FACULTY ATTITUDES TOWARD

ASSESSMENT

By

REBECCA MARILYN DUEBEN

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of

REBECCA MARILYN DUEBEN find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

________________________________________________________________________
Kelly A. Ward, Ph.D., Chair

________________________________________________________________________
Kristin Huggins, Ph.D.

________________________________________________________________________
Patricia A. Sturko, Ph.D.
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FACULTY ATTITUDES TOWARD
ASSESSMENT

Abstract

by Rebecca Marilyn Dueben, Ph.D.
Washington State University
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Chair: Kelly Ward

Within the field of undergraduate program assessment, anecdotal evidence abounds about negative faculty attitudes. Regardless of the common wisdom, there is little research that corroborates these reports. If reports are correct that faculty resistance is wide spread, it is still not clear if that resistance is toward accreditation, professional development, institutional requirements, other calls for accountability, or assessment. In fact, faculty members can be seen as spending much of their careers assessing: Faculty members routinely assess their students, a textbook they are using, whether the curriculum has adequately prepared students for the next class or their careers, and more. Faculty attitudes toward program assessment remain unclear and largely uninvestigated.

The focus of this study is based on 18 interviews of faculty members in three programs of study at a large, research-intensive, land-grant institution. The approach is socially constructivist in nature; the theoretical lens is that faculty members have constructed concepts of assessment and that their constructions inform their participation. The study provides information about faculty attitudes toward assessment with a nuanced understanding toward the factors that influence their attitudes. The study reveals that faculty members view student learning outcome assessment as a call for accountability, a reaction that supports their fear that the information they provide will be used to cut positions and programs of study. When assessment is initiated...
within the program, however, faculty willingly participate to gain the information that assessment provides to improve their curriculum and their teaching. Additionally, how faculty construct their understanding of assessment is related to the epistemological foundations of their disciplines.

The study adds to the body of literature on faculty attitudes toward assessment. Next steps include incorporating faculty perspective and participation into the assessment process. Additional research will reveal the support needed for faculty to engage in assessment and for institutions to support that engagement.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Student learning outcome assessment of undergraduate programs in higher education intends to learn if the teaching and curriculum are effective in giving students the knowledge, skills and abilities the program promises in its student learning outcomes. In essence, programs assess to determine how well the program is meeting its stated outcomes. Walvoord (2010) defines assessment as “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise and resources available, in order to inform decisions that affect student learning” (p. 2). Assessment can be used to provide information for improvement of a program, to determine if the program is effective, to provide faculty feedback about their teaching or the curriculum, to better understand students and more. Student learning outcomes assessment is formative, which is to say it provides information for the program and faculty so that they can “form” the students’ experiences. The intention of formative assessment is to improve or sustain the quality of the program so that students achieve the student learning outcomes. According to Suskie (2009), formative assessment is “undertaken while student learning is taking place rather than at the end of a course or program” (p. 24). At its core, program assessment is primarily about the students, the faculty, the curriculum and the way they interact to support students in achieving student learning outcomes.

Regional accreditation, on the other hand, requires that institutions conduct assessment to ascertain that institutions and their programs of study are actively engaged in assessing student learning outcomes. Regional accreditors are not able to be discipline specialists because they oversee all disciplines. Instead, the regional accreditors are often more concerned that institutions are engaged in assessment and working to improve teaching and curriculum. While
regional accreditors insist that institutions participate in assessment, much of the assessment process is left to the faculty and programs to decide, meaning that any assessments faculty already do for their and their students’ benefits could potentially be used to satisfy regional accreditors. In short, regional accreditation, among other things, ensures that formative assessment is happening at the program level, but regional accreditation is summative assessment because it “sums” up the current state of assessment (among other things) at an institution. Summative assessment labels the worth of an academic program. Its intention is not necessarily to improve the program but to determine the program’s worth. Suskie (2009) says that summative assessment is “the kind obtained at the end of a course or program” (p. 23).

