009). To alleviate this burden, various associations, including the regional accreditors, banded together to form oversight commissions, including the National Commission on Accreditation and the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education. These commissions evolved through a series of machinations during the following decades, coalescing with the formation of CHEA in 1996 (Brittingham, 2009). CHEA now is the primary non-governmental oversight body for accreditors. Its purpose is three-fold, to: 1) advocate on behalf of its members with the government, citizens, and international parties, 2) serve members by identifying
emergent issues, addressing common areas of interest, acting as an authority, and providing resources, and 3) recognize and certify the quality of accrediting organizations (CHEA, 2012). The recognition of an accrediting commission by CHEA is a formal process that uses standards similar to those used by accreditors when accrediting colleges (CHEA, 2012).

In addition to CHEA, the federal government plays an important role in overseeing accrediting organizations. The government’s hands-off approach to accreditation began changing in 1965 with the passage of the Higher Education Act. Building on the success of the GI Bill, this act significantly expanded financial aid for veterans of the Korean War (Brittingham, 2009). In order to determine which schools were worthy of taxpayer dollars via student aid, the government turned to the all-ready-existing accreditation system. Initially, this relationship was symbiotic, accreditors continued to operate independently, schools were bolstered through financial aid funds, and the federal government outsourced assessment processes. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, policy makers became concerned with low graduation and high student loan default rates (Brittingham, 2009). Subsequent reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act increased the pressure on accreditors to ensure that colleges were producing desirable outcomes. The United States Department of Education (USDE) was granted the power to recognize accreditors much in the same way the CHEA does. The purpose of this recognition is to ensure that students who receive federal financial aid receive a quality education (Windmill, 2007).

Regional, national, and programmatic commissions must now answer to two
authorities, CHEX and USDE. This has produced predictable tension between the accrediting commissions, which were designed to be self-regulatory cooperatives, and the federal government, which wants the commissions to perform regulatory functions. The influence of the government has also accelerated adoption of outcomes-based accreditation approaches.

**Current Trends.**

Brittingham (2009) summarizes the trends in accreditation over the last 50 years as being a movement from quantitative and minimal to qualitative and aspirational. These trends have occurred as a result numerous factors. Firstly, aspirational, mission-based approaches make accreditation useful for a more diverse set of institutions. Secondly, a lack of new locations for schools and the use of technology for supporting branch campuses and online learning has reduced the rate of new institutions and meant that a higher percent of schools already meet the minimal standards for accreditation (Brittingham, 2009). Accordingly, accreditation has evolved to focus on outputs. The federal government’s insistence on measuring outcomes has only accelerated this trend. Unfortunately, while inputs are often measureable, such as number of books in the library and the qualifications of the faculty, outputs, such as the degree of student learning, have proven more difficult to measure.

The evolving focus of accreditation is been reflected in the standards. In the 1960s, the standards were designed to ensure that essential structures were in place and the necessary resources were available for operations (Beno, 2004). In 1984, a major shift occurred when the SACS adopted standards focused on institutional effectiveness
(Brittingham, 2009). Other commissions soon followed. By the 1990s, new requirements that focused on student achievement, such as test scores and completion, retention, graduation, and job placement rates emerged (WASC, 2012). In the early 2000s, another set of requirements was added that focused on assessing student-learning outcomes, or what students have learned as result of attending school (WASC, 2012).

The recent trends in accreditation have made addressing accreditation requirements challenging. On one hand, colleges and accreditors must respond to the self-reflective, non-regulatory approach embodied in CHEA. On the other, they must respond to the more top-down approach embodied in USDE. Colleges are being asked to use more qualitative standards for internal assessment while the broader political paradigm focuses on outcomes and measurements of effectiveness. The result is a myriad of interpretations. As is demonstrated in the ensuing section on existing literature, faculty, administrators, accreditors, and policy makers interpret the purpose and meaning of accreditation differently (Todd & Baker, 1998; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). With these challenges in mind, colleges must put significant effort into navigating and interpreting a broad, and possibly conflicting set of requirements. This study intends to enhance our understanding of why some are able to do this better than others.

**Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)**

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges is the regional accrediting commission that covers California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands (See Figure 5). WASC is comprised of three sub-commissions, the: 1) Accrediting Commission for Schools, which accredits K-12 institutions; 2) Accrediting Commission for Senior
Colleges and Universities, which accredits 4-year colleges and universities; and 3) ACCJC, which accredits two-year colleges (WASC, 2012). Although other regional commissions have experimented with separate standards for two and four year institutions, only WASC maintains this distinct separation (Brittingham, 2009). ACCJC accredits each of the 112 California community colleges.

The commission is made up of nineteen members who are appointed by a selection committee. The composition of the membership has several requirements. There must be a member that was recommended by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, the University of Hawaii, and each of the other two WASC sub-commissions. The members must also include five faculty members, five that represent the public, three administrators, one from an independent institution, and one from the Western Pacific (ACCJC, 2012).

The purpose of the commission is to assure stakeholders that each of its member institutions has definitive and appropriate educational objectives, maintains conditions in which these objectives can be achieved, is successful in achieving these objectives, appears able to sustain this success, and meets a set of established standards (ACCJC, 2012). The commission achieves its purpose through the process of accreditation.

**Accreditation Procedures.**

The focus of this paper is the reaffirmation of accreditation not initial accreditation. However, the standard lexicon is to use the term accreditation when referring to reaffirmation so it has been adopted for the purposes of this study. After an initial accreditation, ACCJC reaffirms accreditation on a six-year cycle. This process
includes four primary components:

- An institutional-wide self-study
- A comprehensive evaluation by a team of peers
- A set of recommendations developed by the visiting team
- An action by ACCJC

In addition to these core components, colleges must submit a midterm report every three years and annual progress reports. They may also have to submit follow-up reports and host visits as required by the commission. The basis of the self-study and the team evaluation are outlined in the two core documents published by the commission, the Eligibility Requirements for Accreditation and Accreditation Standards. The action taken by ACCJC is based on a report generated by the evaluating team. Once an institution has been granted initial accreditation, ACCJC takes one of the following actions:

1. Reaffirm accreditation: the institution has met accreditation requirements and needs only to submit a mid-term report after three years
2. Reaffirm accreditation with contingencies: the institution has met accreditation requirements, but there are areas of concern that must be addressed via reports or site visits in addition to the standard midterm report
3. Defer a decision: the commission requires additional materials before a decision can be made
4. Issue a warning: the institution is deviating from the standards set forth by the commission
5. Impose probation: the institution has significantly deviated from commission
standards or has not responded conditions imposed by the commission

6. Order show cause: the institution is so far out of compliance with commission standards that it must show justify why the commission should not terminate its accreditation

7. Terminate accreditation: the institution has failed to correct actions and is out of compliance with commission requirements

To be reaffirmed, colleges must meet minimum eligibility requirements and a set of standards to maintain their accreditation.

Eligibility Requirements.

There are 21 eligibility requirements listed in the Accreditation Reference Handbook (ACCJC, 2012). Compliance with eligibility requirements is expected at all times. The eligibility requirements are relatively prescriptive, meaning there is less room for interpretation at the college level than there is for the standards. The eligibility requirements are:

1. Authority- the institution has the authority and license to operate as an educational institution

2. Mission- the institution has a clearly defined, adopted, and published mission

3. Governing board- the institution has a functional board that is responsible for fiscal solvency and sound education

4. Chief executive officer- the institution has a board-appointed executive who administers board policies

5. Administrative capacity- the institution has sufficient qualified personnel to support
the mission

6. Operational status- the institution is in operation

7. Degrees- the institution offers degree programs and a significant number of students are enrolled in them

8. Educational programs- educational programs align with the mission, recognized fields of study, and adequate levels of rigor

9. Academic credit- credit is granted according to standard protocols

10. Student learning and achievement- expected outcomes for students are published for each academic program and achievement of them is assessed

11. General education- general education makes up a significant portion of all degree programs

12. Academic freedom- intellectual freedom is sustained

13. Faculty- an appropriately sized core of full-time faculty exists for supporting all educational programs

14. Student services- adequate services are provide to all students in order to support student learning

15. Admissions- admission policies are adhered to and support the mission

16. Information and learning resources- the institution provides information and resources needed to support its academic programs

17. Financial resources- the institution is financially stable and able to support its academic programs

18. Financial accountability- the institution undergoes an annual audit and makes findings
available

19. Institutional planning and evaluation- the institution evaluates its effectiveness, publicizes the results of this evaluation, and take steps to improve effectiveness

20. Public information- the institution published a catalog with general information, student requirements, and polices affecting students

21. Relations with the accrediting commission- the institution demonstrates adherence to eligibility requirements and complies with requests from the commission

**The Standards.**

ACCJC has four standards: 1) Institutional Mission and Effectiveness, 2) Student Learning Programs and Services, 3) Resources, and 4) Leadership and Governance. The current version of the standards was adopted in 2002. Within these standards, the accreditation trends mentioned previously are evident. For example, the “Resources” standard is primarily focused on ensuring the college meets the baseline requirements for operation. Meanwhile, the “Student Learning Programs and Services” standard is much more focused on improving quality, effectiveness, and learning outcomes.

What follows is a summary of each of the standards and sections. The summary is lengthy, but critical because meeting these standards is what determines whether a college will succeed in accreditation. The most recurrent theme across all standards is that colleges must engage in on going assessment, use student learning as the unit of analysis, and implement improvements based on this assessment. In some areas, especially those concerned with student learning programs and services, these assessment requirements are tightly and consistently incorporated. In other areas, such as resources
and leadership and administration, assessment requirements are less integrated, appearing
to be simply appended to the end of sections.

**Standard I: Institutional Mission and Effectiveness.** Standard I has two sections.
The first, section, I.A, is concerned with the institution's mission. The college is required
to have a mission that defines its purpose, target population, and commitment to student
learning. Four requirements are itemized under this section. The college must: a) have
student learning and service programs aligned with the mission, b) the mission statement
must be board approved, c) the mission must be regularly reviewed, and d) the mission
must inform planning and decision making.

The second section, I.B, is concerned with institutional effectiveness. The college
must be able to demonstrate ongoing support for, assessment of, and improvement of
student learning. Institutional processes, planning, and resource allocation must support
institutional effectiveness as demonstrated by the achievement of student learning,
institutional, and programmatic performance outcomes. There are seven itemized
requirements under this section. The institution must: a) sustain dialogue about
continuous quality improvement in the areas of student learning and institutional
processes, b) set effectiveness goals that support its purpose, produce measurable
outcomes, and that are broadly understood, c) engage in ongoing, cyclical assessment of
progress towards goals using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, d)
demonstrate that planning is broad, participative, and linked to resource allocation, and
supports improvement, e) base quality assurance communications to stakeholders on
assessment data, f) engage in ongoing assessment of planning and resource allocation processes, g) engage in ongoing evaluation of its assessment processes through systematic review.

**Standard II: Student Learning Programs and Services.** Standard II focuses on services to students, including instructional programs, support services, and learning resources. It also requires the college to maintain an environment conducive to diverse learning. Standard two is by far the most substantive of the standards.

*Section II.A - Instructional Programs.* The first section, II.A, is concerned with instructional programs. The college must offer recognized and emergent programs of study that culminate in measurable outcomes, such as degrees, certifications, employment, or transfer. These programs must be systematically evaluated in order to maintain relevancy, improve teaching and learning, and achieve learning goals. There are eight untitled subsections under the instructional programs section.

The first subsection requires that instructional programs support the mission and integrity of the institution. Three points are itemized under this subsection. The college must: 1) provide programs that meet the diverse and unique needs of the target population as determined through research and assessed by progress towards achieving outcomes goals, 2) employ appropriate instructional delivery systems, 3) identify student-learning outcomes for courses, programs, certificates, and degrees, assess the progress towards achieving these outcomes, and make improvements based on assessment.

The second subsection requires that the college assure quality and improvement
for all of its instructional programs. Five specific requirements are itemized under this subsection. The college must: a) develop and employ systemic approaches for establishing, administering, and delivering courses and programs, b) rely on the faculty expertise in establishing student-learning outcomes, c) maintain rigorous and compressive programs, d) employ delivery processes appropriate for the target population, e) evaluate all courses and programs through ongoing systemic processes, f) engage in continual assessment of established student-learning outcomes, work to improve these outcomes, and communicate them to stakeholders, g) validate any examinations that measure learning outcomes, h) award credit on the basis of students achieving established course learning outcomes, and i) award certificates or degree based on students achieving established programmatic learning outcomes.

The third subsection requires the college to sustain a valid general education program as a component of all instructional programs. Valid general education programs must have comprehensive learning outcomes that provide students with a) an understanding of the major areas of knowledge, b) the ability to engage in life-long learning, and c) an understanding of what it means to be a productive and ethical citizen.

The fourth subsection requires that the college's degree programs include at least one area of focused study. The fifth subsection requires that students who complete certifications and degrees possess the necessary competencies for employment in the field.

The sixth subsection requires the college to provide clear and accurate information regarding course, program, and transfer policies. Three requirements are
The college must: a) make transfer credit policies available and assess articulation agreements to ensure learning outcomes are comparable, b) make arrangements so that when programs change, students can continue making academic process with minimal disruption, and c) accurately and consistently represent itself to stakeholders.

The seventh subsection requires colleges to publicize board-approved policies supporting academic freedom, student honesty, and guiding beliefs. Three requirements are itemized under this subsection: a) faculty must present subject matter in a fair and unbiased manner, b) expectations for student honesty must be disseminated, and c) institutions that require the adoption of specific beliefs must provide prior notice to target populations.

The eighth subsection requires colleges to conform to ACCJC standards when operating internationally.

Section II.B - Student Support Services. The second section of Standard II focuses on student support services. The college must recruit and admit diverse students and provide a student pathway from access to success that meets the needs of these students. Student services must be evaluated in an ongoing and systemic way to improve these services. There are four untiited subsections under the student services section.

The first subsection requires the colleges to ensure that student services are of a high quality and support learning outcomes and the institutional mission. The second subsection requires the college to provide a catalog of its services that include general information, requirements for students, policies that impact students, and locations of
policies.

The third subsection requires the college to research the needs of student and provide appropriate services based on these needs. Six requirements are itemized under this subsection. The college must: a) provide equal access to all student services, b) sustain a campus climate that encourages student development, c) administer a counseling service program that supports student and advisor development, d) administer programs that enhances the understanding of diversity among students, e) engage in ongoing evaluation of entrance processes, and f) consistently evaluate student services as they support student-learning outcomes and make improvements based on this evaluation.

II.C - Library and Learning Support Services. The third and final section of Standard II focuses on library and learning support services, such as tutoring, computing, and training. These services must be sufficient to support the existing instructional programs and regularly assessed. There are two untitled subsections under the library and student services section. The first requires the college to provide a sufficient degree, quality, and variety of services. Five requirements are itemized. The college must: a) select and maintain appropriate equipment and materials, b) provide information competency instruction, c) provide adequate access to services, d) maintain and secure support services, and e) establish and document any inter-institutional agreements for providing library and learning resources. The second subsection requires colleges to consistently evaluate library and learning resources as they contribute to student-learning outcomes and implement improvements based on this evaluation.
Standard III: Resources. Standard III focuses on the resources that the college uses to achieve goals. This standard is divided into four sections: human, physical, technology, and financial resources.

Section III.A - Human Resources. The human resources section requires the college to employ qualified personnel for supporting learning. Personnel must be treated equitably, evaluated regularly, and given access to professional development. Diversity must be encouraged and human resources planning must be integrated with broader planning efforts. The human resources section has six untitled subsections.

The first subsection requires colleges to employ personnel with the appropriate education, training, and expertise to support its program and services. Four requirements are itemized under this subsection: a) the recruitment and hiring process must be valid and clearly publicized, b) personnel must be regularly evaluated, c) effectiveness in producing intended learning outcomes must be included in personnel evaluation for those involved in instruction, and d) a written code of ethics must be upheld.

The second subsection requires that the college maintain a sufficient number of full-time faculty, staff, and administrators to support its purpose. The third subsection requires a systematic approach to the development of and equitable maintenance of personnel related policies and procedures. Policies that ensure fairness are documented and adhered to and personnel files are secured but available to the respective employee. The fourth subsection requires colleges to develop and sustain policies that foster diversity and equity. This includes maintaining programs and practices that support
diversity and equity, assessment of these programs and practices, and a demonstrative of integrity in the treatment of all personnel. The fifth subsection requires institutions to provide access to professional development for all personnel. Professional development must meet the specific needs of the personnel and be systematically assessed and improved. The sixth subsection requires that human resources planning be incorporated with institutional planning and that human resource processes be continuously assessed and improved.

Section III.B - Physical Resources. Physical resources include facilities, real estate, equipment, and other assets. These resources must support instructional programs and services, improve effectiveness, and integrate with institutional planning. The physical resources section includes two untitled subsections. The first requires colleges to provide adequate and safe resources for supporting instructional and student services. The college must plan, maintain, and renew these resources on an ongoing basis and assure that they are accessible, safe, and conducive to learning. The second subsection requires colleges to engage in ongoing assessment of physical resources. Capital planning must support college goals and be integrated with broader institutional planning.

Section III.C - Technology Resources. Technology resources must also support student learning, improve institutional effectiveness, and be integrated into broader planning efforts. The section has two untitled subsections. The first requires that technology be designed to meet the teaching, learning, communications, and operations of the colleges. Four requirements are itemized under this subsection: a) hardware, software, services, and support must support institutional effectiveness and operations, b)
technology training must be provided to personnel and students, c) a college must engage in systematic maintenance, acquisition, and replacement of technology, and d) technology must enhance instructional programs and services. The second subsection requires colleges to engage in ongoing evaluation of technology and make improvements based on this evaluation.

Section III.D - Financial Resources. The college must have sufficient financial resources for supporting programs and services. This section has three untitled subsections. The first requires the college to use its mission and goals as the basis for financial planning. Four requirements are itemized: a) financial planning must be integrated with institutional planning, b) institutional planning must account for financial resource realities, c) short range financial operations must take into account long term plans, obligations, and fiscal solvency, and d) the college must have clearly defined processes for planning and budget development and abide by these processes.

The second subsection is concerned with the integrity of the financial management and control system. It has seven itemized requirements: a) the college must have documentation demonstrating that financial resources are used to support learning programs and services, b) necessary financial information must be distributed through the college, c) the college must have sufficient financial resources to overcome emergencies, d) financial resources must be administered effectively, e) financial resources must be legitimately used, f) contracts must support institutional goals, and g) the college must engage in ongoing evaluation and improvement of financial management systems.

The third subsection requires the college to regularly assess the use of financial
resources in order to improve effectiveness.

**Standard IV: Leadership and Governance.** Standard IV focuses on leadership, governance, decision-making, and organization. This standard is broken into two sections, 1) Decision-Making Roles and Processes and 2) Board and Administrative Organization. There are a significant number of itemized requirements under each.

*Section IV.A - Decision-Making Roles and Processes.* The college must engage in ethical and effective leadership in order to achieve goals and improve the quality of services. There are three untitled subsections under this topic. The first subsection requires that leaders foster an environment that encourages empowerment, innovation, excellence, and participation. The second subsection requires the college to codify their participative decision making processes. Faculty, administrators, staff, and students roles in governance and input processes must be clearly define and communicated. Faculty and academic administrators must be the primary force behind recommendations that affect learning programs and services.

The third subsection requires that board, faculty, staff, and students participate in cooperative processes and efforts that benefit the college. The fourth subsection requires ethical and honest communication with external constituents, including ACCJC. ACCJC recommendations and requirements must be responded to effectively. The fifth subsection requires that the decision-making processes be evaluated regularly to ensure maximum effectiveness.

*Section IV.B - Board and Administrative Organization.* This section focuses
specifically on the roles of the board and the board’s relationship to the president (or chancellor). There are three untitled subsections with itemized requirements under each. The first subsection requires colleges to have a board that develops policies. These policies must support effective delivery of student learning programs and services and the financial stability of the school. In addition, there must be a codified policy for evaluating the president (or chancellor in a multi-college system). There are ten itemized requirements under this subsection: a) the board must represent the public interest and protect the institution, b) board policies must support the institutional mission, c) the board assumes ultimate responsibility for institutional effectiveness, legal issues, and finances, d) board bylaws must be publicized, e) the board must act in accordance with its bylaws, f) the board must have systems for member training and terms of office, g) the board must engage in self-evaluation according to defined processes, h) there must be a codified code of ethics for the board that is complied with, i) the board must be involved in accreditation processes, and j) the board must select and evaluate the president (or chancellor) and delegate to him/her full authority and responsibility for enacting board policies. In a multi-college district the board must also have a policy for selecting and evaluating college presidents.