Another type of accreditation is professional. Professional accreditation is a discipline-specific evaluation and is associated with primarily the professional disciplines, such as nursing, engineering, and education. Professional accreditation often sets benchmarks and other types of specific performance measures for the programs because the evaluation is conducted by peers in the discipline who also help set the standards of what kinds of knowledge, skills, and abilities students should have at graduation. Programs with professional accreditation must meet regional and professional accreditation standards. Professional accreditation can be considered summative assessment because it also sums up the value of the program.

In addition to professional and regional accreditations, there are a number of other evaluations that programs and faculty members must face that include program review, prioritization, or other types of productivity reports. These evaluations are also summative in nature in that they label the programs and determine the value in one way or another. Unlike the summative assessment of professional and regional accreditation, the other types of evaluation often happen at the higher levels of institutional administration, state government, or federal
government. The intention of these types of assessment is to determine the worth of a program, and often the intention is also to determine the worth of a program relative to other programs in order for budget prioritization.

The focus of the study is on faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment; understanding the broad range of assessments and evaluations faculty members face provides the context in which faculty members construct their attitudes. Although it might be logical to assume that faculty would embrace assessment as supportive of them in teaching students, assessment experts have lamented faculty resistance to assessment for years because they note that faculty participation in assessment is critical (Banta, 2011; Ewell, 2002; Walvoord, 2010).

**Faculty Involvement in Assessment**

Regardless whether the assessment is summative or formative, faculty involvement in the assessment process is crucial for several reasons. First, faculty members are experts in the content and best know the knowledge, skills, and abilities students should be gaining in a particular field of study. Faculty know how students have been taught the curriculum and can determine what assessments can best demonstrate how students meet the stated learning outcomes. Furthermore, the information gained from assessment returns to the faculty to make decisions about how to improve the curriculum and their teaching. Without faculty involvement, the assessments that can be used are outside the context of what students have learned.

One example of such an assessment is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). This exam has a standardized definition of what critical thinking is, a definition the creators obtained by examining a variety of institutions’ definitions of critical thinking in an attempt to create a definition that would be widely palatable to a many different institutions and stakeholders (CAE, 2014). One of the primary criticisms of the CLA is that the same definition of critical thinking is
applied equally to all discipline and institution types. For example, a fine arts major at a liberal arts college would be expected to exhibit the same kind of critical thinking that an electrical engineer major at a research intensive institution does (Banta, 2011). One of the problems with assessments, such as the CLA, is that they occur outside of the context in which students have been taught. While the CLA is widely used, its effectiveness is summative assessment because it is a snapshot used to determine if a program of study has been successful in teaching critical thinking. Further, the CLA offers no formative feedback for any of the institutions or programs of study to improve their curriculum or processes.

Faculty involvement is important to understand, develop, and implement assessment. Faculty involvement provides a rich understanding of what students have learned in the program of study. Without faculty engagement, what the institutions and stakeholders can know about student learning is limited to snapshots that may overgeneralize what students learn and are dependent upon student good will to try their hardest on the exams because students are likely to have no personal investment in the outcome. Conventional wisdom from the field reports that faculty attitudes toward assessment are negative and that faculty approach assessment with resistance, and these same experts offer advice for working with faculty to accomplish useful assessment work without being waylaid by their attitudes (Banta, 2011; Ewell, 2002; Walvoord, 2010). If faculty members are resistant toward assessment, then their participation is not full and could impact the quality of the assessment they conduct, making it important to understand faculty attitudes toward assessment.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