The second subsection focuses on the role of the president, who is the primary person responsible for the institution's quality and effectiveness. There are five itemized requirements listed. The president must oversee administrative functions and personnel, b) lead institutional improvement and effectiveness processes, c) ensure compliance with regulations and policies, d) oversee finances, and e) serves as a liaison with the
The third subsection concerns multi-college districts. The district must provide leadership for setting expectations and provide support for college operations. It also must define the relationship between the district and colleges and serve as the liaison to the board. There are seven itemized requirements: a) the functions of the district and colleges must be clearly delineated and codified, b) the district must support the college mission and functions, c) there must be a fair distribution resources to the colleges, d) expenditures must be controlled effectively, e) the chancellor must allow the president’s full authority to implement policies at the college level, f) the district must act as a liaison to the board, and g) the district role and delineation of responsibilities must be regularly evaluated for effectiveness in achieving goals.

**Supplemental Resources.**

Because there are a large number of colleges and visiting teams, interpretations of the standards and methods of assessment can vary. To reduce inconsistencies, ACCJC publishes supplemental materials that describe how assessment should be performed. Four of these key documents are critical to understanding how colleges assess themselves and how the visiting team evaluates the college. They are the “Guide to Evaluating Institutions,” “Self-study Manual,” “Team Evaluator Manual,” and “Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness.”

*Guide To Evaluating Institutions.* The “Guide to Evaluating Institutions” is designed to serve both the college and the visiting team. Its goal is to facilitate a deeper assessment of whether colleges are prepared to meet the standards. This document was
important to this study because is it designed to normalize the assessment approaches used by both the college and visiting team.

The guide provides general information about accreditation and the recent trends reviewed previously. Six themes that span the standards are discussed: 1) an institutional commitment to student learning, 2) the assessment, planning, and improvement cycle, 3) the establishment of student-learning outcomes as a tool for demonstrating effectiveness; 4) participative organizational structures for assessment and decision-making, 5) internal dialogue among a broad set of constituents, and 6) institutional integrity.

An important section within the guide concerns evidence. Evidence is defined as data upon which judgment and conclusions are made. It must undergo analysis and reflection by the college in order to be useful and must be verifiable, relevant, representative, and actionable. The guide details three key types of evidence. The first is student achievement evidence, which includes test results, student progress, and retention or graduation rates. The second is student learning outcome evidence, such as samples of student work or summations of what students have learned. The third is institutional evaluation evidence, which must be intentional, dialogic, and purposeful. Evidence can exist in a number of forms, including data systems, published documents, instructional materials, grading tools, and reports. Evidence should not simply be data in raw form, but demonstrate how the institution uses and analyzes data for decision-making and improvement.

The remaining 67 pages of the guide contain questions that are designed to provoke reflection, dialogue, and judgment among the college and visiting team. Two to
three questions are listed under each subsection. For example, under section I.A, evaluators are asked, “What does the institution’s mission statement say about its educational purposes?” Certain sections also contain examples of acceptable evidence. The entirety of the guide will not be reviewed for the purposes of this paper, but can be accessed via ACCJC website.

**Self-Study Manual.** The “Self-Study Manual” is designed to be used by colleges in conjunction with the “Guide to Evaluating Institutions.” The goal of the self-study is for colleges to determine how well they meet the accreditation standards and to improve quality and effectiveness. A broad set of representatives from across the institution, including students, faculty, staff, administrators, district personnel, and the board are required to participate in the self-study. A certification page with signatures from these participants must be included. Because ACCJC, via WASC, is a federally recognized regional accreditor, its member colleges are required to comply with United States Department of Education requirements. Evidence of compliance with necessary regulations is required. Colleges are strongly encouraged to engage in ongoing assessment and planning processes, rather than trying to undertake the self-study only before the site visit.

The manual details the format and content of the self-study report. There are ten sections: 1) a cover sheet, 2) a certification page that attests to broad participation, 3) a table of contents, 4) an introduction that includes the background and environmental data of the college, 5) an abstract of the report, 6) the organization of the self study, 7) the organization of the institution, 8) a certification of compliance with eligibility
requirements, 9) responses to previous accreditation recommendations, 10) a self-evaluation of how the college meets the standards, and 11) a detailing of the evidence that will be made available to the visiting team.

The manual includes some basic suggestions for self-study processes, including committee organization, participation, and document preparation. The procedures for submission, the site visit, and post-visit actions are detailed. The manual concludes with five appendices: 1) a sample certification, b) a sample cover sheet, c) a certification for meeting eligibility requirements, d) policies referred to in the standards, and e) a self-study report checklist.

**Team Evaluator Manual.** The “Team Evaluator Manual” contains instructions and recommendations for the visiting team and chair. Like the “Self-Study Manual,” it is designed to be used in conjunction with the “Guide to Evaluating Institutions.” The manual defines the role of the visiting team as assessing the self-study and the institution against the accreditation standards. Eight specific responsibilities of the visiting team are itemized. The team evaluates the institution using the standards, verifies evidence that supports the claims of the self study, identifies problem areas not recognized by the college, confirms that the college meets eligibility requirements, ensures that previous recommendations have been addressed, ensures that the institution has adopted integrated processes for evaluation and planning that lead to student achievement and learning, and recommends an action for the commission.

The manual details the role of the commission in communicating with the institution, selecting the team chair and members, providing training for the visiting team,
and supplying materials. It also describes the role and expectations of the team chair and members. The protocols for the site visit are listed, including an initial team meeting, a meeting with the institutional staff, meetings during the visits, an exit meeting, and the confidential recommendation to ACCJC.

After the site visit, the visiting team generates a simplified report for the commission to use as the basis for an action. The report has a specific format and includes five sections: 1) a title page, 2) an introduction, 3) a report on how the college has responded to previous recommendations, 4) an evaluation of whether the college meets eligibility and standards requirements, and 5) a confidential recommendations for action by the commission. The manual provides suggestions for developing effective recommendations. The bulk of these suggest that the recommendations be solely based on, and linked to, ACCJC standards. Recommendations should be clearly defined, but diplomatic. Recommendation should be grounded on observation and require that the institution engage in new behavior without prescribing that behavior. In summary, the commission calls for recommendations to be diagnostic, supportive, and substantive.

The manual concludes with a series of frequently asked questions for evaluators and an outline of each step of the accreditation process. Appendices include forms for evaluating the visiting team chair and members and a template for the written report.

**Institutional Effectiveness Memo.** Although student-learning outcomes were incorporated into the standards in 2002, the staggered cycle of the accreditation across the colleges and the significant effort required to implement this new assessment approach has necessitated a transition period. In a 2007 memo to college leaders, the President of
ACCJC, Barbara Beno, provided a rubric for analyzing institutional effectiveness in preparation for a comprehensive evaluation. Its purpose is to assess progress towards compliance with student-learning outcomes requirements. This rubric is intended for use by colleges, visiting teams, and the commission (See Table 1). In 2012, ACCJC requires that institutions be at the proficiency level of student-learning outcomes.

Table 1

Simplification of “Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness” (ACCJC, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Implementation</th>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>Program Review</th>
<th>Student-learning outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>The college has preliminary investigative dialogue about planning processes.</td>
<td>There is preliminary investigative dialogue at the institution or within some departments about what data or process should be used for program review.</td>
<td>There is preliminary, investigative dialogue about student-learning outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>The college has defined a planning process and assigned responsibility for implementing it.</td>
<td>Program review is embedded in practice across the institution using qualitative and quantitative data to improve program effectiveness.</td>
<td>College has established an institutional framework for definition of student-learning outcomes (where to start), how to extend, and timeline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency</td>
<td>The college has a well-documented, ongoing process for evaluating itself in all areas of operation, analyzing and publishing the results and planning and implementing improvements.</td>
<td>Program review processes are in place and implemented regularly.</td>
<td>Student-learning outcomes and authentic assessment are in place for courses, programs and degrees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>The institution uses ongoing and systematic evaluation and planning to refine its key processes and</td>
<td>Program review processes are ongoing, systematic and used to assess and improve student.</td>
<td>Student-learning outcomes and assessment are ongoing, systematic and used for continuous quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deficiencies that Have Led to Sanctions.

In 2009, ACCJC began publishing a summary of the type of deficiencies that have led to sanction. Twenty-two percent of the deficiencies were related to planning and using assessment data; 15% were related to financial management, 15% were related to the board role and responsibilities, 14% were related to program review, and 10% were related to internal strife. Two-thirds of the colleges had three or more areas of deficiencies and almost half of the schools had been instructed to correct these deficiencies during the comprehensive visit six years prior (ACCJC, 2012). While this information is useful in terms of understanding what the deficiencies are, it does not explain why the deficiencies are occurring in the first place, colleges have multiple deficiencies, and colleges are not addressing deficiencies over time. It was a hypothesis of this research that the underlying culture impacted the ability of the institution to take adequate corrective action.

Summary of Accreditation Processes.

Colleges under ACCJC commit to a six-year cycle of review that includes an institutional-wide self-study, a comprehensive evaluation by a visiting team of peers, and a decision by the commission. The college must also submit annual and midterm reports and may be subject to additional requirements as a result of recommendations.

The colleges are assessed against a set of standards provided by the commission. The standards have evolved over the last fifty years. Previously, they were focused on ensuring colleges had the necessary resources to operate effectively. Today, the
standards require that colleges demonstrate they are using their resources effectively to produce desirable results. This effectiveness must be measured in terms of student achievement and learning. Improvement processes must then be implemented based on this assessment. The most recent version of the standards was developed in 2002 when student-learning outcomes were implemented.

To make the process more consistent across a large number of institutions, the commission provides supplemental materials that describe how assessment of the colleges should be performed. The materials serve both the colleges in their self-study, and the evaluation teams in generating an accreditation report. One of these documents, the “Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness,” reflects the understanding that incorporating student-learning outcomes into accreditation requires a transition period. Colleges are expected to be proficient with student-learning outcomes in 2012.

The ACCJC process has been met with resistance and recently tensions have flared between faculty and the colleges and the commission. Faculty are concerned about the definition of learning outcomes and whether these outcomes can be accurately measured (ASCCC, 2005). They worry that defining student outcomes impacts academic freedom and restricts student learning. Faculty are also concerned with the linking of student-learning outcomes to faculty evaluations (See Standard III.A.1.c) which are subject to collective bargaining. In 2010, The ASCCC adopted a formal resolution confirming its opposition to linking student-learning outcomes and faculty evaluations (ASCCC, 2010).

There has also been criticism of the high number of sanctions imposed by
ACCJC, which has placed 55% of California community colleges on some type of sanction, compared with less than 6% for other accreditors (ASCCC, 2010). In response, the California Community College Chancellors Office formed a task force that provided recommendation to the commission. These recommendations led to a quick response from ACCJC defending its practices (ASCCC, 2010). The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges countered with a motion for a vote of no confidence (ASCCC, 2010). The motion was withdrawn and instead a motion to explore receiving accreditation from an agency other than ACCJC was passed (De Anza College, 2010).

This study was neutral in terms of the relationship between ACCJC and the colleges. It was concerned only with why some colleges are succeeding under the current process while others are repeatedly struggling. It was hypothesized that there are cultural differences at the colleges that influence accreditation success.

**Existing Accreditation Research**

A review of the existing literature revealed a dearth of research into the areas of college and university accreditation. For example when using the Academic Search Premier research database, a search for “Accreditation” in the title field returned 1872 results. However, only 244 of these were in peer-reviewed publications in the United States. Most of these 244 articles were focused on programmatic accreditation, such as teacher education, medical, counseling, and business accreditation programs. Only 41 addressed regional accreditation. Of these 41 articles, nearly one half were concerned with accreditation policy at the national level, meaning only 23 articles addressed accreditation implementation at the college level. Results were similar using other
databases, including Lexis Nexus and Wilson Web. Finally, most of the remaining articles were not empirical—meaning recommendations were not based on valid research protocols.

In order to supplement these published articles with data from empirical research, a significant number of dissertations addressing accreditation were reviewed. In the end, 40 dissertations and 40 articles were analyzed for this study. The content of these works were coded and five themes were identified: 1) accreditation policy, 2) contextual factors, 3) perceptions, 4) actions, and 5) outcomes. What follows is a meta-analysis of the existing literature and research according to these five areas.

**Theme 1: Accreditation Policy.**

The first major theme presented in the literature pertained to issues of accreditation policy. As discussed previously, this research project did not intend to examine the underlying tenet of national, regional, or state accreditation policy per se. It was assumed that colleges must be able to respond to calls for accountability and the accepted practice currently is accreditation. However, this project did intend to examine how accreditation policy influences local implementations and responses. The literature revealed five primary areas of accreditation policy that affect schools: issues of purpose, the standards, state policies, and accreditation procedures.

**Purpose.** Accreditation continues to serve its initial role of conferring legitimacy and allowing for credit transfer (ACCJC, 2012; CHEA, 2012). It also provides access to federal financial aid dollars and a framework for demonstrating accountability (Greiner, 1997). However, the purpose of accreditation appears to be evolving as accreditors
respond to public and political demands for greater accountability (Barber, 1990; Beno, 2004; Morest & Jenkins, 2009). There has been a corresponding shift in focus towards the quality of education students receive, primarily in the form program review and student-learning outcomes for some time (Armstrong, 1983; Beno, 2004). Unfortunately, definitions of education quality are difficult to establish (Barber, 1990). Some assert that two of the primary purposes of accreditation, to provide accountability and improve educational quality, are inherently conflicting (Provezis, 2010).

**Accreditation Standards.** To assist colleges in normalizing their interpretation of accreditation demands, accreditors make use of a specific set of criteria, referred to as “standards.” These standards have mirrored recent changes in the purpose of accreditation and now contain “accountability” terminology, such as outcomes, institutional effectiveness, and quality. Regional accreditors across the United States have adopted these new standards consistently (Provezis, 2010). In the past, changes to the standards do not appear to have significantly affected the accreditation process. Even when new institutional effectiveness criteria were added, the average numbers of recommendations and visiting team and self-study processes remained consistent in the 1980s (Freeman, 1988). However, the recent increase in number of sanctions in the California community college systems seems to break with this pattern.

Leaders specifically support the standards-based process (Sykes, 2003). It is found to be more effective than open-ended processes (Burris, 2009) and allows for a significant degree of local autonomy (Skolits and Graybeal, 2007; Barber, 1990). As a result, accreditation remains a relatively private endeavor, rather than a publicly regulated
process (Greiner, 1997). It would be logical for this local autonomy to produce different results among California community colleges.

**Governmental Policies.** Although accreditation processes are not regulated per se, several states have attempted to align regulations and accreditation practices. In a national study, this is found to have resulted in conflicts between national and state policies (Greiner, 1997). According to some studies, participants resist the imposition of regulations on the traditionally private accreditation process (Greiner, 1997; Snyder, 2006). However, in both Iowa and North Carolina, college leaders report that accreditation-linked state policies provide value (Avery, 1992; Snyder, 2006). One way is by encouraging benchmarking (Snyder, 2006), a process of comparing like institutions in a way that accreditation does not. In addition, active engagement among statewide parties appears to be beneficial (Barber, 1990).

**Procedures.** As mentioned previously, the methodology behind accreditation has remained relative constant over the years and consistent across the six regional accreditors (Provezis, 2010). Accreditation occurs at regular increments of five, six, or ten years. Some research indicates that cycles less than 10 years are more effective at producing outcomes (Robinson-Weening, 1995). However, institutional leaders tend to favor the longer cycles, because it reduces hardship on the institution (Sykes, 2003). All institutions must engage in a self-study process. This process is viewed as favorable by participants (Sykes, 2003) and effective by external researchers (Barber, 1990). The college must host a visiting team of peer reviewers from similar institutions. Research suggests that there is a need for improved training for visiting team participants.
(Hollingsworth, 2010). Though evaluators have experiential strength, there have not always been clear specifications regarding the purpose of the evaluating team, nor effective models for the evaluators to use (Silvers, 1982). The evaluator handbook, currently produced by ACCJC, appears to be an attempt to address some of these concerns (ACCJC, 2011).

**Theme 2: Contextual Factors.**

Issues of context make up the second major theme in the literature surrounding accreditation at the college level. Several factors appear to play a role in accreditation processes, including timing, resources, the environment, and culture. With respect to timing, newer institutions are reportedly more supportive of current processes (Robinson-Weening, 1995). In addition, the faculty at institutions that have recently participated in accreditation processes is more supportive (Walker, 1993).

Colleges report that a lack of sufficient resources is the primary barrier to effective accreditation processes (Hollingsworth, 2010; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007; Morest & Jenkins, 2009; Miles, 1992). This concern isn’t just voiced by colleges. North Central Association, the regional accreditor for much of the Midwest, has indicated revenue as the primary concern for the colleges it accredits (Miles, 1992). In California, a study of three community colleges also reveals issues of sustainability as a primary concern from accreditation participants (Waite, 2004). Resource restraints are particularly noted in the area of institutional research. In a study of 111 schools, Morest and Jenkins (2007) report that 75% of the colleges had two or less institutional research staff, 50% had one or less, and 20% had less than a half-time equivalent. As a result, institutional data are rarely
valid due to poor research methods, poor data management, bias, and significant gaps in collection and analysis (Morest & Jenkins, 2009).

Studies concerning the impact of environmental factors, such as size, location, age, and campus climate on accreditation processes have produced mixed results. In a quantitative study of 33 community colleges under the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Gordon (1998) finds that college environment has little impact on the self-study teams. Similarly, in a broad analysis of survey data from 136 colleges across 45 states, Salvador (1996) discovers that environmental factors do not impact perceptions. However, other studies have found environmental factors to be influential. Mortenson (2000) discovers that more selective institutions have more resources and fewer sanctions, Robinson-Weening (1995) finds that the impact of accreditation is greater in smaller schools, and Baker (1998) reports that participants from medium sized institutions (1,500-3,000 FTEs) perceived institutional effectiveness (IE) processes as more important than their colleagues at both smaller and larger institutions. It is not known to what degree environmental factors influence accreditation in California community college accreditation, however, on the surface accreditation results do not appear to be linked to them. Colleges of various sizes, locations, and populations served both succeed and struggle with accreditation.

**Theme 3: Perceptions.**

A large portion of the research relating to accreditation practices in colleges is focused on participant perceptions. The most significant factor that drives perception appears to be the participant’s role, or position, in either the organization or the
accreditation process. Similarities in perceptions across participant roles will be reviewed first, followed by differences.

**Common Perceptions.** Participants across a wide range of roles view accreditation practices as positive and valuable (Cooney, 1984; Faulkner, 2002; Todd & Baker, 1998; Walker, 1993). In a survey of a large number of college presidents and state legislators in the SACS region, both groups are found to be in support (Brown, 1999). A study of 13 Michigan colleges uncovers that all valued the self-study and that accreditation was especially important to students (Cooney, 1984). In a study of 106 United States colleges using the Baldrige Model of Institutional Effectiveness, Faulkner (2002) finds that leaders value the accountability processes. Welsh and Metcalf (2003), in a study of 168 colleges in the SACS regions, discover a high degree of support from both faculty and administrators. According to Todd and Baker (1998), perceptions of importance are independent of all demographic and job position related data.

Research also demonstrates similar perceptions across sub-groups regarding the impact of accreditation. In a study of 25 schools in the SACS region, Todd and Baker (1998) disclose that presidents, deans, and faculty report the same degree of implementation of accountability practices. There is also a common perception that the degree of implementation is lower than the level of importance (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). At a single institution in Michigan, Harris (1983), finds that both faculty and administrators share similar views towards accreditation. They report the same level of degree and type of change and both perceive the improvements to the educational environment (Harris, 1983).
Group-Mediated Perceptions. However, despite these common perceptions in the areas of support and outcomes, participant role appears to be one of the strongest predictor of perceptual differences. In a study of 136 colleges across 45 states, Salvador (1996) discovers “sub-group” to be the primary factor that influences perceptions. Similarly, Barber (1990) finds that participant views on accreditation outcomes differ most strongly according to job position in a study of national, regional, and state accreditation councils and four schools. In a study of 400 faculty, college presidents, and self-study committee members, Yarbrough (1983) reveals that groups have different perceptions towards critical accreditation factors, with no factor common among all groups. Participants also recognized that their perception of accountability practices was mediated by their professional position and relation to the accountability processes (Harbour et al, 2010).

Perceptual differences between administrators and faculty are the most reported. These include perceived differences in the areas of level and source of support, degree of knowledge, and degree of adoption. Though faculty and administrators are supportive of accreditation-related activities, they differ in their degree. In four separate studies, Todd and Baker (1998), Welsh and Metcalf (2003), and Skolits and Graybeal (2007) report that administrators perceive accreditation-related initiatives as more important than faculty. The depth of support that administrators and faculty report is also motivated differently. Although both groups’ level of support was influenced by the perceived source of motivation and personal level of involvement, administrators were more supportive when
there was a higher depth of implementation, while faculty were more supportive when there was a focus on quality and outcomes (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003). Administrators also reportedly view accreditation activities as more internally motivated than faculty (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003).

Administrators are more deeply involved in accreditation-related activities (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003) and have a greater understanding of them than faculty (Salvador, 1996). Salvador (1996) finds that faculty tend to know less about practices outside of the classroom than other subgroups. Administrators also view accreditation-related activities as more deeply implemented than faculty (Thomas, 1997; Welsh and Metcalf, 2003).