There are few formal studies of faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment in higher education. Instead, the assumption is that faculty members resist assessment mandates,
potentially not participating fully. The study examines what faculty member attitudes toward assessment are and what factors influence attitudes. Faculty involvement in assessment is significant because faculty are best positioned to understand what students have learned, how they have been taught, and to gather artifacts of student learning. Without faculty faith and belief in an assessment system that supports them, their students and the program, faculty can limit the authenticity of the assessment, or in worst case scenarios, sabotage assessment efforts. Not knowing what faculty attitudes toward assessment are runs the risk of limited or faulty assessment results and further alienating faculty members. The study sheds light on what faculty think about assessment, what they understand assessment to be, and their attitudes toward assessment. Understanding faculty attitudes is important in shaping approaches to faculty and in responding to their reactions. The result in understanding the attitudes is possibly improved faculty participation, better understanding of what students are learning and improved programs of study. The study works to take the initial step of exploring faculty attitudes with the intention to improve assessment processes.

The study employs a qualitative approach in order to fully explore the faculty members’ attitudes within the contexts of their programs and institutions at a four-year, land-grant institution. The study includes interviews with 18 faculty members from three different programs on one campus to determine their attitudes about assessment. One program has the additional assessment level of professional accreditation. The intention is to provide diversity of programs while still allowing the trends within the data to surface.

Gaining faculty member participation in assessment requires heightened understanding of faculty attitudes and perceptions about assessment and accreditation. While some descriptions of faculty resistance exist (Banta, 2011; Ewell, 2002; Walvoord, 2010), more research is needed to
clearly define what faculty members perceive about assessment in general and accreditation specifically. The study asks: What are faculty attitudes toward assessment? What factors influence faculty attitudes toward assessment? Understanding the responses to these questions will support faculty engagement in assessment efforts as well as better utilize faculty, institutional, and accreditors’ time to design and implement initiatives to meet the assessment challenges higher education faces.

**Research Design and Methodology**

Eighteen faculty members within three different academic programs provide the basis for understanding faculty attitudes. The sample includes a range including programs that have a long history of assessment and from programs that have limited experience with assessment. For example, one program with long-standing professional accreditation is included in the study as well as a program that has never had any formal assessment requirements placed on them outside regional accreditation. Individual faculty interviews took place within three different programs of one large, research intensive, land-grant university. Permanent faculty members within the selected programs were approached for interviews regardless of their appointment type (clinical or tenure track) to identify emerging trends in assessment. The intention is to capture as much of a faculty cross section within the three programs as possible to identify emerging trends. Adjunct faculty members were not interviewed because they tend to be paid on a per class basis, and so their participation in assessment practices, if it exists, tends to be limited. Additionally, the study includes analysis of websites and other available information as context for the faculty members’ perceptions and expectations.

Data analysis includes transcription of interviews, close and repeated readings, coding of themes, examination of institutional and program websites, and member checking as well as a
review of current literature to check for emerging trends and anomalies in the data. The data analysis provides a robust and deeper understanding of the position and attitudes of faculty members toward assessment and accreditation.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study approaches the programs and faculty members with a social constructivist view of assessment based on Dewey’s (1938) seminal work. Dewey saw education as happening not solely within an individual, but “between an individual and objects and other persons. The conception of situation and interaction are inseparable from each other” (p. 43). Burr’s work (2003) also influences the study in describing knowledge as being “construct[ed] between people” (p. 4). The framework provides a view to understand faculty attitudes toward assessment as constructed within the faculty’s discipline and department, constructing views of assessment that shape their attitudes. Reactions to assessment, then, happen not only within an individual faculty member but in the faculty members’ relations with each other, the institution’s administration, as well as the discipline. Assessment and its attending issues are constructed within the program, including how it is approached or reacted to as well as how the program responds to outside calls for authority. Faculty members construct their attitudes toward assessment in the context of their lives within the program, responding to students, course loads, committee work, and more. How they understand assessment and believe it to work is influenced by their work within the program and their colleagues’ interpretations and responses to assessment. Recognizing the social constructs and how they influence, or fail to influence, the faculty members is an important step for making meaning within the study. How the program and individual faculty members interpret and tell the story of assessment can reveal much about their participation. Additionally, constructivism guides the study’s questions, analysis, and
presentation of data, especially in terms of how the history and current contexts influence individual interpretations of assessment and accreditation.

**Summary**

Understanding faculty attitudes about assessment and the factors that influence those attitudes is a first step to better understand faculty participation in assessment. If the common wisdom expressed by many assessment experts in the field is correct, faculty members generally resist participating in assessment. In order to allow faculty members to explain their own constructions of assessment, the study relies on a qualitative approach. The study attempts to understand faculty responses toward assessment by allowing the participants to express their opinions, experiences, and concerns with complexity. To place the results from the study in context, a broad history of assessment in the U.S., as well as other related literature, are provided in the next chapter to see how assessment and calls for accountability have worked to shape faculty attitudes toward assessment.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Assessment is a complex system of improvement and accountability that requires understanding faculty involvement to provide trustworthy data. Understanding the context of assessment in the U.S., as well as how assessment has been conducted over time, provides insight into how faculty members have constructed their understandings of and reactions to assessment. This chapter provides an overview of assessment and accreditation, including the history, the purpose of assessment, and faculty members’ involvement in order to provide a context in which the faculty attitudes, as revealed by the data analysis of the research, are situated.

Current Context of Regional Accreditation and Accountability

To examine the ways that calls for accountability have influenced higher education, it is helpful to know how regional accreditation has interacted with and influenced higher education. Regional accreditation, although it currently only requires that institutions are involved in formative assessment, stands between institutions of higher learning and the federal government. Regional accreditors attempt to respond to the concerns of the federal government by demonstrating the value of higher education, while still supporting institutions of higher learning. Because of this nuanced political stance, a review of regional accreditation provides information about higher education and calls for accountability.

The national budget crisis placed strain on the budgets of higher education, decreasing the size of the faculty while increasing the amount of work for individual faculty members. More committee work and larger sized classes consume faculty time and attention (Newman, 2012). Research indicates that faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment are strained, but
this assumption overlooks the fact that faculty members spend much of their time participating in assessment even when it is not required (Ewell, 2011).

Most of the assessment work faculty members do, however, is not to fulfill the requirements of outside calls for accountability. When examining faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment, the distinction between assessment and outside calls for accountability is important: Teachers assess their own processes and methods, the curriculum, their students, and student work. What attitudes faculty members have toward assessment, however, is largely unreported. Read anecdotal reports carefully of faculty resistance toward assessment, and what will surface is the resistance faculty members feel toward accreditation and other types of accountability but not necessarily toward assessment. While assessment has always been present in education, accreditation and other types of outside calls for accountability are relatively recent developments (Brittingham, 2009).

Some of the reported resistance toward accreditation can be attributed to the approach many accreditors take. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as well as the Department of Education insist that accreditation is a voluntary process that is used as a “means to assure and improve higher education quality, assisting institutions and programs using a set of standards developed by peers” (CHEA, 2015, para. 1). Undermining this notion of free participation is the reality that if institutions do not participate in regional accreditation, they will not be eligible to receive federal funds. Without federal funds, many institutions of higher education would find their financial future at stake.

The accreditors, for their part, oversee the accreditation process on campuses via the following process:
1. An individual institution typically completes a self-study and submits it to the regional accreditor for review.

2. The regional accreditor gathers volunteers from peer institutions within the region to visit the institution.

3. The team reviews the institution’s self-study, visits the campus, and then makes recommendations to the accreditor.

4. The accreditor then determines whether to grant or extend accreditation (CHEA, 2012).

Throughout the process, CHEA, and consequently the regional accreditors, are supportive of institution and program control over student learning outcomes. The accreditors have little choice but to have the institutions or programs control the learning outcomes because the accreditors do not have specific discipline knowledge. Professional accreditors can be much more specific in their requirements, but the regional accreditors often focus on the processes of assessment rather than the actual data or benchmarks. The consequence is that CHEA works to support individual institutions as it responds to the federal government, which is largely looking for definitive answers about the complex nature of student learning. Tension can mount for CHEA as it stands between the demands of the federal government and the independence of individual institutions and programs controlling their student outcomes and assessment.