In addition to perceptual differences between administrators and faculty, other groups view accreditation practices differently. McClure (1996) finds that academic middle managers report the least confidence in quality improvement outcomes of any group. On a broader level, while college presidents and policy makers are both supportive of accreditation practices, policy makers are not as satisfied with current practices as administrators and tend to be more supportive of reform (Brown 1999). The commissions may view accreditation differently than colleges as well. For example, the NCA is found to value issues of mission more than the colleges it accredits (Miles 1992). Even within subgroups, perceptions can differ. For example, Gordon (1998) discovers that self-study team leaders and members can have contrasting views.

**Other Perceptual Conflicts.** In addition to group-mediated perceptual differences, conflicting views of accreditation have other sources. One is the accountability trend itself. Provezis (2010) reports that there is perceived conflict
between accountability and academic quality purposes of accreditation. Some view an adherence to principles of quality learning as more important than accreditation (Kern 1990). Armstrong (1983) finds that accreditation practices were only deemed useful when perceived as beneficial to the participants and applying to institutional goals or instructional and functional needs. Although faculty supports quality improvement measures (Todd & Baker, 1998), some members view the student-learning outcomes standards only as a passing trend while others fear that they will be linked to compensation (Waite, 2004). Individuals rate their value of accreditation as higher than their degree implementation (Faulkner, 2002; Welsh and Metcalf, 2003). And, even while they understand the need for accreditation, they fear the workload (Hulon, 2000).

According to existing research, some important influences on perceptions of accreditation are related to timing. The more recent the experience with accreditation, the more positively faculty view it (Walker, 1993). Job tenure also appears influential. While Thomas (1997) finds that time of service does not impact degree of adoption, Todd and Baker (1998) find that it does mediates perception of importance. Newer faculty place significantly more importance on accreditation-related processes (Todd & Baker, 1998).

**Theme 4: Practices.**

The fourth major theme in the existing research centers on college practices within the context of accreditation. Practices are the actions that colleges take in response to policy requirements and are influenced by the local context and perceptions of the participants. There are four primary areas with regard to practices in the literature
reviewed for this study: engagement, leadership, planning, organizational models, and institutional research. It should be noted that while these practices are linked to effective accreditation processes, they are not linked to actual accreditation results.

**Engagement.** Practices that foster engagement are reportedly desirable. Robinson-Weening (1995) finds inclusive engagement to be one of the three primary factors that improves accreditation effectiveness and Thomas (1997) finds that it produces higher levels of adoption. In a study of two universities that were recognized for having exemplary accreditation processes, one in Indiana and one in New Hampshire, Sandmann et al (2009) find engagement to be a key common factor. Gutierrez (2006) also finds the engagement of internal and external stakeholders as a critical factor in the removal of accreditation sanction for the University of Guam. Engagement also seems to influence perceptions. Diede (2009) and McClure (1996) find that those who are more engaged tend to have more positive views to accreditation practices.

The practice of engaging stakeholders is reportedly influenced by several factors according the existing studies. The degree of faculty motivation is correlated to level of engagement (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003). In a qualitative study of three schools, Diede (2009) finds that normative power, that which seeks to establish accreditation as a moral imperative, was more effective in motivating faculty engagement than remunerative, or transactional power. Coercive power is revealed to have the opposite affect, alienating faculty instead (Diede, 2009). Environmental issues may or may not have an impact on engagement. While Gordon (1996) finds no correlation between environmental factors and engagement, Corpus (1998) finds the environment to be a key factor that precludes
engagement. Organizational models used in accreditation practices can have an impact. Brua-Behrens (2003) finds that the AQIP model did not encourage engagement as much as traditional accreditation practices. Finally, perceptions influence engagement—those who view accreditation activities more positively tend to be more engaged (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003)

Researchers support engagement. Sandmann et al (2009) conclude that an institutional commitment to engagement can benefit accreditation processes. They recommend that engagement be strategically prioritized, that communities of engagement champions be formed, and that leaders use the accreditation process to drive an engagement agenda. They contend that an engaged institution can integrate the meaning behind accreditation into ongoing self-assessment processes and avoid the experience of accreditation being merely a compliance exercise.

Engagement can occur both internally and externally. Sykes (2003) finds that ongoing engagement with accreditors was deemed important in a study of 90 college presidents. Cruise (2007) finds that accreditor support influenced accreditation-related activities in a case study of a single SACS institution. Hollingsworth (2010) also notes the accreditation liaison officer, the primary local contact with the accreditor, was critical to accreditation processes in a study of 150 Mississippi schools. Engagement with external bodies can extend beyond the accrediting commission. For example, Sandmann et al (2009) find that the focus of engagement practices at the University of New Hampshire was the local community. Kern (1990) recommends involving the local community as well.
Internally, Kern (1990) recommends that colleges participate in diverse decision-making. Sandmann et al (2009) find a significant focus on faculty engagement at the University of Indiana, which formed an “Outreach Scholars Academy” for teaching faculty about engagement. McClure (1996) finds a high degree of involvement from campus leaders at sixteen South Carolina colleges. Developing formal organizational structures that foster engagement may be beneficial to accreditation processes. For example, the creation of a faculty senate at the University of Guam was one factor that led to removal of accreditation sanction (Guiterrez, 2006). Kern (1990) also recommends the creation of a council for institutional effectiveness processes.

**Leadership.** Leadership practices appear to influence accreditation processes. Robinson-Weening (1995) reports that the role of the president improved accreditation process effectiveness. Marshall (2007) finds that leadership influenced accreditation processes and Thomas (1997) reports that leadership affected the level of adoption. Walker (1993) reports the president's support to be critical to the self-study. Finally, Gutierrez (2006) reports that a change in leadership was one factor that help lead to the removal of sanction for the University of Guam.

Two qualities of leadership are mentioned specifically in multiple studies: leadership commitment and participative styles. Commitment is referred to by Cruise (2007), who finds that committed leadership influenced quality improvement processes. Kern (1990) recommends a strong commitment from leadership and Sanders (2009) reports that leadership commitment was an important theme. Participatory styles of leadership are discovered to be effective in multiple studies. Sanders (2009) reveals that
consistent communication and engagement between leaders and participants was critical. Hollingsworth (2010) notes that leader facilitation was key. Finally, Hunnicutt (2008) indicates that contingent and leader-member-exchange methods were critical and consequently recommends leader-member-exchange methods of leadership in accreditation-related activities.

**Institutional Research.** One area indicated to be of particular importance to accreditation-related activities is institutional research. Cruise (2007) reports that internal research greatly influences accreditation-related processes. Unfortunately, as external requirements for data-driven decision making have increased, resources have dwindled (Morest & Jenkins, 2009). For example, in a study of 111 colleges, 75% are discovered to have two or less institutional research staff, 50% have one or less, and 20% have less than a half-time equivalent (Morest & Jenkins, 2007). As a result, institutional data is rarely valid due to poor research method, poor data management, bias, and significant gaps in collection and analysis (Morest & Jenkins, 2009).

Similar findings are apparent in other studies. Dowd (2005) indicates that accountability trends have driven institutions to produce data that are never actually used in operations. Skolits and Graybeal (2007) report that accountability data are widely available to colleges, but that a lack of resources impeded effective use of the data. Prince (2000), in a study of 123 schools, finds that student-learning outcomes, graduate/employee satisfaction, and retention data analyses processes were highly valued, but ineffectively implemented. In a case study of three colleges, Marshall (2007) finds that problems with data collection and analysis were consistent across all three.
Researchers provide several recommendations in the area of institutional research. Kern (1990) recommends that colleges engage in institutional research on an ongoing basis- not just for accreditation purposes. Dowd (2005) recommends creating a culture of inquiry- one that places value on how an organization makes decisions about what information is important, who is involved in using it, and how to communicate it, rather simply on the content. Dowd (2005) contends that this will result in a focal shift from the data to the decision makers. Dowd (2005) seeks to support the development of cultures of inquiry by breaking accountability strategies down into three categories: performance benchmarking, diagnostic benchmarking, and process benchmarking. Performance benchmarking is the simplest and consists of comparing outcome data. Diagnostic benchmarking is one level deeper, seeking to assess the organizations quality and improve in areas of deficiency. Process benchmarking is the most resource intensive. It involves comparing core practices between multiple institutions and experimental research into effective educational practices.

Morest and Jenkins (2009) recommend involving a wide range of campus constituents in the adoption of data-driven decision-making in order to make institutional research internally motivated rather than externally mandated. Morest and Jenkins (2009) also recommend employing qualitative, in addition to quantitative research, linking program development to institutional research data, and establishing formal organizational structures for supporting institutional research such as committees, advisory boards, and opportunities for interns and graduate assistants. Morest and Jenkins (2009) assert that these techniques can help lead toward a culture of evidence,
which in turn will benefit a college’s ongoing operations and ability to meet accreditation requirements.

**Organizational Models.** The accreditation standards, self-study, and site-visit provide formal frameworks for colleges to develop processes and responses. However, other organization effectiveness frameworks have also been used in conjunction with traditional accreditation frameworks. Two of these models are the Baldrige Model of Institutional Effectiveness and the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP).

Congress formed the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Program in 1987 in order to increase the effectiveness of United States businesses by providing a framework for organizational quality improvement processes (Ruben, 2007). The Baldrige Model proved to be applicable across a variety of organizations and has since been adapted for education institutions. Roland (2009) develops an assessment matrix built on three prominent organizational effectiveness models, the Goal Model, Competing Values Framework, and the Baldrige Model, and finds the Baldrige model to be the most valuable in assessing whether X schools is prepared for accreditation. In a study of 106 colleges engaging in quality improvement processes, Faulkner (2002) reports that leaders find the Baldrige Model acceptable and especially applicable in settings that would benefit from an emphasis on research-based, data-driven decisions. Ruben (2007) recommends linking accreditation practices with the Baldrige Model and their complimentary qualities in order to strengthen improvement processes.

**AQIP.** The Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) was developed by the North Central Association of Schools (NCAS) in 1999 as alternative evaluation
process for schools accredited by the commission. The program was built using
categories based on the Malcolm Baldrige criteria (Bishop, 2004). The AQIP model
focuses on the concepts of ongoing quality improvement by using goal-setting,
 networking, and accountability processes. AQIP appears to be favored by two-year
institutions. In a broad study of Iowa community colleges, Snyder (2006) finds AQIP to
be the preferred model. Shakir (2010) also finds that two-year schools were twice as
likely as four-year schools to use the AQIP in a study of 140 NCAS schools.

Studies have also discovered AQIP to be effective. Bishop (2004) indicates that
the cultures of three institutions were transformed by the ongoing engagement in quality
improvement processes under the AQIP model. Participants in Bishop’s (2004) study
reported enthusiasm about the impact the AQIP model had on accreditation processes,
believing it had helped the college embark on a path to continuous improvement. Garcia
(2009) reveals that schools using the AQIP model have better graduation and retention
rates than schools that use the traditional model. In a single institution case study, Brua-
Behrens (2003) finds that most participants believed the AQIP model to be a better fit for
the culture of the institution. However, they also reported that the AQIP model did not
drive involvement to the same degree as the traditional model (Brua-Behrens, 2003).

The Baldrige and AQIP models are not the only organizational models examined
in the literature. In fact, Stoodley (1982) develops a “single self-study” framework and
finds it to be feasible. This framework allows colleges to use the same tools for
programmatic accreditation (such as nursing) and regional accreditation processes. Other
studies indicate that traditional strategy and planning processes also impact accreditation.
Marshall (2007) and Cruise (2007) find that organizational design, planning, and strategies influence accreditation processes and the degree of success. Kerr (2003) identifies planning as important to accreditation processes and recommends that assessment practices start from the ground up—first at the course, then program, then institutional levels—and that institutional strategies should be tied to learning outcomes. Kern (1990) recommends the development of a strategic planning task force to aid in accreditation-related responses.

**Theme 5: Outcomes.**

The fifth major theme evident in the literature relates to the outcomes of accreditation processes. Studies indicate that accreditation may be effective in producing intended results. Sykes (2003) concludes that accreditation is achieving “exactly” what it is designed to do: provide a platform for critical assessment and accountability to stakeholders. Reported accreditation outcomes can be broadly categorized into practices and perceptions.

Colleges have been found to engage in new practices after accreditation processes. For example, Cooney (1984) discovers that 80% of the accreditor recommendations were implemented in a study of 29 Michigan community colleges. Armstrong (1983) reports that nearly one-half of 105 western colleges were responding to outcomes-based accreditation requirements by engaging in the assessment of student achievement and satisfaction. Additionally, schools have used this assessment for improving processes (Armstrong, 1983). In a study of six NEASC schools, Robinson-Weening (1995) indicates that accreditation led to organizational improvements,
especially in the areas of mission, governance and administrative structure, evaluation and planning, general education, faculty, and student services. Hulon (2000), in a longitudinal cases study involving 20 years of accreditation-related documentation, discovers similar organizational improvements including the development of policies, procedures, planning, personnel, and budget. External forces may further the adoption of accountability practices. McClure (1996) reports that South Carolina mandates led to the development of support structures that formalize the implementation of effectiveness processes.

The self-study appears to be a particularly influential component of the accreditation process for schools. At a single institution, Harris (1983) indicates that faculty and staff concur that the self-study produced positive changes in the environment. Greiner (1997) performs a meta-analysis of four case studies and also finds that accreditation drove improvements in the self-study processes.

Caution may be merited when analyzing the degree of impact accreditation has on institutional practices. For example, SACS is recognized as a leader in promoting institutional effectiveness, having rolled out associated requirements in the early 1980s (Kern, 1990; Todd & Baker, 1998). However, Thomas (1997) finds that participants report only moderate levels of institutional effectiveness adoption in a study of 73 SACS colleges more than a decade later. Waite (2004) reports that some participants view the current focus on student-learning outcomes as merely a “trend” that is barely feasibility and unlikely sustainable.

Participating in accreditation appears to not only lead to the adoption of new
accountability practices, also to influence the perception of the participants. As discussed previously, Bishop (2004) finds that participants at three schools using the AQIP model valued accreditation more and they perceived a significant change in the culture towards quality improvement. Perceptual changes can cut across sub-groups. Harris (1983) reports that both faculty and staff perceive the educational climate as improving. In a study of 198 SACS college presidents, all report that accreditation resulted in positive change (Murray, 2004). These changes occurred in the areas of academic programs, student-learning outcomes, and institutional effectiveness (Murray, 2004). Even those who may be unhappy with accreditation guidelines have been shown to support accreditation as a valid way to assure quality (Sykes, 2003). Participants critical of the prescriptive nature of the accreditation standards responded that the self-study was useful and that accreditation made a difference (Sykes, 2003). Nutter (2000), in a study of 255 faculty members, finds a positive correlation between the implementation of NCA guidelines and faculty satisfaction with programs.

**Summary of Existing Research.**

Existing research into accreditation can be categorized into five primary themes. The first theme is policy. Research has demonstrated that the purpose of accreditation is changing from a way to establish legitimacy to one that provides accountability. Despite this change in purpose, the process of accreditation is relatively unchanged, consisting of published standards, a self-study, a site visit by a team of peers, and action by an accrediting commission on a cyclical basis. Accreditation standards have changed to reflect the accountability trend and now focus on learning outcomes and program
assessment. Overall, accreditation remains a relatively private endeavor, meaning colleges maintain discretion in how they respond to the standards. Despite this, some states have instituted mandates related to accreditation. These mandates have produced both desirable outcomes and conflicts.

The second theme is the local context. The timing of accreditation in the college’s life cycle and recency of experience with accreditation seem to impact both degree of adoption and perceptions. Participants from a broad range of colleges and stakeholders agree that a lack of resources is the greatest impediment to effective accreditation processes. Studies into other contextual issues, such as college size, location, and accrediting commission have produced mixed results, indicating that a correlation between these factors and accreditation processes has not been established.

The third theme is perceptions—how participants view accreditation. There are some global perceptions, most importantly, that accreditation is valuable. Participants also generally agree that the degree implementation lags behind level of importance. The most prominent predictor of perception is sub-group, or participant role. This perceptual divide is strongest between administrators and faculty, who have contrasting degrees of support, motivation, knowledge, and adoption. Other sub-groups, such as policy makers and middle managers have differing views from both faculty and campus leaders. Perceptual conflicts arise within individuals themselves—some view an inherent conflict between accountability and academic quality; others support the purpose but dread the impact.

The fourth theme of research study is accreditation practices. Engagement is a
significant area of study and was found to affect the level of adoption and effectiveness. Committed leaders who employ a participatory style of leadership appear to be influential. Institutional research is identified as a key component to accreditation processes. Finally, it organizational effectiveness models, such as AQIP, appear to have an impact on accreditation preparedness and effectiveness.

The fifth theme in the existing research is in the areas of accreditation outcomes. For the most part, studies indicate that accreditation is producing intended outcomes—colleges are engaging in more processes of critical analysis and institutional improvement. The evidence of these outcomes lies in both practices and perceptions. Colleges are institutionalizing accreditation-related practices by adopting accreditor recommendations and developing permanent internal support structures for assessment activities. Participants, though not always supportive of accreditation standards and processes, report positive outcomes as a result of participating in these processes.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Existing studies either do not sufficiently link findings to accreditation results, provide recommendations that are not based on empirical evidence, or are contextually dependent. In addition, despite the size of the system and the high number of sanctions, there are few studies into accreditation in the California community colleges. The following section provides examples of studies that do not address these gaps and concludes with a description of how this research does.

**Findings Not Linked to Accreditation Results**

Studies by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) and Todd and Baker (1998) are examples of
robust studies that do not link findings or recommendations to accreditation results. Welsh and Metcalf compare administrative and faculty support for institutional effectiveness activities. Their data are drawn from separate surveys of administrators and faculty at 168 colleges accredited by SACS between 1998-2000. They find that administrators are highly supportive of institutional effectiveness activities and that perceived motivation, depth of implementation, and personal level of involvement impacted the degree of this support. In the faculty study, they find that faculty also express a high degree of support for institutional effectiveness activities and that perceived motivation, personal level of involvement, and definition of quality impacted the level of faculty support. In comparing the two studies, they find that administrators assign greater importance to institutional effectiveness, are more likely to view effectiveness processes as internally motivated and deeply integrated, report a greater degree of involvement, and were more likely to base the quality of processes on student-learning outcomes than faculty. Perceived motivation and personal level of involvement were significant predictors of level of support for both groups. However, the depth of the implementation influenced administrator support while perceptions of quality influenced faculty support.

The authors conclude that assumptions about the rift between faculty and administrators in supporting accreditation-related activities processes are incorrect. Both groups place importance on the processes and are influenced by two out of the three predictors identified by the authors. By working to accommodate administrator need for deeper implementation and faculty interest in quality, leaders can increase campus-wide
support for IE processes.

Todd and Baker (1998) also conducted a quantitative study on 25 schools accredited by the SACS. The study participants include the president, a dean, and three faculty members at each institution. Data collected included demographic data, job related data, perceptions of IE, and 40 indicators related to IE. These indicators had two scales of measurement: the degree of implementation and perception of importance.

The most prominent finding was that implementation scores were lower than importance scores, demonstrating that respondents believed IE processes should to be implemented more deeply. The degree of implementation and perceptions of importance were independent of all demographic and job position related data, except job tenure, which did mediate perception of importance. Newer faculty placed significantly more importance on IE processes. Institution size also had an impact on sense of importance. Participants from medium sized institutions (1,500-3,000 FTEs) perceived IE processes as more important than their colleagues at both smaller and larger institutions. Similar to Welsh and Metcalf (2003), the researchers find that administrators perceived IE initiatives as more important than faculty, though both reported the same degree of implementation.

Todd and Baker (1998) conclude that colleges should commit to more deeply implementing IE practices, that participants at larger and smaller institutions should place more importance on IE, that leaders should specifically involve faculty with more than six years of tenure in IE practices. Unfortunately, the authors make no mention of findings related to the actual practices being implemented- the first of their two research
questions.

While the studies conducted by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) and Todd and Baker (1998) are quite robust, there is no linking of findings or conclusions to accreditation results. Do administrator or faculty perceptions predict whether a college gets reaccredited? Are middle-sized schools more likely to get reaccredited since there is greater support for accreditation-related activities? Are levels of support for accreditation-related activities lower at colleges that were placed on warning lower than those that were reaccredited? While these findings are valuable, they would be more useful to college leaders if they also could demonstrate how they might produce accreditation results.

Sandmann et al (2009) conduct a comparative case study that is similar in design to this project. Their research includes observation, report analysis, and participant interviews at two institutions. They observe both internal and external engagement. At the first university there was a significant focus on faculty engagement. For example, the University formed an “Outreach Scholars Academy” for teaching faculty about engagement. The second University focused on linking internal and external engagement practices, evidenced by the formation of a Vice-Provost position that facilitated engagement between the faculty and the community. Sandmann et al (2009) conclude that an institutional commitment to engagement can benefit accreditation processes. They recommend that engagement be strategically prioritized, that communities of engagement champions be formed, and that leaders use the accreditation process to drive an engagement agenda. In turn, they argue that an engaged institution can integrate the
meaning behind accreditation into ongoing self-assessment processes and avoid the experience of accreditation being merely a compliance exercise.

Unfortunately, Sandmann et al (2009) demonstrate how two institutions are participating in engagement processes, but not whether it is an effective for getting reaccredited. Like the previous articles, the focus of the research is to be the relationship between the participants and the practice, but we don’t learn what the practices are. In addition, these are obviously two large universities with significant resources at their disposal. Can this level of engagement be expected in a small community college?

The remaining literature does not address this gap either. There appears to be a fairly strong understanding of the current policy trends, contextual factors, participant perceptions, practices, and organizational outcomes in relation to accreditation processes. However, there appears to be almost no understanding of how these various issues influence whether a college will succeed at accreditation.

**Recommendations Not Based on Evidence.**

Articles by Wood (2006) and Kern (1990) are examples of works that provide recommendations for succeeding at accreditation without presenting any empirical evidence to support claims. Wood (2006) provides examples of accreditation-related practices at an institution that succeeded. She cites a lack of process-oriented analysis in accreditation literature and contends that the documentation provided by the accrediting agencies amount to little more than “cookbooks” for producing accreditation materials. Based on her own professional experiences and data from observations and informal interviews, she recommends breaking accreditation processes into three chronological
stages with particular tasks under each. These tasks include “organize documents into a room” and “review institution’s mission and conceptual framework.”

Unfortunately, while Wood’s recommendations may appear sensible, she does not present evidence to support them. Her research methods are not necessarily valid because she relies only on her own experience and conversations with practitioners. As a result, her recommendations read as a checklist that is ironically more formulaic and restrictive than the original accreditation materials she’d sought to elaborate on. There is little evidence that these steps are what lead to accreditation success and that if other colleges follow them, they will succeed.

Kern (1990) reports on the case of a college that was successfully reaccredited. He warns that mimicking models in other colleges will not succeed if core environmental factors are not first addressed, including a strong commitment from administration, shared decision-making involving a diverse set of campus representatives, and the involvement of the local community. He identifies specific practices that colleges should engage in to address these factors, including: 1) maintaining an ongoing program of institutional research 2) forming a Council of Institutional Effectiveness, and 3) forming a Strategic Planning Task Force.

Unfortunately, Kern’s article, like Wood’s, is lacking in data-based research. He explains the purpose of disseminating institutional research data, but it is not clear if this is the institution’s purpose or his own personal assertion. Did he actually observe something that supports this claim? He begins the article by presenting three critical environmental factors for institutional effectiveness, but it is not clear how these were
arrived at.

**Context-Dependent Studies.**

Studies by Harbour et al (2010), Skolits and Graybeal (2007), Young (2006), and Gutierrez (2006) are examples of works that produce evidence-based findings, but are contextually dependent because they are single institutional designs. Harbour et al (2010) note that we have yet to understand how accountability measures are interpreted and implemented at the local level. In order to develop a better understanding, they conducted a qualitative, interpretive case study of a community college in rural Wyoming. They began by collecting documentation via two “gatekeepers” within the institution and used chain sampling to identify 15 participants who agreed to be interviewed and recorded. These participants included trustees, most of the College’s senior administration, faculty members, and staff members.

Harbour et al (2010) find that participants conceptualized accountability measures from multiple viewpoints, including local, state, market, and/or academic perspectives. Participants were familiar with both formal and informal expectations in these areas and demonstrated a nuanced understanding of local accountability practices. The first significant finding is that participants perceive accountability processes as interactive in nature- meaning that there was ongoing dialogue, internally and with external stakeholders. The second significant finding is that participants recognize that their professional position and relation to the accountability processes mediate their perception of accountability practices.

Skolits and Graybeal (2007) conduct a similar case study of an institution in
Tennessee. They posed three research questions: 1) How are IE processes defined and implemented at the local level? 2) How do participants perceive the college’s IE functions? 3) What are the barriers to IE initiatives? They use a mixed methods approach, conducting a survey of 168 faculty and staff participants as well as targeted interviews. They discover that there is significant local discretion in determining how to interpret and respond to external accountability demands. They also find that faculty and administrators differ significantly in their support, level of participation, and perceptions of IE processes. While it was reported the resources and data for IE processes were widely available, all participants agreed that lack of time was the most significant impediment to IE processes. Academic leaders also indicated difficulty in defining student-learning outcomes as another significant barrier.

Both Harbour et al and Skolits and Graybeal (2007) conclude that understanding local context is critical to understanding the entire accountability picture. However, we do not know if the institution actually succeeded at accreditation or if the perceptions played a role in this success. While is it important to understand the local interpretation of policy, if effective practices are to be transferred from a successful institution to one that struggles, these practices must actually be identified. Then context must be controlled for in a way that these practices can be relevant in different settings. If the authors were to compare two or more institutions, they would be better able to understand the unique local interpretations that lead to success with accountability measures.

Studies by Young (2006) and Gutierrez (2006), are the only two studies of the more than 80 reviewed that actually link practices to outcomes. However, both are single
institution cases studies of highly unique institutions, making them highly contextual. Young (2006) examines a California community college that was stripped of its accreditation and finds that “lack of adherence to policy and practice which included corruption, unethical behavior, insufficient fiscal oversight, and micromanagement on the part of the Board of Trustees” were the primary causes of the college losing its accreditation.

Gutierrez (2006) studies Guam University, which recently recovered from probation to become reaffirmed. Gutierrez (2006) conducts a qualitative single-institution case study and finds three internal factors that contributed to reaffirmation: 1) a change in leadership, 2) creation of a faculty senate, and 3) involvement of the institution’s community. Gutierrez also identified three external factors that contributed: 1) less political interference, 2) external financial support, and 3) guidance and assistance from external parties, including WASC.

That these two studies were the only two found that link institutional practices to accreditation results is indicative of associated gap in the research. Unfortunately, the single site design of the studies restricts their application. This research will expand on these studies by identifying practices that have broader application than just a single institution.

**California Studies.**

A total of four studies on accreditation in the California community college system were found and reviewed. The first was Young’s (2006) study discussed above. The second was a project that consisted of developing a model based on the Baldrige,
Competing Values, and Goal Models of institutional effectiveness for evaluating accreditation preparedness (Roland, 2011). Roland’s (2011) complete study was not publicly available at the time of this project, however, according to the abstract, there was a correlation between these models and preparedness for accreditation. Roland (2011) concludes that the model was helpful and that the Baldrige Model was the most valuable. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether applying this model influenced accreditation results.

The third was an examination of how three California community colleges are implementing student-learning outcomes (Waite, 2004). Waite (2004) finds that challenges exist, including faculty resistance to the potential for linking outcomes to evaluations, administrator concern over documentation and external interference, and resource issues. Waite (2004) also identifies themes of communication, leadership, trust, education, and a shift to an assessment paradigm as critical.

The fourth was an exploration of how a single community college responded to student-learning outcomes requirements (Bontenbal, 2006). Bontenbal (2006) finds that learning occurs at various levels, from individual to institutional. However, institutional learning appears to lag behind individual learning.

Unfortunately, none of these studies link accreditation practices to results.

**Addressing the Gaps.**

Four characteristics of existing research lead to gaps in our knowledge. Studies either do not examine how practices impact accreditation results, are not based on empirical research, are overly contextually dependent, or do not examine California community colleges. Despite the fact that several existing studies fulfill one or two of
these gaps, none sufficiently address them as a whole in the way that this project did.

This study examined the link between practices and accreditation by selecting sites based on their accreditation results, it relied on defensible qualitative research methods, it examined four institutions in order to increase generalizability, and it focused on the California community colleges.

**Activity Theory**

The primary hypothesis of this study was that cultural practices at the college-level influence accreditation success. What these practices were was not as clear. Activity theory was chosen as the theoretical framework because it is designed to analyze the impact of cultural practices in activity settings. Activity theory is based on the cultural-historical psychological works of Vygotsky, Leont-ev, and Luria (Kuutti, 1996). Cultural-historical psychology delves into contextual behavior, such as psychological processes (Price-Williams, 1975) or actions, and the relationship between individuals and their context. Cultural-historical activity theorists argue that incorporating culture, context, and social interaction into the analysis can address the need for a micro-macro analysis of institutional settings (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). As a consequence, this theoretical tool is well suited for an analysis of accreditation practices since they are implemented in institutional settings through the actions and interactions of individuals.

Three principles of cultural-historical psychology are: 1) actions are mediated through artifacts, 2) culture is represented by use of these artifacts in a contextual setting over time, and 3) cultural-historical analysis must be grounded in everyday activities (Cole, 1998). Artifacts, or tools used in practices, can be material or ideological and have
been developed to facilitate goal-directed human action (Cole, 1998). Wartofsky (1979) identifies three levels of artifacts. Primary artifacts are those use directly in human production, such as a pen or piece of paper. Secondary artifacts are models or representations of primary artifacts and are used to transmit knowledge. Examples might include instructions, procedures, or a diagram. Tertiary artifacts are almost entirely ideological and may no longer appear to have a direct practical application. They include values, art, and complex processes.

**Activity Theory Generations.**

Activity theory has evolved over three generations. The first generation focused on the role of cultural artifacts in mediating action. It is best represented by Vygotsky’s triangle diagram indicated in Figure 6 (Uden, Valderas, & Pastor, 2008).

![Figure 6. First-generation activity theory triangle](image)

In this model, the subject acts on the object and produces an outcome. However, the direct relationship between subject and object is mediated by the use of cultural artifacts when the subject begins to take action (Engeström, 2001; Uden et al, 2008). Activity theory focuses on the dialectical interactions of the components as indicated by the arrows pointing between the components (Halverson, 2002). Thus, while the identification of the subject, object, and mediating artifact is necessary for forming the
model, the interactions between these components is equally, if not more, important. Engeström (1999) and others (Collins, Shukla, & Redmiles, (2002); Halverson, 2002) pay particular attention to tensions between the elements, asserting that they provide rich insight into how the activity works.

A limitation of first generation activity theory was that it was restricted to the analysis of isolated individual behavior without taking into account the social context. Based on the works of Leont-ev (1978), a second generation of activity theory was developed to examine activity systems in broader, social settings (Engeström, 1999; Uden et al, 2008). The original triangle diagram was expanded to include three new components: community, rules, and division of labor (See Figure 7).

![Second-generation activity theory diagram](image)

**Figure 7. Second-generation activity theory**

The community in which the activity is taking place is represented at the base of the triangle. Rules mediate the relationship between the community and the subject and the division of labor mediates the relationship between the community and the object. Rules consist of the cultural norms, behaviors, expectations, and conventions. Division of labor refers to how the work of the activity is distributed among participants and includes roles and responsibilities. The artifacts, rules, and division of labor are not isolated. They each
influence the other components and produce a system of tensions and interactions.

The inclusion of three additional components results in a threefold increase in the number of relationships. Relationships between groups of elements also emerge. For example, a subject-object-artifact activity triangle that functions well in isolation may not fit with the rules and division of labor in the broader community.

Second generation activity theory focuses on the activity system. Because of the larger number of components, tensions and contradictions begin to play a larger role. Understanding these tensions is critical because they serve as the motivating force behind the disturbances, change, and innovations that propel the system forward (Wenger, 1998). Because the entirety of the system influences the resulting outcome, analysis requires treating the elements, their relationships, and the associated tensions as a unified whole (Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire, & Keating, 2002).

In the last 20 years, a third generation of activity theory has emerged that accounts for the interactions of multiple activity systems. The development of third generation activity theory reflects a shift in the core unit of analysis. The first generation focused on the concept of mediated action. The second generation examined this action within an activity system. The third generation focuses on interactions between multiple activity systems.

There have been several third generation activity theory models, each representing different ways of associating activities. Engeström (2008), for example, gives prominence to the object in his model shown in Figure 8. Multiple activities are related through common, or parts of common, objects. Tension and/or synergy may
occur in overlapping objects, and in some cases lead to “runaway” objects that are beyond the control of any single activity system (Engeström, 2008).

Figure 8. Engeström’s (2008) model of third-generation activity theory

Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999) and Barab et al (2002) use a nested activity model in which the outcomes from one activity become elements of ensuing activities. Nesting may occur in parallel, serially, or in some combination of the two. In parallel nesting, multiple initial activities produce components in a single ensuing activity (See Figure 9). In serial nesting, one activity produces a component used in a second activity, which, in turn, might produce a component used in another.

Figure 9. Parallel nested activity systems

Third generation activity theory accounts for the interaction of multiple activity
systems. Although there are different models of third generation activity theory, each activity system is “reasonably well bounded” (Engeström, 2008) and functions as the unit of analysis. Activity systems can be linked in a number of ways, such as sharing elements or producing elements in one another. Engeström (2008) identifies the happenings between activity systems as “processes.” These processes are multidirectional and begin to blur the boundaries between activity structure and processes. The examination of processes will be a key component to this study.

**Application to this Study.**

Activity theory is being selected for this study because it is uniquely designed to examine the influence of culture on activities. This study will rely on social-historical definition of culture as a system of material, procedural, and conceptual artifacts being used by a social group over the course of its history (Cole, 1998).

Activity theory is also being used because it is a compressive theory that has evolved over a period of 80 years. Originally developed in the 1930s, the theory has successfully withstood the significant changes in the social sciences during the 20th century. Scientific applications of activity theory have grown steadily since 1980 and exploded after 2000 (Roth and Lee, 2007). Its use in the research of work-based, social settings is well established and relevant (Engeström, 2008).

Finally, activity theory is flexible in examining micro and macro levels of activity. This study will rely primarily on second and third generations of activity theory. Second generation activity theory will be used to understand the contextualized actions of participants and the relationships between components of the activity system. Third
generation activity theory will be used to understand the processes that exist between multiple activity systems.

**Literature Review Summary**

This literature review consists of six sections: 1) the California Community College System, 2) ACCJC, 3) accreditation, 4) accreditation-related research, 5) gaps in the existing research, and 6) activity theory. Trends in accreditation are apparent in the current ACCJC standards. These standards focus on the ability of institutions to demonstrate ongoing assessment of outcomes and make improvements based on this assessment.

Accreditation-related research falls primarily into five thematic areas: 1) issues of accreditation policy, 2) the impact of environmental factors, 3) perceptions, 4) institutional practices, and 5) the impact on institutions. Four primary gaps emerged from a review of existing accreditation research. Studies do not link practices to accreditation results, do not support recommendations with evidence, or provide findings that are overly contextualized. In addition, there is little research into the California community colleges. Two studies link practices to outcomes, but are of highly unique situations, including the only public institution to lose accreditation (Young, 2006) and an isolated university in the Pacific (Gutierrez, 2006). Four studies examine California community colleges, but none link practices to accreditation results (Bontenbal, 2006; Roland, 2001; Waite, 2004; Young, 2006). This study addressed these gaps by examining the link between practices and accreditation results, relied on defensible qualitative research methods, examining four institutions, and focusing on California
community colleges.

Activity theory was selected as the theoretical frame for this project because has been successfully used to examine cultural practices (Cole, 1998; Engeström, 2008; Uden et al, 2008).
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative comparative case study of four California community colleges. Two colleges that have repeatedly struggled and two that have regularly succeeded with accreditation were selected. The two colleges that have succeeded were compared to each other in order to identify commonalities. The colleges that have struggled were also compared to identify commonalities. The commonalities between the successful and struggling colleges were contrasted and differences were identified.

Figure 10 demonstrates the overarching framework of the methodology.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 10. Overall methodological approach (A colleges now X, B colleges now Y)*

**Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative research approaches were used for two primary reasons. First, the focus of this research was the nature of human behavior not the quantity or degree of those behaviors- an approach more closely associated with qualitative methods (Merriam,
Second, since there is little existing research into how institutional practices influence accreditation results, there were no broad, empirically supported laws of behavior from which to perform quantitative deductive analysis. Instead, this study relied on inductive and emergent analyses by drawing general conclusions from local settings, again, approaches associated with qualitative methods (Merriam, 2009).

This research was built on multiple qualitative paradigms, including: phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory and narrative analysis. Schram (2003) defines phenomenology as the study of the conscious human experience within a bounded reality. As reviewed in Chapter 2, existing research into accreditation at the college level is dominated by phenomenological modes of inquiry, primarily in the area of perception (see Welsh and Metcalf (2003) for example). While this study recognized the importance of phenomenology, the human experience was only deemed important if it appeared to influence accreditation results. For example, phenomenological experiences common to both X and Y colleges were discarded unless they uniquely contrasted with general expectations. The findings from this study were not the quality or depth of the perceptions themselves, rather the impact these perceptions may or may not have on accreditation. Phenomenological modes of inquiry were a component of this study, but as a subset of broader examination.

The broadest, most dominant form of inquiry was ethnographic in nature. The core hypothesis of this study was that the underlying culture of the organization influences accreditation success. This culture exists inside and outside of accreditation processes. Based on activity theory, the working definition of culture for this study was
object-oriented, tool-mediated action in a context of community rules and division of labor (Cole, 1998; Engeström, 2008). Merriam (2009) indicates that in order to understand the culture of a group, time must be spent with the group. Because of the limited time frame of the project, interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection. Though it was not as immersive as a traditional ethnographic study might be, the interviews provided some degree of immersion and time with participants in the group.

This study also relied on the tenets of grounded theory- a research methodology in which theories are induced from local, substantiated findings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory was necessary because the limited research into accreditation activities has resulted in a dearth of applicable theories. Though activity theory was used, it did not serve as a grand theory to be tested or verified in a local context. Instead it served as a reference point for theoretical sampling, a grounded theory procedure in which data collection, coding, and analysis are conducted simultaneously in order to develop emergent theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison, a grounded theory procedure in which data patterns are compared and coded (Merriam, 2009), was also used to develop substantive theories. Constant comparison analyses were strengthened by the comparative case study design of the study. For example, data from multiple institutions were compared to find similar themes or codes.

The final qualitative mode of inquiry that was used was narrative analysis, or the stories people tell (Merriam, 2009). Narratives may be considered one of the most powerful cultural artifacts because language simultaneously contains material,
conceptual, and ideological components (Cole, 1996). Due to the limited duration of this study, analysis of narratives was necessary for understanding the social historical culture of the organization. Merriam (2009) defines narratives as first person experiential stories.

Case Study Design

The four qualitative modes of inquiry applicable to this study (phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative analysis) served to inform a case study of four institutions. A case study can be defined as an in depth analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). The case study methodology was used for this study precisely because of its binding nature. Limiting the scope of the system allowed for richer and more descriptive analyses, particularistic examination, and heuristic embellishment of the researcher’s understanding (Merriam, 2009). These features were particularly desirable for this study because we have so little understanding of the relationship between institutional practices and accreditation results.

A multi-site comparative case study design was selected for several reasons. To begin with, experts in the field are strongly supportive of the design. Herriott and Firestone (1983) indicate that the comparative nature of multiple cases studies makes the evidence more compelling and the study more robust. Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that multi-site studies “strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings.” Merriam (2009) also identifies them as a common strategy for validating and generalizing findings. Yin (2003) summarizes this overall support by simply recommending that when there is a choice, select a multi-site case study.

A multi-site approach also appeared to be the best way to strike a balance
between explorative and descriptive examination while reasonably controlling for setting. Existing single-institution case studies, such as Gutierrez’s (2006) study of Guam University or Young’s (2006) study of a college that lost accreditation, provide rich descriptive findings, but are so bound to the respective institutions that it would require significant effort to apply findings to other settings. Yin (2003) asserts that single site studies are justified in these cases because of the unique nature of them— one being in an extremely isolated geographic region and other being the only public institution in United States history to lose accreditation (Young, 2006). This study, however, examined “somewhat” unique cases, colleges that regularly struggle with accreditation, and the goal was to uncover findings that can apply in multiple contexts. With this in mind, the fact that multi-site case study findings have built in validation and generalizing qualities was particularly desirable.

**Data Collection**

Data collection refers to the method and tools implemented for retrieving and codifying data. Data collection topics include site selection, participant selection, the data collection framework, and collection procedures.

**Site Selection.**

Site selection was performed through purposeful sampling. Patton (1990) describes 16 forms of purposeful sampling, four of which were used in site selection: criteria, extreme, convenience, and stratified.

**Criteria Sampling.** Criteria sampling was performed by selecting sites that met specific criteria (Patton, 1990). The first criterion was that the site be a 2-year
community college in California. This resulted in an initial set of 112 potential sites. The next criteria for selection were literal and theoretical replication. The intent of literal replication is to produce similar results between sites (Yin, 2003). The intent of theoretical replication is to produce contrasting results, but for theoretically predictable reasons (Yin, 2003). This study made use of both. Colleges that have a track record of accreditation success were selected for the purpose of literal replication and results common to both were sought. The same was done for colleges that have repeatedly struggled. Substantive theories of how practices at these colleges influence accreditation results were produced. The results from the colleges that have struggled were then compared to those from the colleges that have succeeded for the purpose of theoretical replication. Similar and contrasting sites were determined by analyzing ACCJC actions on the 112 California community colleges from June 2003 - June 2011 (ACCJC, 2012). This analysis revealed that since 2003, 51 colleges were not placed on any form of sanction while 62 were placed on sanction at some point.