In response to this tension, CHEA has encouraged regional accreditors to accept the individual institutions’ goals and outcomes as the standards by which they are judged. The decision allows institutions, programs, and even individual faculty members to use the assessment they have long been doing as part of the assessment process and evidence that their students are meeting the student learning outcomes.
Regional accreditors and CHEA also stand up for institutions of higher learning against other outside calls for accountability. A recent example of this accountability happened when the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report in late 2014 taking aim at national accreditors, who the GAO questioned of doing their jobs properly. At issue was that the GAO thought accreditors should sanction colleges with poor outcomes such as graduation rates, loan default rates, dropout rates, and retention rates more than the accreditors have done. CHEA President Judith Eaton explained that the accreditors have a process that intends to improve universities, not deny accreditation (Stratford, 2014). The incident with the GAO reveals that, while the federal government often misunderstands the purposes of assessing student learning in higher education, it can exert pressure. When the accreditors come under fire, they defend institutions and yet still often pass the demands on to universities, who in turn make demands of the departments and programs. This high-stakes accountability is ultimately passed along to the faculty members.

The GAO threat to professional freedom is an example of how CHEA responds to federal level demands for accountability, but many examples of threats exist on the state and institutional level as well. Examples of higher education coming under decreased state funding abound (Mortenson, 2012), while threats to the institution’s performance also exist. McLendon et al. (2006) note that the state involvement in higher education is focused on controlling the outcomes of higher education: “States are demanding performance by public colleges and universities. In scrutinizing outcomes, state policymakers have sought to influence institutional behavior for the purpose of improving institutional performance” (p. 1). CHEA and accreditors serve a role in explaining the value of higher education in an attempt to protect institutions from outside influence that could alter their behavior and even their missions.
For faculty members, this type of ongoing threat is the context in which they teach, research, and serve. Even when they survive a reprioritization, faculty members are well aware that the next round of cuts is possibly looming. The freedom that had enticed faculty members into the academy seems to be shrinking fast. It is within this atmosphere faculty members are asked to do more assessment and prove that their students are meeting the student learning outcomes. The history of accreditation in the United States offers additional insights into the tension of who will oversee higher education.

A Brief History of Assessment, Accreditation and Calls for Accountability

By the time institutions like Harvard and other Ivy League schools were well established in the United States, many more institutions of higher learning were appearing and disappearing at rapid rates. By 1860, Brittingham (2009) reports that over half of the 500 colleges that had been established were already disbanded. Established institutions looked for ways to differentiate themselves from what they considered fly-by-night colleges, especially to potential students and donors. In 1885, the first regional accreditor, the New England Association of Schools, was established to act as an accreditor and note which institutions were respectable. By 1900, half of the current six regional accreditors were in existence for the same purpose. These accreditors were mostly concerned with distinguishing diploma mills from established institutions (Brittingham, 2009).

A desire to quantify the experience of students in higher education began in the U.S. in earnest in the 1930s (Shavelson, 2007). At that time, it was not known how or if large scale standardized tests would work in higher education. The state of Pennsylvania took on the task by administering a 3,200 multiple-choice item, 12-hour long exam to 70% of its college seniors (Shavelson). The test was not repeated in that form, but its existence established that large-scale
standardized testing was possible, if onerous for the test takers (and, likely, the test administrators and graders, too).

With World War II and the influx of federal money to higher education via the G.I. Bill, the federal government became more interested in exactly how their dollars were being spent. The federal government looked to regional accreditors to help with the process. In 1952, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges used the word “accredit” for the first time in reviewing a college in response to the federal government’s influence (Brittingham, 2009). The federal government’s desire, however, for quantifiable evidence that students were learning—that the federal dollars were being well spent—continued and flourished as did standardized tests of various forms.