**Extreme Sampling.** Extreme sampling refers to the selection of sites that embody highly unique circumstances (Patton, 1990). This study did not seek the most extreme cases, but did examine colleges with distinctly different accreditation results. First, the most successful sites were determined by identifying those that have participated in at least two accreditation processes without have any sanctions imposed over the last nine years. Twenty-one colleges met this criterion. Second, colleges that have struggled the most were identified as those that have had five or more actions taken on them in the last nine years. Twelve colleges met this criterion. The result of this “semi-extreme”
sampling was a set of 33 potential sites.

**Convenience Sampling.** Patton (1990) identifies convenience sampling as the weakest rational for purposeful sampling. For this study, geographical proximity to the researcher’s home was used to determine convenience. Convenience sampling was considered valid for this study because it did not significantly limit the quantity and qualities of the possible sites. Of the 33 potential sites, 17 colleges (nine successful and eight struggling) were found to be within three and one-half hours of the researchers home. These sites had a similar degree of variation among them when compared to the broader set. They spanned a wide range of sizes (including one of the smallest and largest colleges in the state), a wide-range of settings (rural, suburban, and urban), and colleges in single-college and multi-college districts. The result of convenience sampling was a set of 17 target sites.

**Stratified Sampling.** The last purposeful sampling technique used in selecting sites was stratified sampling. The method may be described as selecting samples from an existing set in a way that increases diversity according to a key variable (Patton, 2001). Three criteria were considered for a stratification variable: 1) whether the college was a single-college district, 2) college service area population, and 3) college size. A correlation analysis was performed between number of sanctions and these three criteria for the 17 target sites. College size was revealed to have a higher correlation than service area population or whether the college was in a district: .53 to .16 and .15 respectively. Based on this, college size was established as the key variable for stratification sampling.
The remaining 17 colleges ranged in size from approximately 1,700 to 34,000 students. In this set, the larger schools tended to demonstrate better results than the smaller schools. The five colleges over 14,000 students had a total of six sanctions, or an average of 1.2 sanctions per college. The eight colleges between 8,000-14,000 students had 35 sanctions, or an average of 4.4 sanctions each. The seven colleges under 8,000 had 43 sanctions, or 6.1 sanctions each. These three size ranges provided the basis for stratification. One college was selected from the set of largest schools and another from the set of smallest schools. Two colleges were selected from the middle-sized schools, one that has succeeded and one that has struggled.

**Access.** The final step in site selection was getting access to four community colleges that met the criteria established by purposeful sampling. Assuming that colleges with repeated sanctions would be more resistant to being studied, the researcher contacted the presidents at five colleges that had a large number of sanctions. The presidents at three responded affirmatively with one week’s time. An interim president declined the study and another president did not respond. The president of one of the colleges subsequently left his/her position and the interim president did not respond to correspondences from the researcher. The presidents at the two remaining colleges referred the researcher to the director of research who granted final approval in writing.

After contacting colleges that had been on sanction, presidents at colleges that had not been on sanction were contacted. It was incorrectly assumed that securing approval from these colleges would be simpler. However, the first three colleges declined to be part of the study. The presidents at two of the colleges did not respond to
correspondences. After a formal review process of the research project, the third college declined to participate because it was believed the project would consume too many resources and there was not a direct benefit to the institution. The next two colleges contacted both agreed. Each had a formal review process that included a committee review of the project proposal. Approval was coordinated with and granted in writing by the director of research

**Site Selection Summary.** The set of four sites selected consisted of 1) one large successful school, 2) one medium-sized successful school, 3) one medium-sized struggling school, and 4) one small struggling school. The set met the base criteria of containing only California community colleges. It contained extreme samples, colleges that have had more than five sanctions and colleges that have never been placed on sanction the last decade. It contained variance across the size continuum. It incorporated literal replication by including multiple colleges that have succeeded, multiple colleges that have struggled, and multiple colleges of the same size. It made use of theoretical replication by containing colleges of similar size that have had different accreditation results. Lastly, the set contained sites that are convenient for the study and were willing to participate. For the remainder of this project, the two colleges that have been placed on sanction multiple times over the last ten years are referred to as X1 and X2. The two colleges that have not been placed on sanction are referred to as Y1 and Y2. X2 and Y2 have been assigned a common number because they are similar in size. Figure 11 demonstrates the results of the site selection process.
Participant Selection.

Participant selection was determined via purposeful sampling as well. Criteria sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to establish that participants had to be adults, employed at the selected California community colleges, and willing to participate. Chain sampling (Patton, 1990) began in conversation with the Presidents and then continued with the institutional researcher. Research has indicated that perceptions of accreditation vary according to three categories: role (Barber, 1990; Salvador, 1996), length of service (Todd & Baker, 1998), and involvement with accreditation (Harbour et al, 2010). In order to minimize the potential impact of bias based on these categories, a list of six potential participants were solicited from the director of research at each college: two that contrasted according to role, two that contrasted according to tenure, and two that contrasted according to level of involvement in accreditation. Stratified sampling (Patton, 1990) was applied to develop a set of potential participants that evenly spanned
the three categories for each of the schools and across the set as a whole.

Sixteen individuals were contacted directly via phone and email, four from each college. Fourteen responded and agreed to be interviewed. Two did not respond. Two replacement participants were originally sought. However, as data was collected, it became apparent that fourteen interviews would provide significant findings. Therefore, the number of interviews was capped at fourteen. Table 2 indicates the final distribution of the participants.

Table 2

Participant summary (A colleges now X colleges, B colleges now Y)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Admin/Staff</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>1-3yr</th>
<th>4-15yr</th>
<th>15+yrs</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Med</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four research administrators, three current or former faculty senate presidents, two college presidents, two faculty accreditation chairs, one academic administrator, one
full-time faculty member, and one classified staff were interviewed. The tenure of these interviewees ranged from five months to 30 years. Their involvement in accreditation ranges from none to 20 years of continuous involvement. Though variance according to demographics was not specifically sought, the participants were relatively diverse. Nine were female and five were male. Nine were Caucasian, four were African American, and one was Asian. The participants’ ages appeared to span approximately three decades.

For the remainder of this project, a unique identifier from 1-14 will identify the fourteen participants. To simplify the presentation, they are referred to in conjunction with their college identifier. For example, referring to preceding Table 2, interviewee Y2.11 refers to the eleventh interviewee, an administrator at college Y2, one of the two colleges that have been highly successful with accreditation.

**Data Collection.**

The intent behind the design of the study was to find a balance between depth of understanding and breadth of application. For example, a longitudinal study of a single institution that included observations, a large number interviews, document analysis, and an immersion into the culture would have provided a deeper understanding of the culture at a single institution, but it would be more contextually dependent. A quantitative study comparing practices across a broad number of colleges would have provided more broadly applicable findings, but with less depth of understanding. Selecting four institutions allowed for some degree of triangulation and confirmation of local findings so that they might be applied more broadly. Limiting the number of sites to four allowed for a deeper understanding of each.
Interviews were used as the sources of data because it was believed they provided the best avenue for understanding underlying cultural practices within the limited scope of the project. Yin (2003) and Merriam (2009) identify interviews as one of the most important sources of data in case study research. Interviews were unstructured. However, a base set of questions was developed in order to comply with the CSU Sacramento Institutional Review Board requirements. Yin (2003) cautions that one of the major drawbacks of a multi-site case study is the scope of work. With this in mind, activity theory was used to narrow and focus the questions. The following base questions were developed using the concepts of tools, rules, division of labor, and community:

1. How would you describe your College’s overall accreditation processes?
2. Who is involved in accreditation at your college?
3. How would you describe the specific instruments or tools used by the college in accreditation processes?
4. What challenges has the College faced with regards to accreditation?
5. What successes has the College had in regards to accreditation?
6. How does accreditation impact the campus?
7. How would you describe the culture of your college?

A set of follow up probes was also developed:

- How did X come about?
- How does X work?
- Can you clarify X?
- How has X changed over time?
• What are the strengths/weaknesses of X?
• Who uses X?
• What is the impact of X?
• What was your role in X?

In addition to meeting the requirements of the Institutional Review Board, developing these questions prior to the interviews provided two other benefits. First, it was a useful exercise for the researcher by framing an approach to the interview, restricting the scope, and providing “fallback” questions if the interview stalled. Second, these questions were forwarded to interviewees prior to meeting. This seemed to provide a higher level of comfort for participants by giving them an understanding of the topic of conversation. It also allowed them to begin formulating responses. Several of the interviewees had a copy of the questions with notes on them at the beginning of the interview.

Despite the development of these questions, the interviews were loosely structured. Generally, interviews started with the first question, but the bulk of follow up questions emerged from the conversation. Fitting with Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) findings on the nature of case study interviews, there was a consistent line of inquiry (shaped by activity theory), but the questions were fluid and emerged from the dialogue. Interviews were conducted in January and February 2012. They were one-on-one and at a time and place of participants’ choosing. The interviews were audio recorded on an iPod and transferred to the researcher’s personal computer within 24 hours. After
backing up the files, they were deleted from the iPod. Audio files were transcribed using an audio program called *Logic*. Transcribed files were then uploaded into a SQL database. The data was coded and analyzed using the SQL database. A more detailed explanation of the coding and analysis process is provided in Chapter 4.

**Protecting Participants.**

The participants’ rights to privacy and psychological safety were protected in several ways. Participation was entirely voluntary and could be terminated at any time. Consent forms and copies of the base questions were emailed to participants prior and hard copies were brought to the interviews. Signed consent was obtained prior to recording conversations. Questions were framed so that responders do not have to reveal identifying information and participants were encouraged not to provide answers that they were uncomfortable with. No identifiers were written either in field notes or transcriptions. Identifiers that did get recorded were not transcribed. Pseudonyms were used for the site and all participants in both public and private documents.

All data collected was done so electronically. Recordings were made on an iPod and transferred to a computer within 1-2 days. After transfer, the recordings were erased from the iPod. Digital materials were stored under password-protected accounts on the researcher’s computer.

There was minimal risk for discomfort or harm to the researcher or participants. There were no physical procedures. Participants were able to choose a setting that was physically and psychologically comfortable for them. Interviews and observations were conducted in normal every-day settings and at conversational levels. This study was
considered to be “minimal risk” by the California State University, Sacramento Institutional Review Board because the likelihood of harm discomfort was no greater than might typically be encountered in an everyday work setting.

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher was a director of technology at a four-year state university. The researcher had worked in higher education technology since 1990 in a variety of capacities at seven institutions of higher education. The researcher became interested in accreditation while working at a small community college in California that was responding to accreditation. The researcher worked with the Vice President of Business Services and President of the Faculty Senate to develop a data system for linking institutional planning to resource allocation in response to the recommendations by the accreditation visiting team. However, the vice-president left his post during the project and internal resistance to the system prevented it from being implemented. The college has since been placed on warning. It is not known whether implementing the data system for planning and resource allocation would have prevented sanction for the college.

While at the college, the researcher regularly worked with a sister college that had a reputation as a top performer. The sister college was superior according to numerous metrics, including student achievement, productivity, planning, and accreditation. The researcher, other members of the district, and community members routinely predicted that the sister college would pass accreditation while the researcher’s college would be placed on warning. These predictions were proved correct in recent actions by ACCJC. Based on these experiences, the researcher hypothesized that there was an underlying
culture of success at the sister college that was missing from the researcher’s college. This hypothesis became the basis for this project.

Based on the experiences of the researcher, biases may have been present. The researcher is experienced with information technology and may have emphasized problems and solutions related to technology. The underlying hypothesis, that institutional culture can influence accreditation results, was based on the researcher’s own experience at multiple institutions and is susceptible to the personal experiences of the researcher. The researcher also believed going into this study that accreditation processes were valid, even if imperfect. There is the possibility that accreditation processes are so flawed that the researcher’s findings are meaningless.

To overcome these real and potential biases, this project was grounded firmly in the standardized research methods outlined in this Chapter 3. It was a qualitative comparative case study. Site and participant selection and data collection and analysis methods were rooted in qualitative research methodologies and substantiated by existing literature. This literature was reviewed in Chapter 2.

Finally, to avoid any potential conflict of interest or ethical violations, data collection sites were selected where the researcher had no previous or current interest or experience. There was no compensation provided to the sites, participants, or the researcher. Only a copy of the dissertation and a summary of its finding was provided to the participants. It is hoped that these finding are useful, but there is no guarantee that there was any benefit to participants or the researcher.
Chapter 4
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This chapter describes data management, data analysis, the findings, supplemental observations, and how the accuracy of the data was ensured.

Data Management

Interviews were one on one and took place in interviewees’ offices. They lasted approximately one hour, generally with some introductory and closing discussion before and after. Most college visits included multiple interviews back-to-back. All interviews were recorded on an iPhone using an application titled iTalk. Within 24 hours, the recorded materials were transferred to the researcher’s personal laptop computer and stored under a password secured account. After backing up the files to a secure hard drive, the original recordings were erased from the iPod.

Recorded files were grouped into folders by college. The files were then imported into and audio program titled Logic. One Logic project was associated with each college and contained four audio files. The audio files were “sliced” every eight seconds, the playback speed of the project was reduced to between 30-50% of the original speed, and the audio clips were extended to fill the resulting silence between each clip. The result was a playback of the audio file at normal speed, but with significant portions of each clip being repeated.

The repeating playback of the clips facilitated the transcription process. The audio recording for each interviewee was transcribed into a simple text file. Carriage
returns were added each time a question was asked and between significant topical changes in the interview. The result was 14 separate text files.

These text files were uploaded into a “text” table in a MySQL database using an application called *PHPMyAdmin*. Each carriage return produced a separate record, or excerpt, in the database, resulting in approximately 350 records. Each record contained an “id,” “college,” “person,” and “text” field. The “id” field was a unique identifier associated with each excerpt. The “college” field indicated the college associated with the excerpt. The pseudonyms X1, X2, Y1, or Y2 were used in place of the college name. The “person” field contained the person associated with the excerpt. The numbers 1-14 were used in place of the individual’s names. The “text” field contained the excerpt.

A “people” table was created that housed information about the interviewees. Again, no identifying information was used. Each record contained an “id,” “person,” “college,” “role,” “position,” “tenure,” and “involvement” field. The “id,” “person,” and “colleges” fields were the same as the “text” table. The “role” field indicated whether the individual was administrator, faculty, or classified. The “position” field indicated the person working title. The “involvement” field indicated whether the person had a high, medium, or low level of involvement.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was initiated by coding each of the excerpts. A table titled “coding” was created in the database. Coding was approached from two simultaneous frameworks, activity theory and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Activity theory codes such as tools, rule, object, division of labor, community, and object were assigned to
excerpts. However, a goal of this study was also to discover new phenomena without imposing preconceptions on the data. Thus, grounded codes, determined solely by the researcher, were also applied to each excerpt. Activity theory and grounded codes were identified and associated with an excerpt based on the researcher’s interpretation of the topic. Using both activity theory and grounded theory frameworks provided a degree of triangulation that reduced theory bias.

Table 3

Coding table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>text</th>
<th>code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SLOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>resistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table is a snapshot of the “coding” table. The “text” field contained a unique identifier associated with an excerpt from the “text” table. The “code” field contained individual codes. Because the “coding” and “text” tables were separate, multiple codes could be associated with each record in the text table. Referring again to the table, Excerpt 1 was associated with both planning and integration while Excerpt 4 was only associated with resistance. Each excerpt had an average of three codes associated with it, meaning the coding table had 900+ records. There were 210 distinct codes across these records.
Code Analysis.

A view titled “code_analysis” was generated which presented summary information about the codes. The view contained “count,” “code,” “college,” “person,” “role,” “involvement,” and “tenure” fields. A snapshot of the view is shown in the following table.

Table 4

Summary of codes (A colleges now X colleges, B colleges now Y)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>count</th>
<th>code</th>
<th>college</th>
<th>person</th>
<th>role</th>
<th>involvement</th>
<th>tenure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>DOL</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>1,10,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,1,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>motivation</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>change</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>enforcement</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,1,2,7,27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>leadership</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>integration</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>union</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>hero</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,2,3,4</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Med</td>
<td>7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>division</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>rules</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>2,3,5,6</td>
<td>Admin,Faculty</td>
<td>High,Low,Med</td>
<td>0,2,7,27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>external pressure</td>
<td>A1,A2,B1</td>
<td>10,3,4</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>7,27,30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “count” field indicated the number of times the particular code occurred in the coding table. The “code” field indicated the code. The “college” field was a concatenation of the colleges associated with text that had been labeled with the particular code. The “person,” “role,” “involvement,” and “tenure” fields followed the same paradigm as the college field. For example, in Table 4, the code “hero” occurred 18
times. It was applied to excerpts from five people in three different colleges. These
people were both administrators and faculty, had medium and high levels of involvement
and accreditation, and had tenure ranging from 7-30 years.

The result was a listing of the 210 codes from most to least frequent with several
indicators of how widespread the codes were across the interviews. The most frequent
code, “DOL” (for division of labor) occurred 41 times. Thirty-three codes occurred ten
or more times and accounted for 55% of the total occurrences. Ninety-four codes were
only used once.

**Theme Identification.**

Because codes were generated in grounded fashion, numerous codes were either
synonymous or could be considered a subordinate to another. Codes were thus
consolidated into themes by giving primacy to the number and breadth of occurrence
across the colleges and the individuals. Breadth was considered to prevent outliers. For
example, a single code could have been applied to multiple excerpts from one person,
even though it did not apply across multiple parties and institutions. In general, however,
codes that occurred more often also occurred more broadly. There did not appear to be
any glaring outliers.

The 33 codes that occurred ten or more times accounted for 55% of the total
occurrences and were selected as the focus of consolidation. All of these codes were
noted to have applied to multiple colleges and people. Each code that could be collapsed
into a more frequently occurring code was removed from the list. This analysis was
based solely on the researcher’s grounded interpretation.
Table 5

*Code consolidation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>count</th>
<th>code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>DOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>external pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above demonstrates how “enforcement” and “external pressure” were analyzed as being subordinate to the concept of “motivation.” They were thus removed from the list and consolidated into the broader theme of “motivation.” Likewise, “hero” was collapsed into the “leadership” theme and “planning” was collapsed into “integration.” The result was a list of six meta-themes that accounted for more than half of the 900+ code occurrences. They were division of labor, motivation, change, leadership, integration, and tools.

A view titled “coded_text” was created that grouped excerpts according to theme. Excerpts for each of the seven dominant codes were analyzed. Distinct similarities or differences between the struggling schools (X1 and X2) and the succeeding schools (Y1 and Y2) were sought. The three themes that that best demonstrated differences between the X and Y colleges were: 1) division of labor, 2) motivation, and 3) integration. These
codes were adopted as the three master themes that would frame further analysis of the project. Although issues of change, leadership, resources, and tools were discussed often, the distinction or similarities between colleges were not as discernable.

**Subtheme Identification.**

Excerpts from each of the master themes and the top five themes that had been rolled into them were individually analyzed. Similarities between colleges with common accreditation results were sought, as were differences between colleges with contrasting results. When specific quotes that highlighted these similarities or differences were identified, they were copied into a separate text file, one for each theme. There were approximately 400 quotes extracted from the database. These quotes were analyzed and grouped with similar or contrasting quotes via drag and drop. For a quote to have validity, it had to confirm or contrast with at least two other quotes from different participants. Clusters of related quotes formed distinct subsections of each master theme. For a subsection to be considered valid, valid quotes from at least three colleges had to be present. This ensured that at least two of the colleges represented in a subsection had contrasting accreditation results. In actuality, most subsections contained quotes from all four colleges. The outcome was that there were between three and five subsections per theme that were considered valid. These subsections contained direct quotes from interviewees that demonstrated similarities or differences between the X colleges and Y colleges. The presentation of these similarities and differences makes up the following section on findings. These findings are substantiated by more than 200 direct quotes or paraphrases.
Findings

Three master themes emerged from the data. The first was division of labor or role definition; the way that work is divided up in the community. The second was motivation, or the reasons for behaving in certain ways. The third was integration, or the state of having multiple parts combined into a whole. These themes were interactive, linked throughout the data, and played a significant role in how accreditation processes were implemented. For example, conflicts surrounding the division of labor served to demotivate individuals and groups. Integrating systems and their processes alleviated division of labor conflicts, but required motivation to be developed in the first place.

Following is a presentation of findings under each theme. The findings at the X colleges are compared to the findings at the Y colleges. It is important to note that these findings are relative, not absolute. As an example, participants from X colleges did report on overcoming conflicts—just not as often as participants from Y colleges.

Division of Labor.