In the late 1970s, faculty members protested the use of standardized tests and requested testing that captured the students’ higher order thinking skills (Shavelson, 2007). The result was that Educational Testing Services (ETS) and American College Testing (ACT) leapt to the fore with versions of tests that required students to apply knowledge in novel situations and that contained open-ended questions. New Jersey also weighed in with the Tasks in Critical Thinking exam (Shavelson). While these tests were not mandated, they established the possibility of exams testing higher order thinking skills. The tests, however, did not last ten years. Shavelson reports that problems with cost, inter-rater reliability, and scoring ultimately were the demise of each of the tests. Some of the tests continued but in a multiple choice format that did not attempt to test critical thinking.

The 1980s created a watershed in terms of assessment in the U.S. and student learning outcomes. In the mid-1980s, five publications served to shake up the assessment world and introduce student learning outcomes. First, the Study Group on the Conditions for Excellence in
Higher Education published a report with four major findings (Ewell, 2002). They found that higher education should set high standards for students, that learning should be active, and that students need prompt feedback on their work. Perhaps even more important was the report’s assertion that institutions of higher learning could actually learn and change themselves for the better from doing assessment (Ewell, 2002).

The Study Group’s report was followed in 1985 by a report from the Association of American Colleges (AAC, now the Association American Colleges and Universities) which found that higher education lacked curricular coherence. William Bennett had already entered the fray and raised concerns about curriculum with his book, *To Reclaim a Legacy*, in 1984. In 1983, the Department of Education (with *A Nation at Risk*) and in 1985 the National Governors’ Association with *A Time for Results* (Alexander et al., 1986) heightened concerns about effectiveness within institutions of higher learning. These combined voices grew loud enough that the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) held the First National Conference on Assessment to address the concerns raised by the AAC, Bennett, and the Department of Education. The result was that both the NIE and the AAHE called for the use of student learning outcomes (Ewell, 2002).

Student learning outcomes, as called for in the literature and the reports (Banta, 1999; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010), require individual institutions and/or programs of study to determine their own learning outcomes for students. The process of creating student learning outcomes is kept local by faculty members who know the students and the curriculum. Faculty members choose their own measures (and methodologies, for that matter) to assess the students’ progress. The findings are sometimes not quantifiable and often can be understood only in context of the program or institution.
The desire for a definitive number to assess higher education, however, still existed with the Department of Education. By 1990, the Department was already consulting with ETS on a national standardized test for higher education. ETS, ever ready with a standardized test, had one by 1996. The only reason the test was not adopted is because Congress voted it down, concerned about the cost (Banta, 1999).

By 2006, then-president George W. Bush asked the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, to write a report on the state of higher education in the U.S. The report, titled *A Test of Leadership*, was completed in 2006 by what is commonly referred to as the Spellings Commission (also known as the Commission on Higher Education). The report noticed a number of things: Federal financial aid was a confusing process that mostly put funds into the hands of those who did not need it, students were vastly underprepared for higher education, and more. Most concerning in terms of higher education assessment, however, was the report’s finding that college students were not learning and that institutions of higher learning were resistant to accountability. The Spellings Commission solution was a national, mandatory, standardized test to be administered to all college seniors before graduation. The test the commission recommended, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), was already established and in use. High-stakes standardized testing was inspired by the same testing behind No Child Left Behind for K-12 schools (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2007). At the time Spellings published the report, approximately 30,000 students had taken the CLA. As of November 2011, 300,000 students had taken it (Field, 2011). The sponsors of the CLA, the Council to Aid Education (CAE, 2014), notes that “over 700 institutions—both in the United States and Internationally—have used the CLA to benchmark value-added growth in student learning at their college or university compared to that of other institutions” (para. 2).
The CLA is a timed test that purports to assess critical thinking (CLA, 2012). It consists of three parts, one of which gives students a scenario, documents to consider, and then asks students to create a product from that information. The example the CLA website offers focuses on a company called Dyna-Tech that is considering buying a certain kind of airplane which just experienced a fatal and very public crash. Students are given the scenario, told they report to the CEO of Dyna-Tech, and asked to write a memo to the CEO recommending whether to buy the plane or not. Documents for students to consider might include federal safety reports, letters to newspaper editors, reports from companies with similar planes, and more. Students must determine which documents they will consider and which ones they will not. They then write a convincing memo with recommendations to the CEO (CLA, 2012).