The concept of division of labor is one of the components of activity theory and featured prominently in interviews across all colleges. In activity theory, division of labor mediates the relationship between the community and the activity by establishing roles, responsibilities, and duties associated with individuals or groups within the community. The following table demonstrates one similarity and three differences between X and Y colleges under the theme of division of labor.
Table 6

*Differences related to division of labor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division of Labor Area</th>
<th>X Colleges</th>
<th>Y Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation Work</td>
<td>Participants in X and Y colleges reported few difficulties in dividing work up among existing structures.</td>
<td>Participants reported more often that roles were agreed upon and abided by and used similar language in describing the roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Definition</td>
<td>Participants reported more often that roles were not universally agreed upon.</td>
<td>Participants reported more often that roles were agreed upon and abided by and used similar language in describing the roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Participants frequently reported conflicts and described them as acrimonious and long lasting.</td>
<td>Participants rarely described conflicts, and when pressed, reported them as minor and short-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Conflict</td>
<td>Participants reported more on progress in spite of ongoing conflicts.</td>
<td>Participants reported more on how conflicts were overcome.</td>
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**Accreditation Work.** The reported division of labor around most accreditation activities was notably similar at all four colleges. The work was divided up according to existing hierarchical and governance roles and few difficulties were reported. For example, X1.1 explained, “We identified…each cabinet member responsible for each recommendation. I'm responsible for certain recommendations that are close to my area.” X2.4 similarly stated, “We…looked for natural groups. For example, the one on the fiscal…our budget committee ended up being that…group.” Likewise, Y1.6 asserted that accreditation roles were essentially “in job descriptions.” X2.4 did report that previously, the college had recruited people to participate in accreditation areas that they were not familiar with “as a way of learning about [the] institution.” However, after sanctions, “the thrust was, ‘be a participant in the areas that you know about.’”
Role Definition. The definition of roles between organizational structures in the X colleges did not appear as clear as in the Y colleges. This included the role of the faculty, faculty union, faculty senate, governing board, and administration. Participants in the X colleges frequently described situations in which organizational units did not abide by mutually agreed upon roles. For example, when discussing the relationship between faculty union and senate, X1.3 reported, “Within [the] contract, the union controlled the hiring contract and procedures, which is illegal. It's supposed to be the senate. That's in the ed. code.” X1.3 described how uncertain role definition directly impacted accreditation: “The senate [is] on one side…saying faculty must do SLOs…you have the union, who on their website…says, ‘faculty do not have to do SLOs.’” All participants at X1 described a cozy relationship between the union and senate, with leaders common to both, as one of the sources of the problem. Similar issues were reported in X2 with relation to the board. As X2.5 put it, “[There’s] a bit of network between the board of regents…some of them were faculty here. And they still have friends on the faculty.” Multiple participants commented on repeated board micromanagement issues at X2. The ACCJC Standard IV requires that the college acknowledge and abide by “the designated responsibilities of the governing board and the chief administrator (ACCJC, 2012).” Thus, it is not surprising that a college in which the board’s responsibilities are not clearly maintained would be placed on sanction. In fact, board-related deficiencies have been increasing and made up 15% of the deficiencies that led to sanction in 2009-2011. However, this study seems to indicate that lack of clarity in role definition is more than simply an accreditation deficiency. The ambiguousness
appears to contribute to broader organizational conflict, which in turn may disrupt the overall accreditation process. For example, X2.4 attributed some faculty frustration with accreditation processes back to a previous report in which the faculty “worked to create the report, and then in the 11th hour, the administration came in edited out things that they thought were too negative.” As a result, faculty voice was lost in the process and members were reported to be more distrustful. This may have had contributed to obscuring roles later. X2.4 describes, “Not just because of this, but…the senate and the union became very intermixed…too much so. I worked to detangle them. This is a senate role, this is a union role.”

Contrastingly, in the Y colleges, clear role distinctions were repeatedly reported upon. In describing the relationship between the faculty senate and union, Y1.10 stated, “There are…differences set out for the roles of those two organizations in legislation and faculty contracts.” Y1.6 was one of six participants at the Y colleges who referred to AB 1725, the California law that specifies the role of academic senate. Y1.6 elaborated, “So they have these very clearly and sometimes codified in regulation, responsibilities that they take very seriously.” When describing the board as an asset, Y1.10 also referred to its role: “[We’ve] had a board that has worked well for a long time…I bet it's been 40 years of strong involvement, but boards that knew their role. Haven't micromanaged.” Y2.14 and Y2.13 asserted the consistent reinforcement and clarification of roles as key for maintaining better relations between groups. Y2.12 and Y2.14 both detailed a long history of negotiation between the senate and the administration, centered on the areas of responsibility assigned to the faulty senate under AB 1725. During the interview, Y2.14
showed a card that listed the “10+1” areas of faculty responsibility defined by AB1725 and reported that even that “several administrators pride them selves on carrying 10+1 cards.” Y2.13 agreed, saying that role clarity was critical to their “extremely excellent” shared governance system. “In fact,” Y2.13 elaborated, “they try real hard to keep their roles separate. Senate is the voice of the faculty on academic and professional issues. The union is about workload and working conditions.”

**Division of Labor Conflict.** Conflict in this section will refer only to those arising from issues of division of labor, not other areas. There appeared to be more conflict at the X schools. In X1, conflicts between the faculty union, senate, and administration were described as intense and long lasting. As X1.3, explains, “The senate had been controlled by a group of people that also controlled the union. So the people…running the senate were very suspiscious of the administration.” Later, X1.3 reported, “They said in the union newsletter, ‘it doesn’t matter if we lose accreditation. We'll be taken over by somebody else. That just means the administration will be gone, but we'll still be here.’” X1.2 offered a similar account, sharing, “Some people wanted us to [lose accreditation] because they thought all the administration would go away.” The conflict was so deep, that it appeared to be threatening the institution’s viability. At X2, conflict was not reported to be as intense, but was repeatedly reported on. X2.5 noted that while divisions between faculty and administrators is common, “sometimes [that division is] jokey and quite open, but not here.” And later, “It's not like these divisions have sprang up in the last two to three years. It's something that's been going on a long time.” X2.4 indicated that divisions between faculty and administration played out in
accreditation areas: “there was a bit of a ‘none of the recommendations are related to instruction. The problems are with the administration of the institution.’”

These findings seem to coincide with the fact that internal governance strife accounts for 10% of the deficiencies that led to sanction between 2009-2012 (ACCJC, 2012). However, internal strife seems to be more than just a stand-alone problem. It appears to lead to problems in other areas. The impact of division of labor conflict on other accreditation activities is explored further under the “Interpreting the Findings” section in Chapter 5.

Conflicts related to division of labor were also reported at the Y colleges. However, they were described as neither pervasive nor long term. In fact, some of the conflicts were highlighted as examples of the shared governance processes at work. As Y2.13 described it, “We fiercely argue and debate…but at the end of the day we find a common ground. We never let it break down to the point of no return.” Y1.10 indicated that conflict “tended to be at the margins…in the gray areas where maybe both [areas] have some claim to them.” Y1.6 also described other situations where “there’re people whose title and function is to guide that, and then there are end users who feel passionate about their role.” But overall, Y1.6 described a lack of long-term tension between groups, summarizing the relationship between various groups as “good.”

**Overcoming Division of Labor Conflict.** With regards to division of labor, participants at the X colleges more often described making progress in spite of conflicts while participants at the Y colleges more often described methods for overcoming conflict. For example, in explaining a recent success in incorporating program review
into full-time hiring, X1.3 said, “The union's still ticked off about that, but oh well.” Likewise, while describing a recent achievement, X1.2 referred to the fact that there was “legacy problem of that other culture” and that it would be around until the people who ascribed to pre-accountability ways of thinking retired or left the college. This doesn’t mean the X colleges didn’t overcome conflict. At college X1, a centralized database system was developed that appeared to alleviate some structural conflicts around accreditation and planning roles. X2.4 discussed working to ensure that faculty voice was sustained in the accreditation process. However, some of the underlying issues that originally caused the conflicts did not appear to be as clearly addressed.

Overcoming division of labor-related conflict in the Y colleges seemed to be core part of the culture. Many of the ways that conflict was overcome will be covered in ensuing sections under the themes of motivation and integration. These include enforcement, maintaining a critical mass, process integrity, and interconnectedness. Participants shared some very specific ways in which role conflict was overcome. The most common was role definition. Y2.14 believed that positive relations were maintained because they would “periodically re-enforce with each other where the lines are.” Y2.14 detailed how they called in the state at one point for a technical visit in order to clarify roles. Faculty at Y2 carried cards with them that outlined the specific roles afforded to the faculty senate and Y2.14 even described a system in meetings: “If we start to lean away from the 10+1, we each have a yellow card, and we can hold the yellow card up and say, ‘Caution, this is veering away from a 10+1 issue.’”

Ad-hoc groups appeared to be an important tool for navigating areas of conflict at
Y1. They were described as “how it's always been done” by Y1.10, who also explained, “If an issue arises that looks like it's in the gray area, the first step is to form a joint faculty/management task force to look at the issues…rather than fight one another behind the scenes.” Y1.10 conjectured that ad-hoc groups were better to navigate across the organizational structures and generate buy-in than standing groups because they were “free of long standing political structures.” Y1.6 revealed some of the confidence in these groups when sharing that the college had no concerns about a recent accreditation recommendation because the district had an ad-hoc task force working on it. Even the accreditation steering committee was described as ad-hoc, and serving “only that function.”

Co-leading and representation were used to overcome conflict in all the colleges, but was more prominent at the Y colleges. Both schools have adopted the model of having faculty, administration, and classified “tri-chairs” for governance and accreditation committees. When discussing recent course reductions, participants from both colleges detailed collaborative processes that involved transparent and publicized representation from multiple groups. Y1.10 and Y2.13 both asserted that affected groups, while not necessarily happy with the outcomes of the budget cuts, were satisfied with process because they were heard. In the end, confidence in division of labor structures was very high at the Y colleges. A Y1.10 put it, “There...is enough strength in the structures to absorb that kind of grousing and complaint and carrying on, without it just causing the structures to break.”
Motivation.

Motivation, or the reason for acting a certain way, was the second key theme presented in the data. In activity theory, motivation is associated with the object and its purpose. When multiple activity systems encounter the same object, different interpretation of the object’s purpose and motive occur (Engeström, 2008). Logically, in institutions where group activity systems are not aligned, contrasting interpretations of the object are more likely to occur. These differing interpretations can obviously impact motivation. The following table indicates three of the key differences between the X and Y colleges with regards to motivation and one commonality.

Table 7

Differences related to motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation Area</th>
<th>X Colleges</th>
<th>Y Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>Participants reported that accreditation was not universally interpreted as important.</td>
<td>Participants reported that accreditation was universally interpreted as important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Motivation</td>
<td>Participants reported that motivation for accreditation was more externally driven.</td>
<td>Participants reported that motivation for accreditation was more internally driven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforcement Methods</td>
<td>Participants reported that enforcement of accreditation-related processes had not been historically consistent.</td>
<td>Participants reported that enforcement of accreditation-related processes were a permanent part of the institution’s practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Mass</td>
<td>Participants at both colleges reported on the concept of critical mass as being important to motivation.</td>
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Importance. Accreditation was historically perceived as significantly less important at the X colleges than Y colleges according to participants. This contrasts somewhat with research that suggests while group identity has been found to play a role
in the degree of perceived importance - with administrators placing more importance on accreditation than faculty - (Todd and Baker, 1998; Welsh and Metcalf, 2003; Skolits and Graybeal, 2007), there is a common perception that accreditation is important (Cooney, 1984; Faulkner, 2002; Todd and Baker, 1998; Walker, 1993; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). This was initially supported at the X colleges, where participants gave the impression that, in general, faculty placed a lower level of importance on accreditation than administrators. However, the interviewees that seemed to place the most importance on accreditation at the X colleges were long-serving faculty. In addition, faculty at the Y colleges were reported to have very consistently placed a high level of importance on accreditation.

In this study, insularity and lack of understood value appear to have been stronger mediators of perceived importance than role. At X1, geographic and functional isolation was reported to have contributed to insular views. X1.3 stated, “The college has always thought it was special. And that it was separate from all the rest of the community colleges so it didn't have to follow any of the rules that are laid out.” X1.2 concurred, “We saw ourselves more as kind of an exclusive, stand-alone institution…we don't have to abide by the regulations.” Similar notions of insularity were reported at X2, however, the more frequently indicated source was a lack of perceived consequence. X2.4 described the college’s lack of motivation in previous years: “[When] we were put on warning…we kind of rather casually [responded].” Insular thinking among individuals mirrored institutional thinking. When describing the individuals most resistant to accreditation, X1.2 asserted, “Those are the people who that, if we did lose our
accreditation could walk out here tomorrow, retire, and be fine.” X1.2 continued, “I think people believe that because we have unions that somehow we are protected from that.”

In addition to insularity, a lack of perceived value in accreditation also seems to have contributed. Discussing the lack of progress on student-learning outcomes, X2.5 reported, “[The deans] possibly…don't see the value of it.” Similarly, X1.2 believed that “[faculty are] not sure of what [SLOs] really yield.” Lack of perceived value arose from multiple sources, including notions of academic freedom and outcomes. According to X1.2, faculty “think that the students…should know what they're going to learn, they have the syllabus, and teachers are going to give them what they need to know.” X1.3 also described resistance from many faculty in the form of quid-pro-quo: “They aren't hiring any full-timers, so why should we do it?” The result appeared to be more compliance-based approaches to accreditation. As X2.5 put it: “If a VP or president says I need to do it, I'll write something. But there's not the level of thought and rigor behind it.”

Conversely, accreditation was reported as critically important at the Y schools. Insular thinking was minimally reported on and accreditation was perceived as valuable. Views of importance were both long standing and broadly agreed upon. Y1.10 summarized, “You live and die by staying accredited. [We] all know it's important.” Y2.13 also asserted, “Number one on our agenda for leadership is accreditation. Later, Y2.13 described it as “a history, a culture. Somebody probably started it 20 years ago…we have over 1000 people working here. I did not hear a single one saying, 'We
are not going to do this.” Y2.12 concurred with the both duration and degree of perceived importance: “Maybe it was the beginning…leaders…that were very serious about this institution being great. People know they have to do accreditation right, there hasn't been a lot of resistance.”

Perceived moral and educational value placed on accreditation seems to only have strengthened these long-standing and broadly held views. Y2.12 described accreditation as doing “the right thing by education.” Y2.13 echoed this sentiment: “We owe it to the students. It is a way of instilling quality.” Notions of value appeared to provide motivation at the X colleges as well. X1.2 described the impetus for changing views of accreditation as being related to students as well: “They were behind our students and…understood that finally we could lose it [accreditation].” X2.4’s own motivation was influenced by the perception of value as well: “I kind of drank the cool-aid…that the accreditation process is a very valuable thing to go through.” However, it was not as clear at the X colleges that the value of accreditation was as broadly accepted. As evidenced by X2.5: “As an institution, I haven't really gotten the impression it's on the agenda.”

**Source of Motivation.** An important distinction between the X and Y colleges appeared to be the source of motivation for accreditation. More often, participants at the X colleges described accreditation being externally motivated. They described intense pressure from ACCJC and resulting institutional turbulence. After being placed on probation, X1.3 portrayed the ACCJC representative as saying, “I knew you needed a stick,” because “it was just how hard she had to push us.” X2.4 described the impact of
accreditation sanctions as “bloody” and shared that the college had “a special trustee come in from the state, who came in and for about six months; just sort ran rough shod over the institution.”

Interestingly, externally sourced motivation wasn’t reported as entirely negative. It appears to have facilitated leadership, unification, and the development of processes and tools. As X2.4 stated, “[Sanction]…made leadership pretty easy…and I think people really did rally together.” X1.3 expressed similar sentiments, “Everybody worked together on this because we realized we were on probation.” In demonstrating their database system, X1.3 said, “WASC told us to create that, basically.” X1.2 also described less insular thinking, “Things are more…connected with the rest of the world.” Pressure from ACCJC was also understood to be part of broader accountability trends. As X1.3 acknowledged, “They're under they're own kind of thing from the federal government that's pushing all of this.”

Unfortunately, relying on external sources of motivation appeared to have drawbacks. X2.4 believed it caused the college to focus on reacting rather than making core “changes…in the way we do business so that we can actually meet the standards.” X2.4 also indicated that external motivation did not necessarily instill a sense of value. The college “[did] it for accreditation,” rather than, “because it's the right thing to do.” All of the participants at X1 chronicled a continuing struggle with those opposed to accreditation as well. According to X1.2, “There's a legacy problem of that other culture that's still here.” Relying on external motivation appears to be less sustainable. When describing attrition among individuals participating in accreditation activities, X2.4
stated, “Probably only about 20% off what you originally started with are folks who are
going to see it through to the end.” This contrasted directly with statements from Y2.12,
who explained, “We had…90-100 people…involved in the accreditation process. When
we ended this process, we still had 85-90.”

The Y colleges appeared to be better at reframing approaches so that they were
internally driven. Y2.13 described this as an institutional choice. The freedom to make
this choice led Y2.13 to claim, “The U.S. accreditation system is the best in the
world…this is peer reviewed, voluntary…nobody's forcing you.” Y2.12 elaborated on
the concept of it being choice through the notion of ownership, “I think people are really
proud of what we have here. So they take personal ownership.” In discussing college
Y1’s similar bottom-up approach to accreditation, Y1.10 explained, “We're much more
tolerant of change that evolves…or…but bubbles up naturally. Change that's externally
imposed is where you tend to get friction.” Y2.14 also linked internal motivation to the
notion of quality and made an important distinction between the concept of a mandate
and accountability:

I think we had enough people who were seeing the connections between, SLOs
and student success. A lot of colleges were looking at this as a mandate. And
therefor we're…going to oppose any kind of mandate. Whereas we were looking
at it as, ‘This is as an accountability measure…and we may not like it. But it’s for
the benefit of students.’ And why would we not be in favor of something that's
for the benefit of students?

Participants at both Y colleges recognized that external motivation did play a role.
Y1.10 acknowledged, “Frankly, we do have faculty who you do just have to say, ‘It’s externally driven, get over it,’” and Y2.13: “If we don't do it, somebody will come do it to us.” Like participants from the X schools, they also understood accreditation to be part of the broader accountability movement. Y1.10 described the shift in the ACCJC’s approaches under “pressure from the Department of Ed. when Margaret Spellings was there.” Y1.10 also sympathized with the colleges struggling with accreditation, believing that externally imposed sanctions also wouldn’t be taken well at college Y1: “It would be like, ‘Well they're all [messed] up. They don't know a good college when they see one.’” Y1 was also the only college within a district. In a unique ay that blurred the lines between internal and external motivation, Y1.10 described the competition with sister college(s) to be an additional source of motivation: “You don't want to be the one college that gets knocked.”

However, all seven participants at the Y colleges consistently and repeatedly described accreditation activities as being internally driven. Y2.13 illustrated the point, indicating that even if Y2 were to be put on sanction, the college would still assume ownership: “If we were put on warning, we would fall back and get out of it. You learn from your mistakes.” Y2.12 concurred: “I think the college’s philosophy is the more education you can have, the more understanding you can have…even though you don't have total control, you can have some control.”

These findings support existing research. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) indicate that the perception of the source of motivation influences level of support and involvement. The Y colleges, where motivation was reported as internally driven, appear to have
higher levels of support and involvement.

**Enforcement.** Enforcement was a common subtheme related to motivation. It was discussed in conjunction with accreditation and non-accreditation-related activities. In the X colleges, enforcement was perceived as less consistent and developed than in Y colleges.

As touched on previously, there was a belief that ACCJC did not enforce accreditation at the X colleges. X2.4 shared, “In the past, you could get on warning, and stay on warning forever. I think [one college] was on warning for twelve years or something. There’s no sanction in that.” X1.2 indicated that the college had been on sanction since before she’d arrived several years earlier, “I forget when we first got the warnings and all of that. It's been going on for years.” However, a significant change was experienced in the mid-2000s, which was attributed to pressure from the federal government. As X2.4 chronicled, “When they came back on the midterm report they nailed us. We were very surprised by it. The enforcement of that rigor, was a game changer.” X2.4 continued, “I know that was ACCJC's intent; to say, ‘We're going to make an example of some institutions.’” X1.3 shared a similar story: “They put us on probation for a couple of years. Apparently they weren't supposed to allow us to be on warning for as long as we were.”

In contrast, issues of external enforcement were rarely mentioned at the Y colleges. This is not surprising, since the Y colleges were selected for this study precisely because they have not been placed on sanction. The fact that they report being motivated more internally would also result in less focus on external enforcement. The Y
colleges did receive recommendations from ACCJC however. But, these recommendations were not surprising to the colleges and were quickly reframed as internal activities. For example, Y1.6 described how the recommendations aligned with internally developed planning agenda items: “We picked two of them out ourselves. They came back and said, ‘Guess what? You have to work on those.’” A third recommendation was not listed as a planning agenda item, but according to Y1.6, “There was already a district task force working on [it] so no problem really.” Y1.6 continued, emphasizing the internally driven nature of the process, “Now we had lots of agenda items that they did not give us recommendation on, they're just things we wanted to do.”

Internal enforcement processes were also reported as less consistent and developed at the X colleges, and not just with regards to accreditation. X1.2 expounded on a long tradition of lax enforcement, “I saw the way things were happening...they weren't enforcing deadlines. We're still cleaning it up, after 35 years of just working a certain way.” More recently, X1.1 shared, “The responsible party was the dean…the VP was aware and sent several emails. It still did not get done. Then the president was informed. It still did not get done.” X2.5 speculated that enforcing accreditation protocols would not go over well when comparing his/her experiences, “In my previous institution, there was real power to implement sanctions against departments that did not write decent program reviews. I don't think that would ever be the situation here”

The X colleges have been taking steps to improve in the area of process enforcement and have produced some desirable results. As X1.3 explained, “[Faculty participate] because they won't get anything if they don't. There’s no other way.” X1.3
relayed one of their recent successes, “One of the big criticizers… always complaining about [accreditation]…[kept] doing program review and…did get a…full-time hire this year.” X2.4 also described a formalized process for getting funding, but also shared, “The piece that's missing right now for us is program review connecting specifically to funding allocation.”

In the Y colleges, internal enforcement was reported as consistent and long-standing. When explaining how student-learning outcomes were enforced, Y1.6 described it as, “very straight forward,” courses and program would not be approved without them. Similarly, Y2.12 described a link between accreditation processes and resources: “Program review is the way to ensure money.” The constant reinforcement of protocols and procedures in accreditation and non-accreditation-related areas were an important topic in conversations with all participants from the Y colleges. For example, Y2.14 explained, “If somebody wants to go and develop curriculum…and they go somewhere [other than curriculum committee]…we say, ‘No.’” Similar reinforcement of division of labor issues was also seen as important. Y2.14 shared a past success in which faculty got administrators to abide by shared governance processes: “We kept harping on the process…and all the sudden we had administration [agreeing], saying, ‘No, we've got the hold the line.’”

Critical Mass.

The concept of critical mass was widely and similarly reported on at X and Y colleges. At the X colleges, being able to secure a critical mass was important to overcoming motivational barriers. Participants at X1 similarly described a minuscule
shift in the faculty senate several years earlier that was the tipping point in adopting an accountability-based paradigm. As X1.3 detailed it: “Well there's 15, so we have this 8-7 shift…it was the ‘reasonable’ faculty who became in control of the senate.” Since then, X1.2 said, “There's enough critical mass to get the things done that we need to. There's enough faculty on board in key positions that now we have those people we have working hard on things like accreditation and being compliant.”

At Y colleges, maintaining a critical mass, not universal acceptance, was also seen as important. For example, Y1.6 corrected him/herself, saying, “People seem to have an understanding…I'm going to qualify that a bit, enough people have the understanding. It's not universal.” Y1.6 believed that engaging with mid-level managers was especially important, and used the same critical mass paradigm when referring to them, “That doesn’t mean that every single department chair is engaged in this way, but I'd be very comfortable in saying that over half of them are.” Y2.14 detailed a similar experience, “We had enough new faculty…who've been converted to this new paradigm to use data to justify resources and so forth. It was enough to tip it over.” Participants at the Y colleges reported that there were still points of resistance. As Y2.14 explained, “You'll show them data…and they're still unwilling to make a change.”

Integration.

Integration was the third prominent theme revealed in the data. Mapped against activity theory, integration was taken to imply an activity system that incorporates a unified interpretation of the object, agreed upon divisions of labor, appropriate rules/norms, and shared tools. This integrated activity system was clearly in place in Y
colleges. It was not as clear in the X colleges. Though there was some evidence of integration occurring in the X colleges, the development of shared tools and appropriate customs and norms appeared to be impacted by the historical division of labor conflicts and contrasting motivations previously discussed.

Integration also correlates with the concept of engagement found in existing accreditation research. As reviewed previously, engagement has been reported to improve educational effectiveness, (Robinson-Weening, 1995), foster higher levels of adoption (Thomas, 1997), and lead to more positive perceptions of accreditation (Diede, 2009; McClure, 1996). The Y colleges appeared to have more robust processes for integrating accreditation and reported higher levels of engagement. Table 8 demonstrates how the X and Y colleges differed according to four subsections under the theme of integration: contact, process integrity, interconnectedness, and resources.
Table 8

Differences related to integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration Area</th>
<th>X Colleges</th>
<th>Y Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Participants reported that the level of contact with accreditation has varied.</td>
<td>Participants reported that contact with accreditation was constant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Integrity</td>
<td>Participants reported on the development of nascent processes.</td>
<td>Participants reported on the integrity of existing formal processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interconnectedness</td>
<td>Participants did not report on interconnectedness as often, and instead reported on procedures and heroes.</td>
<td>Participants repeatedly reported on informal and formal approaches the served to connect constituents and activities across the institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Participants reported more often on a lack of resources.</td>
<td>Participants reported more often on sufficient resources.</td>
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**Contact.** Contact with accreditation refers to the persistence and degree of connection with accreditation activities. In the X colleges, the degree of contact was reportedly variable over time while in the Y colleges contact was described as more constant. This was especially apparent in the preparation for accreditation visits and reports. As X1.2 described, “The person who was the researcher at the time…didn't tell anybody that we were up for our report. So we were way behind and then we were just scrambling around.” X2.4 had only been at the college a short period of time when asked to chair a standard, “I walked in new. I had some experience under my belt…so I took it on. To be honest, I kind of stumbled through it.”

Since ACCJC has been enforcing accreditation more strongly, the X schools have been placed on sanction a combined total of 15 times, meaning there has been significant
contact recently. The externally motivated nature of this contact made it difficult to determine what the college’s “natural” level of contact may have been. There were some successes associated with this contact. When asked if program review had been institutionalized, X1.3 responded, “Yeah, it is. We did it in that…in the Fall of 08…in the Fall of 09…in the Fall of 10. And the 10-11 we did a mini review.” However, certain areas of concern were also apparent. For example, the institutional researcher at one of the X colleges, who was relatively new, did not know who the accreditation liaison officer was. It was hard to imagine this happening at the Y colleges, in part because of the more consistent contact.

At the Y colleges, contact was reported as a critical component of success. For example, Y1.6 began the interview:

I think what makes [us] stand out is extensive preparation beginning well before the accreditation visit…extensive involvement from lots of people…extensive documentation…and…attention to accreditation throughout the cycle. [We] take 1.5 years to put [our self-study] together. We're giving nearly a year to putting the midterm report together.

Y1.10 indicated that the accreditation steering committee convened two and one-half years before the visits. Y1.6 asserted that ongoing compliance with accreditation demands, such as assessing SLOs, was simply assumed at this point.

Similar degrees of contact were apparent at Y2. Y2.12 divulged that the college had learned from a previous accreditation cycle in the 1990s, “It was jam-packed, get it done in one year’s time.” As a result, for the last accreditation, Y2.12 reported, “The
steering committee...met twice a month for a year and a half.” Y2.13 drew the following figure to demonstrate the difference between how college Y2 maintains contact with accreditation compared to typical levels of contact.

![Diagram of contact with accreditation over time]

*Figure 12. Comparison of contact with accreditation over time (College B2 now Y2)*

Instead of periods of intense contact, followed by periods of separation, Y2.13 described a more consistent level of contact, even between accreditation visits. This was backed up by the fact that the researcher for this study was introduced at a kick-off meeting for the accreditation visit three years in the future.

Another difference was that people at the Y colleges did not report being “thrown into” accreditation roles. In fact, participants at Y2 described a formalized process for selecting accreditation leaders. As Y2.13 described, “The faculty senate…is sending in three names. The president will interview [them] and select one faculty as the co-chair. We are looking 2-3 years ahead.” When asked, Y2.14 agreed that it sounded like a job interview and stated, “It really is an honor to be able to do that.” Y2.13 even conjectured that contact with accreditation was consciously and subconsciously present during recruitment and hiring processes, “They hired me to help with accreditation...I think it's like this self selective thing…maybe through our interviews. Maybe the success brings in more people to the same boat.”
Processes Integrity. Processes integrity refers to how well processes were perceived and worked. Several issues contributed to the integrity of processes, including issues of enforcement, transparency, buy-in, outcomes, faithfulness, and ease. In the X schools, participants reported that processes had lower levels of integrity than their counterparts in the Y schools. The fact that accreditation-related processes in the X colleges were more nascent is one likely cause. As these processes mature, it is likely that they will develop more integrity. Lack of historical enforcement, as discussed previously, was another important contributor.

X2.5 shared the following impression, “We have an integrated planning process which to me…doesn’t seem integrated at all. It seems like it's been developed kind of piece meal.” X2.4 concurred to some degree, saying that the college was “really good at planning, but not so much at implementing.” Part of the problem was attributed to workload and inefficiency. X2.5 believed that the variety of forms and documents caused people to think, “Well this is just a waste of time…we're putting the same information here and here.” X1.2 concurred, asserting that some resistance to processes could be attributed to the fact that it’s “extra work for them…I think it's a workload issue.” Another problem appeared to be that even when processes were followed, it took a long time and the results were not enticing. X2.4 described a “one-and-a-half year long process…to get funding for an idea,” and X2.5 lamented the fact that “you could submit a strategic proposal and a one page plan to get some extra money, but there was only $100,000.” At the X schools there was less buy-in to accreditation-related processes.
X2.5 claimed, “Some people are saying, ‘Yeah, let's do it,’ but kind of rolling their eyes.” X2.4 shared that historically, the college would say, “oh yeah…transparency, production, dialogue” but then not take action. X1.2 and X1.3 detailed hostile resistance in multiple cases.

The X schools were implementing more integrated processes that addressed many of these issues. The data system underlying accreditation-related processes at X1 was the most technically robust of the four colleges. As X1.3 stated, “The idea was that if we set it up as a database, then portions of it could remain, and we would just update that, instead of having to rewrite the whole…thing every time.” Based on recent successes using the system, participants at X1 were optimistic. X1.3 asserted that they’d “come long way” and that it would “take a lot to go back.” They believed that program review processes were now integrated and hoped to build upon them when tackling student-learning outcomes. The systems at X2 were not quite as convincing. X2.5 was developing a database driven planning system, but in relative isolation. Other participants at X2 did not demonstrate specifically how processes worked as clearly as at other schools. X2.4 conceded that connecting program review to funding allocation, a critical component of accreditation requirements, was still missing.

Conversely, at the Y colleges, processes were perceived to have a great deal of integrity. Y1.10 implied that processes were supported because they were an outcome of “democratic governance processes,” one of the “hallmarks” of the college. Y1.10 even described how the college was currently evaluating the effectiveness of their processes through surveys. Participants from Y2 were especially concerned with the faithfulness of
processes, based on historical issues in which they were bypassed. As Y2.14 explained, “[Under] our prior administration…it was, ‘I’m going to fill the request out. Now let's go talk behind closed doors.’” The result, according to multiple parties, was a push for increased transparency. Participants at Y2 seemed proud of how the various parties grappled with issues of process, implying that dialogue, and in some cases, confrontation, produced desirable results. Y2.12 described how the college “strategically” sought new participants in order to maintain process integrity: “So it's not the same old people.” Buy-in to processes at the Y colleges appeared to be nearly universal. As quoted earlier, Y2.13 claimed, “We have over 1000 people working here. I did not hear a single one saying, ‘We are not going to do this.’”

**Interconnectedness.**

Interconnectedness, for the purposes of this project, relates most closely to the concept of rules, norms, or customs in activity theory. As these rules move from informal to formal, they become either tools, which mediate the individuals’ relationships with the object, or divisions of labor, which mediate the community’s relationship with the object. Interconnectedness bound individuals and groups together across the organization. Interconnectedness terminology included “connecting,” “collaboration,” “inclusiveness,” “representation,” “communication,” and “listening.”

What appeared important at the Y colleges was bi-directional movement between formal and informal approaches. Y1.6 best described some of the informal processes and used the term “matrixing” to describe them. Y1.6 asserted that organizational structures around accreditation were “well integrated because the people on the committees are the
people who serve on the budget committee, the curriculum committee. So what we're doing basically is a jigsaw.” Y1.6 elaborated on informal approaches as well, such as, “reaching out to people, not waiting for them.” Y1.6 explained that informal interconnecting was common on campus: “Other people do it in other styles. They'll do it by being extremely involved in committees of different sorts. Or they'll do it by bringing it deeply into their department in a narrowly focused way, but still connected.” Y1.6 also discussed multiple meetings where the focus of the meeting appeared to be less on the topic of conversation than on forming bonds. For example he/she described a meeting with the department chairs in which “the whole focus of the meeting was to get us connected with one another.” In another meeting, he/she explained, “[The president] just got us all sit in one room, and just had us connect with one another. Spend a couple of hours together. It was huge.” Similar patterns were apparent at Y2. When describing the connected and engaged culture, Y2.12 explained, “When you come into this institution, you get encultured…I think from being around the other campus leaders and seeing how they behave.” The biggest frustration Y2.12 shared in the interview was with faculty who weren’t connecting: “It's the way the college works…[the] expectation is transparency, collaboration, and inclusiveness. We need to model that.”

More formal interconnectedness approaches were also reported on. The most important appeared to be representation. Both Y colleges made use of “tri-chairs,” meaning that representatives from faculty, administration, and classified staff areas jointly led committees and workgroups. As Y1.10 explained that the college had “tri-chairs for every standing committee and governance committee.” The result, according
to Y2.13, was that all parties were “fully represented at the highest level.” Representation was used in ad-hoc situations as well. For example, during recent budget cut processes, Y1.10 shared, “A lot of things…were jointly written by the VP of instruction, the senate president, the union president…so that a consistent message was getting out there.” During a similar budget reduction processes at Y2, Y2.13 indicated that the classified staff had accepted recent cuts because of “the culture of inclusiveness…they are at the table when all of these decisions are made.” Representation at the Y colleges was frequently tied to the idea of being heard, as discussed in several previous sections. Listening was a key point in many interviews. Y1.6 explained that listening was key to winning people over: “At least if someone is complaining to you, they're talking.”

At the X colleges there was less reporting on interconnectedness. Being heard was the most commonly referred topic. X2.4 reported on working hard to maintain faculty voice in accreditation processes. The more recent administration as X1 was being looked on more favorably on because people have “the sense that they were being listened to.” However, in place of connectedness, there seemed to be more focus on tools and individuals. First, college X1 had the most comprehensive data system in place for tracking program review and student-learning outcomes. The college was strongly enforcing use of the system. However, it was not clear that the system had interconnected the community in a way that overcame long-standing customs of divisiveness. Perhaps in time it will. Participants at X2 described the least amount of interconnectivity. A new key member of accreditation planning process, X2.5 did not
know who the accreditation liaison officer was and revealed that accreditation wasn’t incorporated into key settings, like President’s Cabinet. Later, X2.5 illustrated some missing connectivity, “Here, I think people go to conferences and … unless there's a push for you to convert what you've learned, disseminate that knowledge… it's not going to happen.” Participants in the X colleges referred to “heroes” and “villains” more often. The senate presidents at the X colleges appeared to have achieved a tremendous amount of progress and were referred to in somewhat heroic terms by their colleagues, such as “amazing.” X2.5 reported being asked to not leave shortly after arriving and X1.1 was described as having a “huge impact” in a very short time. The comments in themselves were not overly striking, except rarely in seven interviews at the Y colleges did participants single out individuals for credit, instead they focused on the processes.

**Resources.** The final area related to integration where differences were apparent between the X colleges and Y colleges was resources. Resources were not reported on as often as some other subthemes, however, the findings are significant for two reasons. First, existing research identified a lack of resources as one of the greatest impediments to accreditation processes (Hollingsworth, 2010; Skolits & Graybeal, 2007; Miles, 1992; Morest & Jenkins, 2009). Second, the contrast between the comments at the X colleges and Y colleges was stark. Resources were considered part of the integration theme for this project because the availability of resources for accreditation appears to linked to broader priority-setting and fiscal management.

Participants at the X colleges reported fewer resources. X1.3 indicated that when the college first implemented program review, faculty got one-half of a unit of release
time, but in subsequent years, faculty haven’t been paid. X2.5 commented several times on the lack of resources. This included workload, “people just have too much work,” and the money necessary to bring up a database reporting system. X1.2 indicated that money woes were related to the union issues “because all the resources get taken for [faculty].”

Conversely, participants at the Y colleges reported more often that resources were made available for accreditation activities. Y1.6 explained that “when more resources were needed [for student-leaning outcome assessment], the management produced more resources.” Y1.6 also described how the district provided additional resources to the colleges, both in terms of ad hoc groups and money. Y2.14 detailed a time when seven campus leaders were sent to an immersive assessment conference. Upon their return they were given the support and resources to implement new institutional planning processes which now function as a core part of the college’s operations.

It was not clear why the Y colleges seemed to have more resources for accreditation than the X colleges. Y2.13 believed that it was because the institution had traditionally been fiscally conservative. By maintaining a general reserve somewhere in the range of 20% of the operating budget, it was reported that reserve funds could be used for release time and training.

**Supplemental Observations**

In addition to the three master themes, there were some general observations worth noting.

1) The richest source of data regarding institutional culture and practices around accreditation came from long-term faculty who had been at the institution for twenty
or more years and had been heavily involved governance and accreditation processes. The depth of institutional knowledge held by these individuals was so rich that the study could have simply focused on them. Further studies into institutional culture may want to focus individuals in these roles.

2) Administrative turnover was remarked upon as a potential problem, but according to interview statements and accreditation materials, administrative turnover was “high” across all four colleges. Interpretations of tenure did vary. For example, Y2.12 referred to a relatively short-term administrator that had served for 4-5 years.

3) Participants at all colleges asserted that change was difficult for the institution. Y colleges didn’t appear to have to change as much to fulfill accreditation requirements.

4) Leadership was mentioned often. Most participants favored humanistic, participatory, and contingent styles of leadership. X1.2 and X1.3 asserted that the new leadership listened and responded to faculty more and that feeling heard was important. Y1.10 and Y2.12 described autocratic leaders at both institutions that did not fit in well and had relatively short tenures. Their statements seem to confirm research by Sanders (2009), Hollingsworth (2010), and Hunnicutt (2008) indicating that participative and leader-member exchanges styles of leadership were conducive to accreditation processes. However, successes were reported at X and Y colleges under both authoritative and collaborative leaders. X1 went from probation to reaffirmation under a more autocratic leader and is now back on warning under a more democratic leader. Y1 and Y2 maintained their accreditation standing even under more autocratic leaders. Based on the inconclusive findings with regards to
leadership and the number of times it emerged in the data, further research appears merited.

5) Accreditation seems to be working in terms of driving more accountability-based approaches. X2.4 asserted that an outcome of the accreditation enforcement was “a greater focus on a…culture of evidence with data-driven decisions.” Participants at the Y college reported consistently on the implementation of new accountability processes, including student-learning outcomes. Y1.6 also described how the college responded immediately to accreditation recommendations. This seems to confirm findings by Armstrong (1983), Cooney (1984), Greiner (1997), Harris (1983), and Hulon (2000) that indicate that accreditation is producing intended outcomes. This includes the development of organizational tools and structures for self-assessment and the use of self-assessment results for improving processes.

6) Accreditation was looked on favorably by all participants, not just in terms of the implementation of accountability-based tools, but the impact on the climate and quality of the institution. X1.2 went as far to say accreditation had “saved the institution from itself;” by providing a framework for self-improvement. X2.4 described how accreditation brought a degree of unity and focus to the college. Despite legacy conflict, all participants at X1 expressed optimism about the institution, and X1.2 and X1.3 credited this in a large part to the accreditation processes. This seems to support findings by Murray (2004), Nutter (2000), and Sykes (2003) that indicate positive views among participants towards accreditation outcomes.
7) Participants as Y colleges knew a lot about the system-wide accreditation issues and those at colleges that have been struggling. Six Y college participants noted that they had been involved in accreditation visits at other colleges. They were able to detail some of the specific issues that were brought up at the X colleges as well as numerous other colleges in the state. Participants at the X colleges reported more on the state of their own institution and the relationship between their institution and ACCJC.

**Evidence of Quality**

This study followed several procedures for ensuring the accuracy of the data. First, the comparative nature of the multi-site case study design strengthened “the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings (Miles and Huberman, 1994).” Second, the selection of four sites allowed for a balance of breadth and depth of understanding. There were enough colleges that findings could be generalized to a degree, but there were few enough colleges to produce a reasonable depth of understanding. Third, sites were selected using purposeful sampling in order to produce literal and theoretical replication (Yin, 2003). Sites varied according to accreditation outcome and size. Colleges and college groupings were compared against similar and contrasting colleges or groups. For findings to be considered valid they had to have been confirmed across at least three of the colleges. Fourth, participant selection was based on findings from existing research and purposeful sampling. Research has shown that perceptions of accreditation vary according to role (Barber, 1990; Salvador, 1996), length of service (Todd & Baker, 1998), and involvement with accreditation (Harbour et al,
For each college and the collection as a whole, participants were selected that produced a relatively even spread across these categories. This facilitated inter-participant confirmation and reduced the influence of role, tenure, and involvement bias on findings. For findings to be considered valid, they had to be confirmed across at least three participants. Fifth, interviews were unstructured. Although the researcher maintained a line of inquiry, the conversations were generally grounded. Questions emerged from the dialogic nature of the interviews. As a result, the interviewee determined a large portion of the direction of the interview. This reduced the influence of bias on the part of the researcher. Sixth, coding was triangulated. Activity theory and grounded theory codes were applied simultaneously. At one point the research considered abandoning the use of activity theory and spoke with a committee member about it. However, upon further analysis, it was determined that the dominant themes that emerged when independently applying activity theory and grounded theory were remarkably similar. This form of triangulation reduced framework bias. Finally, the researcher engaged in member checking. Each excerpt used in the study was emailed to the corresponding participant. Participants were given the opportunity to confirm that the quotes or paraphrase attributed to them were accurate and that interpretations of them were in the spirit of their intent.