The CLA was written by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) which was established by corporations in the 1950s to support education (CAE, 2014). The CAE says that they canvassed multiple institutions of higher learning to find their definitions of “critical thinking” before they applied their own (CAE, 2014). Their intention was to create a universal definition of critical thinking that would appeal to all institutions. The Spellings Commission recommended the CLA exam as a standard by which all institutions of higher learning and disciplines could be compared.

One concern with the CLA is that it compares all disciplines and institutions equally, and notes as a positive that the results of the exams can be “compared to that of other institutions” (CLA, 2012). Critical thinking that might happen in a history program in a community college is compared with the critical thinking that happens with a business major in a research intensive university. The critics who have raised such concerns are not proposing a hierarchy of critical thinking, but rather note that there is not one definition of critical thinking that can be applied to
all disciplines and institutions (e.g. Banta, 2011). Equally concerning is what the federal government, who has only ever involved itself with assessment in higher education when it has been financially involved, might do with the results once it has them and can compare them. If the federal concern is about funding, and a review of history makes that case (Brittingham, 2009; Shavelson, 2007), then the federal government needs to be clear about the use of the testing data once it has been obtained.

**Purpose of Assessment**

If federal use of comparison data concerns institutions, programs, or faculty members, the CAE has provided something they call “CLA in the Classroom” (CAE, 2012). When faculty members access “CLA in the Classroom,” they are coached to establish a student-centered, activity-based pedagogy that engages students. Straight lectures are discouraged and engaging students to practice the skills on the test are encouraged. As much as the student-centered pedagogies are laudable, institutions everywhere should be concerned about the CAE’s ability to influence what happens in the classroom. While the CLA is a constructivist test (in that students construct their own knowledge) and the “CLA in the Classroom” employs a progressive pedagogy, higher education could find itself next to K-12 education which is dealing with *No Child Left Behind* and pressures to teach to the test. For now, the decisions about what happens in the higher education classroom and how it is taught remain within the faculty’s purview, deeply rooted in academic freedom.

Assessment in the U.S. has followed the trends of teaching and learning. As institutions and classrooms have become more student-centered, so has assessment. The 1980s upheaval over what kind of assessment should be used was about competing philosophies related to teaching and learning. Bennett’s (1984) *To Reclaim a Legacy* is about maintaining a pedagogy
where knowledge recall is central. The National Commission on Excellence in Education’s (1983) *A Nation at Risk* spoke to the fear that the changes would leave the U.S. behind other countries—and the attempts by the NIE and AAHE were a reflection of the practitioners in the field who knew that student-centered teaching and learning were working based on their own assessments.

Assessment is not only tied to the mission of teaching and learning in higher education, it should be a direct reflection of it. What needs to be determined is two-fold: How the students are taught and the purpose of assessment. The “how” students are taught can only be determined on the local level by the faculty members who are teaching them. The purpose, however, can be multi-fold. For example, if the purpose of assessment is simply to compare institutions or to make the process as neat and painless as possible, it seems a clear choice is a standardized test. If, however, the purpose is to determine how to best shape the curriculum to improve student learning, then the assessment is tied to teaching and learning. Leadership at the institutional, state and federal levels would do well to be explicit in their calls for accountability, clarifying the purpose for assessment. The purpose needs to respond not only to the program’s and institution’s desires for curricular improvement and to ensure students are meeting student learning outcomes, but also to respond to those calling for accountability, as the regional accreditors are attempting to have the institutions do.