**Summary of Findings**

Three master themes were presented in the data: division of labor, motivation, and integration. In general, participants from the Y colleges reported more clearly defined divisions of labor, a higher degree of motivation, and a greater degree of integration.
Under the theme of division of labor, X college participants reported more often that roles were not universally agreed upon, conflict resulted, and progress was achieved in spite of these conflicts. Y college participants more often referred to agreed upon divisions of labor, little conflict, and tools for overcoming conflict. Both X and Y college participants reported minimal difficulty in dividing up the work of accreditation activities.

Under the theme of motivation, X college participants more often reported that accreditation was not consistently perceived as important, the source of motivation was external, and that enforcement was not historically consistent. Y college participants more often reported that accreditation was widely seen as important, the source of motivation was internal, and enforcement was historically consistent. Both X and Y college participants reported that maintaining a critical mass, rather than universal acceptance, was key to sustaining motivation and progress.

Under the theme of integration, X college participants reported more often that contact with accreditation was not consistent over time, that processes had not historically had integrity, and that resources were scarce. They also reported less on interconnecting activities. Y college participants reported more often that contact with accreditation was constant, processes were perceived as having integrity, interconnecting activities were prevalent across the organization, and resources were readily available.
Too many California community colleges are being placed on accreditation sanction. From June 2003 to January 2012, 62 of the 112 colleges were placed on warning, probation, or show cause or were closed. Over the last decade the number of sanctions has trended upward. In seven of the last nine cycles, more than half of the colleges have been placed on sanction. A gap between colleges that regularly succeed at accreditation and those that repeatedly struggle has emerged. From June 2003-January 2009, 51 colleges were never been placed on sanction, 21 were placed on sanction three or more times, and some colleges were placed on sanction as many as seven times. Having to respond to a high number of sanctions diverts taxpayer dollars from teaching and learning. Colleges that have become mired in ongoing accreditation responses are falling behind their compatriots and are increasingly under threat of closure. Finally, the California community college system is not responding to accountability measures in a consistent manner and could lose the confidence of stakeholders and policy makers.

There has been little existing research into accreditation. What research there is, fails to link what a college does with accreditation results. There is also minimal research on accreditation in the California community colleges. This project addressed these gaps by examining four California community colleges, two that have repeated struggled with accreditation (X1 and X2) and two that have regularly succeeded (Y1 and Y2). The goal was to identity differences between the colleges in order to inform campus and system
leaders and policy makers.

The primary hypothesis of this study was that cultural practices within the colleges have an influence on accreditation results. Activity theory was used as the theoretical framework for analyzing cultural practices at the four schools. Activity theory asserts that culture is object-oriented artifact-mediated action by a subject within a context of rules (norms), community, and division of labor (Cole, 1998).

The four schools were selected through purposeful sampling. The X colleges had been placed on sanction more than three times in recent years and the Y colleges had never been placed on sanction. Schools also varied in size: one was less than 8,000 students, two were between 8,000-14,000 students, and one was larger than 14,000 students. Fourteen one-on-one interviews were conducted at these schools, three or four at each. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Existing research indicates that perceptions of accreditation vary according to role, tenure, and degree of involvement. Based on this, participants were selected so that a relatively even distribution across each of these categories was achieved. Although a base set of questions was developed, interviews were relatively unstructured.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Coding was framed by both activity and grounded theory concepts simultaneously. A consolidation of the codes revealed five primary themes: division of labor, motivation, leadership, change, and integration. Significant differences were identified between the colleges in the areas of division of labor, motivation, and integration. These three areas were defined as the master themes.
Based on more than 400 direct quotes from participants, three to four subthemes were identified under each theme that best reflected key differences and two similarities between the X and Y colleges. The following table outlines the differences between the colleges for each subtheme.

**Table 6**

*Summary of similarities and differences between X and Y colleges.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>X Colleges</th>
<th>Y Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labor</td>
<td>Accreditation Work</td>
<td>Participants reported few difficulties in dividing accreditation work up among existing structures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labor</td>
<td>Role Definition</td>
<td>Participants reported more often that roles were not universally agreed upon.</td>
<td>Participants reported more often that roles were agreed upon and abided by.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labor</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Participants reported more on conflicts and described them as acrimonious and long lasting.</td>
<td>Participants rarely described conflicts and when pressed, reported them as minor and short-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labor</td>
<td>Overcoming Conflict</td>
<td>Participants reported more on progress in spite of ongoing conflicts.</td>
<td>Participants reported more on how conflicts were overcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>Participants reported that accreditation was not universally interpreted as important.</td>
<td>Participants reported that accreditation was universally interpreted as important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Locus of Motivation</td>
<td>Participants reported that motivation for accreditation was more externally driven.</td>
<td>Participants reported that motivation for accreditation was more internally driven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Enforcement Methods</td>
<td>Participants reported that enforcement of accreditation-related processes had not been historically consistent.</td>
<td>Participants reported that enforcement of accreditation-related processes were a permanent part of the institution’s practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Critical Mass</td>
<td>Participants reported on the concept of critical mass as being important to motivation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Integratio
n
Contact
Participants reported that the level of contact with accreditation varied over time.

Participants reported that contact with accreditation was constant.

Integratio
n
Process Integrity
Participants reported on the development of nascent accreditation processes.

Participants reported on the integrity of existing formal processes.

Integratio
n
Interconnectedness
Participants did not report on interconnectedness as often and instead reported on heroes.

Participants reported more on informal and formal approaches that served to connect constituents and activities across the institution.

Integratio
n
Resources
Participants reported more often on a lack of resources.

Participants reported that resources were readily available.

Accuracy of the data and validity of the findings were maintained through triangulation and by minimizing bias. Data from each of the four colleges and fourteen participants were confirmed against data from other colleges and participants. To be considered valid a statement from a participant had to be confirmed by at least two other participants at two other colleges. Both literal and theoretical confirmation was acceptable. Allowing the colleges to recommend participants that met specified criteria minimized participant selection bias. Also, interviews were unstructured, meaning the interviewees directed large portions of the interviews and the influence of researcher bias was reduced. Theoretical bias was minimized by simultaneously coding data using activity theory and grounded theory concepts.

**Interpretation of the Findings**

It is concluded that there are differences in cultural practices between the X colleges and Y colleges involved in this study. Based on a comparative analysis of the
data across the four schools, it is believed that these cultural practices influence accreditation activities. Because this study involved four schools that varied in size, location, district standing, and past accreditation results it is concluded that, while they are not universal, the findings from this study are likely to apply to other California community colleges. The key cultural differences between the X and Y colleges in this study were in the areas of division of labor, motivation, and importance.

**Division of Labor.**

Participants at the X colleges reported more often that divisions of labor were not as clearly defined or abided by, there were more conflicts as a result, and progress was made in spite of these conflicts. Participants at the Y colleges reported more often that divisions of labor were clear and consistently abided by, that conflicts were minimal, and on methods for resolving conflict. Interestingly, participants at both X and Y colleges reported little difficulty in dividing up the work of accreditation. Individuals in similar roles were assigned the same type of work in all four colleges.

According to activity theory, division of labor mediates the relationship between the community and the object. It was anticipated that there would be difference in how colleges divided the work of accreditation. However, the data reveal that these differences were minimal. What emerged instead were differences in the division of labor in the larger activity system of running the college. Figure 13 is a third-generation activity theory model that reflects a “nested” activity system concept (Barab et al, 2002; Engeström, 2008; Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). The object of one system is to develop the components of another. The diagram demonstrates how organization
conflicts around divisions of labor, represented by the lightning bolt, may impede the development of tools for accreditation, perceptions of accreditation itself, and norms or customs around accreditation. This is also supported in the findings. The second master theme, motivation, correlates strongly with the object and its purpose. The third master theme, integration, encompasses the concepts of tools and norms— in this case referred to as processes and interconnectivity.

Figure 13. The influence of campus division of labor conflicts on accreditation activities

Based on these analyses, it is concluded that developing and maintaining clear and agreed-upon divisions of labor may positively influence accreditation processes. Those involved in accreditation processes should facilitate the development of tools and norms and an agreed-upon accreditation objective. These divisions do not refer simply to the activity of accreditation, but rather to the core structures of the institution, including: faculty, faculty senate, unions, the board, administration, and classified staff. When
conflicts emerge between these structures because divisions of labor are not clear, accreditation processes are likely to be negatively impacted.

**Motivation.**

With regards to motivation, participants in the X colleges reported more that accreditation was not universally perceived as important, that the locus of motivation was external, and that enforcement was not historically consistent. Participants in the Y colleges reported more that accreditation was widely perceived as important, the locus of motivation was internal, and enforcement practices were consistent and established. Participants at all colleges reported equally on the concept of a critical mass being important to motivation. Figure 13 demonstrates that underlying division of labor conflicts may impact the development of a shared objective with regards to accreditation. Thus is not surprising that motivation was not as consistent in colleges with division of labor issues.

Third generation activity theory provides another framework for examining differences in motivation, through the notion of “parallel” activity systems. In Figure 14, the faculty senate, union, and administration are acting in three separate activity systems. Because of this separation, motivations with regards to the object, in the case accreditation, may vary. It is logical that in institutions where conflict or other issues have damaged the campus-wide activity system, individuals’ primary identify would be with smaller activity systems. Multiple activity systems, according to Engeström (2008) can lead to conflicts around the object, as indicated by the lighting bolts in Figure 14. This was supported in the findings. At college X2 faculty input in the self-study, which
had been reportedly frank, was overridden by administrators who believe it might reflect poorly on the institution. At X1, faculty union objected to student learning outcome assessment because it was believed to be an infringement on academic freedom while the faculty senate supported it as part of their shared governance responsibilities.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 14.** Influence of parallel activities systems on accreditation motivation

Participants at the Y colleges reported on some of these similar conflicts, but that they were overcome through ongoing negotiation within a larger campus activity system. Within this broader activity system, accreditation was deemed important, motivation was internally driven, and accreditation activities were enforced. Interpretations of accreditation and motivation for it were reported as more consistent across the Y colleges.

Based on the findings and these analyses, it is concluded that motivation influences accreditation processes. Type and degree of motivation may differ by subgroup and be impacted by institutional conflict around divisions of labor. However, maintaining a perception of importance, establishing an internal source of motivation,
engaging in enforcement practices, and maintaining a critical mass of motivated individuals appears to sustain motivation.

**Integration.**

Participants at the X colleges indicated that accreditation was not as integrated. They reported that the level of contact with accreditation had been variable, that processes were in their nascent stages, less on interconnecting activities, and that resources were not as readily available. Participants at the Y colleges indicated a high degree of integration, including near constant contact with accreditation, robust processes, a high degree of interconnecting activities with regards to accreditation, and significant resources.

Integration is linked with the two other master themes: division of labor and motivation. Figure 13 predicts that schools with fewer conflicts around division of labor may be better at forming tools and norms. This appears to hold true according to the data—processes (tools) were better formed, resources (tools) were more available, and interconnectivity (norm) was more apparent at the Y colleges. Figure 14 predicts that differences in motivation could impact contact with accreditation. This also appears to hold true. The colleges with higher degrees of shared motivation had more consistent levels of contact with accreditation.

The rules and tools within an activity system are linked. As informal ways of behaving become more codified, they eventually become tools (L. Stone, personal communication, January 30, 2012). Conversely, tools influence the ways of being and interacting. For example, Y1.6 reported often on the importance of informal “chitchat”
and “face time,” but later, described at least three meetings, including one led by the president, that emphasized interaction and face time between the attendees. The informal dialogic nature of interactions had become a tool for use in official settings.

In the X colleges, there appeared to be more conflict between tools and rules, as indicated by the lightning bolt in Figure 15. For example, X2.4 reported that informal talk centered on “transparency, production, dialogue,” yet the formalized tools were lacking, such as a process for linking planning and assessment. Conversely, at X1, a robust tool was developed for assessing outcomes and linking planning and assessment, but participants reported on ongoing negative interactions that had to be overcome in order to use the tool.

![Diagram of norms vs. tools conflict]

Figure 15. Norms vs. tools conflict

At the Y colleges, there was less conflict between the campus norms and the tools used for accreditation. This does not mean there was no conflict. For example, several participants, including Y1.10, referred to administrators that had tried push through top-down formal styles of leadership that did not interact well the campus norms. However, they also reported that these administrators had short tenures.
Based on these analyses, it is concluded that the degree of integration appears to influence accreditation practices. Integration subthemes include contact with accreditation, processes with integrity, interconnectivity, and resources. These subthemes appear to be negatively impacted by conflicts around division of labor. Contact also appears to be influenced by motivation. Finally, because of the interactive nature of tools and rules, the development of effective tools for accreditation appears to require consideration of existing rules/norms.

**Recommendations**

The California community college system is the largest higher education system in the United States, with more than 2.5 million students. Its mission is to offer two-year degrees, preparatory instruction for transfer to four-year institutions, vocational instruction, and lifelong learning. Its objective is to advance California's economic agenda and increase its global competitiveness. However, over half of the community colleges in the system have been placed on sanction in the last decade- some as many as seven times. All Californians should be concerned.

This research has increased our understating of what is going on in colleges that are being placed on sanction and what can be done about it. The objective of this research is to inform stakeholders in the California community college system, including campus leaders, executives, mid-level managers, faculty leaders, and board members; statewide organizations, such as the California Community College Chancellor’s Office and California Community College Academic Senate; policy implementers such as ACCJC and the United State Department of Education; and policy makers, including
state and federal lawmakers.

Several recommendations emerged from this study. They are:

1. Understand that accreditation processes may be influenced by campus culture.
2. Define roles and responsibilities for campus groups and abide by them. Many roles are codified in legislation and the accreditation standards.
3. Resolve conflict when roles and responsibilities between groups are not clear. Conflict resolution methods that have been demonstrated as effective include continuous role re-enforcement, arbitration, ad-hoc groups, and co-leading.
4. Establish accreditation as important across the institution.
5. Account for different perceptions of accreditation among groups.
6. Reframe accreditation as internally motivated.
7. Enforce accreditation activities.
8. Seek a critical mass of motivated individuals and groups.
9. Maintain ongoing contact with accreditation processes.
10. Develop accreditation tools that account for existing campus rules/norms/customs.
11. Maintain the integrity of accreditation processes through enforcement, transparency, faithfulness, simplicity, and the production of results.
12. Interconnect a broad set of parties across the institution with formal processes and informal “buzz” related to accreditation.
13. Prioritize resources for accreditation.

Conversely, there appear to be some assumptions that leaders may want to avoid:

1. Do not assume that clear roles in the area of accreditation will overcome underlying
role conflicts.

2. Do not assume that enforcing accreditation processes will resolve underlying conflicts

3. Do not seek universal agreement and acceptance of accreditation processes.

4. Do not form accreditation tools in isolation from the campus rules/norms/customs.

These recommendations will be disseminated through distribution of this dissertation; formal presentations by the researcher at colleges, conferences, and policy implementing/making organizations; and publication of related articles.

**Further Studies**

Further study is merited in several areas. Most broadly, the literature review revealed that there is very little research on accreditation as a whole, minimal on accreditation in the California community colleges, and almost none that links what a college does with accreditation results. With more than half of the California community colleges being placed on sanction at some point in recent years, more research is obviously warranted.

The findings revealed that cultural practices appear to influence accreditation. Practices around divisions of labor, motivation, and integration emerged as important. Additional studies into the culture of colleges with regards to accreditation would be logical. These studies could make use of alternate methodologies to confirm or contradict the findings of this study. For example, a quantitative survey could examine cultural practices across a larger set of community colleges and produce more broadly applicable results. Conversely, and longitudinal study of a single college as it progresses from sanction to reaffirmation could provide more depth of understanding. This project
seems to indicate that faculty who have been at the institution for 20 or more years and
heavily involved in accreditation seem to be a particularly rich source of data in the area
of institutional culture.

The supplemental findings also seem to warrant additional research. Leadership
and change were consistent themes found in the data. Differences between the colleges
in these areas were not as clear as the master themes. However, there is significant
existing research that indicates they may play a role. For example, Hollingsworth (2010),
Hunnicutt (2008), and Sanders (2009) report that leader-member-exchanges styles of
leadership are beneficial to accreditation processes. And Hollingsworth, 2010), Skolits &
Graybeal (2007), and Morest and Jenkins (2009) discover that a lack of resources is one
of the biggest obstacles to accreditation activities. This existing research and the
prevalence of these themes in the data for this project indicate that additional examination
may be merited.

The findings from these four institutions indicate that accreditation seems to be
working in terms of developing accountability processes. This study focused on the
influence of cultural practices on accreditation. However, it became clear that
accreditation influenced the culture as well. A study into the impact of accreditation on
campuses would be a next logical step.

Lastly, college size seems to have at least some correlation with accreditation
results. An analysis of 17 colleges within three and one-half hours of the researchers
home revealed an r of -.53 when college size was correlated with number of sanctions.
Other institutional factors may correlate as well, such as percent of full-time faculty or
location. Existing research in this area has produced mixed results. Gordon (1998) and Salvador (1996) find that environmental factors have minimal impact. However, Mortenson (2000) finds that selectivity plays a role and Robinson-Weening (1995) and Baker (1998) reports college size mediates perceptions and impact. While beyond the scope of this project, further research into the relationship between environmental factors and accreditation results may be logical.

**Reflection**

The hypothesis of this project was that cultural practices influenced accreditation processes. It was also believed that the culture in colleges that regularly succeeded with accreditation differed from the culture in schools that regularly struggled. The researcher spoke with wide range of leaders involved in the California community college system prior to embarking on this project, including faculty, administrators, and staff. All agreed with the assertion that the culture of the institution influenced accreditation success. Some had opinions as to what some of these issues were. Administrative turnover, leadership, and college size were the most commonly identified. However, while it was generally agreed that culture was influential, there was little consensus on what “culture” meant.

Activity theory was selected as the theoretical framework because it provided a unit of analysis for assessing culture. It proved to be surprisingly useful throughout the project. In interviews, discussion often covered activity theory concepts without prompting from the researcher. Not wanting to be held hostage by activity theory, the researcher coded data using activity and grounded theory techniques simultaneously, and
even considered abandoning activity theory all together. However, when discussing the findings with a committee member, the researcher found activity theory to be particularly apropos in analyzing and describing the data. Activity theory provided not only key insight into particular areas of the cultures, but also how these areas interacted and influenced one another.

The greatest bias the researcher had was that campus culture influenced accreditation processes. Fortunately, other than internal “instinct,” the researcher had very little idea of what to look for, which minimized bias. Being in IT, the researcher had some beliefs that a good data system would be critical. Being a participatory and contingent style of leader, the researcher also had beliefs that leadership style might be important. Having witnessed administrative turnover, the researcher believed administrative stability would be important. As it turned out, the data did not necessarily support these notions. Relying on activity theory to frame the research and engaging in unstructured interviews in which participants had a strong role in guiding the discussion and helped limit bias on the part of the researcher.

In the final analysis, this researcher was surprised by how clear the differences between the X and Y colleges were. It had been anticipated that one or two differences might be apparent with further study needed. It was also believed that the findings would indicate that, for the most part, colleges did not have significantly cultural differences. This would have called into question either the hypothesis of the study or the overall process of accreditation. The researcher was pleasantly surprised by the degree to which there appear to be identifiable cultural differences between the colleges and that they
seemed to correlate with accreditation results. The researcher was even more pleased that identified cultural practices at the Y colleges appear to be transferrable and learnable.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study asserts that local cultural practices can influence accreditation processes. Because more than 50% of California community colleges have been placed on sanction at some point in the last decade, it is critical that we develop a deeper understanding of practices that might lead to improved results. This study is one of the first to compare and contrast multiple colleges with the intent of identifying some of these practices.

The two colleges that have repeatedly succeeded with accreditation exhibited differences from those that have struggled in three key areas: division of labor, motivation, and integration. Under division of labor, participants in the successful colleges reported more often on clearly abided by roles and responsibilities, less on conflict, and more on methods for resolving conflict when it did emerge. Under the theme of motivation, participants in the successful colleges reported more often that accreditation was broadly perceived as important and internally motivated and that enforcement of accreditation-related activities was consistent. Under the theme of integration, participants in the successful colleges reported more often on a high degree of contact with accreditation over time, that accreditation processes had integrity, and on interconnectedness activities.

Though this study was limited to four sites, it is believed that the findings will apply to a significant number of other California community colleges. Leaders should
begin to interpret and implement the recommendations from this study. External organizations should reference these recommendations when working with colleges.
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