**The Role of Faculty**

Because they know their students and know how the students were taught, faculty members are best placed for assessing students. Faculty members are the primary members of the academic community who have direct experience with the ways in which students learn the program content. Collectively, faculty create the curriculum for a degree program, and on a more
individual level, faculty design the courses and assignments that direct impact student learning. Knowing what and how students were taught supports the creation of an assessment plan that yields useful information. Faculty also assess (or oversee the assessment) of each student. Collectively, faculty members can speak to the strengths and challenges of a cohort of students. Because of the work faculty do with students, they are already a rich resource for assessment, and including them as central players in the assessment process is essential for developing evidence-based knowledge of the impact their programs have on students. If assessment is going to remain as a localized pursuit, faculty members must be involved.

Anecdotal reports, however, reveal that faculty members are resistant to assessment (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Kuh et al., 2014; Tagg, 2012). Instead of taking up assessment responsibilities, the anecdotal reports assert, faculty members presented considerable resistance toward assessment. Banta (1999) reports what faculty resistance sounded like: “[M]ost faculty respond, ‘We assess all the time. We use course and cumulative grade point averages to tell us how students are doing. What’s wrong with that?’” (p.18). Assessing individual students or even individual courses, however, does not reveal how the program or cohorts of students are learning the curriculum. A faculty member who may know that his or her class is struggling with a basic concept only supports the program when she or he shares that information with the rest of the faculty. In part, assessment is a process to formalize that sharing and watch groups of students, not individual students, respond to the teaching and curriculum over time.

Yet, Banta (1999) recounts that assessment of the curriculum or program also meets with resistance: “Why would we want to change the curriculum? Things are working well now” (p. 18). These assertions, without assessment, are based on the observations of individual faculty members who may have different experiences with students leading them to differing
conclusions. Assessment provides an additional source of information to support faculty in developing an effective curriculum and teaching methods to best serve student learning. Yet, Banta further reported that faculty members sometimes viewed assessment as something that could be waited out: A fad that would fade.

In 2005, Linkon outlined the resistance faculty members experience to assessment:

1. Faculty are “insulted and irritated by being asked to prove the value of our work. Like other professionals, we [faculty] believe that we should be trusted to do our jobs well” (p. 29).

2. Faculty have “witnessed the deleterious effects of assessment on the public image and professional independence of K-12 teachers, and we fear that the same professional decline will happen to us” (p. 30).

3. Assessment takes time. Even when tools could save time in the long run, “we need to learn how to design and use such tools and that can be a lengthy process” (p. 30).

4. Faculty do not see significant benefits for themselves or their students. “Furthermore, few rewards exist for these efforts” (p. 30).

5. “Assessment also raises concerns about academic freedom” (p. 30). Faculty are concerned about individual freedom concerning different theories and approaches.

6. Learning is difficult to measure, and standardized tests are particularly problematic for the humanities. As a cultural studies teacher, Linkon “encourage[s] [students] to pursue questions that generate multiple and even contradictory answers” (p. 30). The humanities resist a quantitative response that is generated by standardized tests.

These concerns were an echo of the sources of faculty resistance reported by Shilling and Shilling (1998). Another element to faculty attitudes toward assessment, as reflected in the
literature, is that assessment as a “one size fits all” approach and does not always consider context and culture, leaving faculty wary.

Clark’s research (1987) illustrates that faculty culture can differ depending on institution and discipline. The professional school, according to Clark, must belong to the academic family of the institution, as well as respond to the demands of the discipline. For example, according to Clark, a school of education must demonstrate its academic weight through research activities while at the same time respond to the needs of hands-on practicum experience for students. These same concerns are faced by other programs that also have professional accreditation. Clark’s conception of discipline and culture is important to consider in relation to assessment given the role the department plays on how faculty approach their work.

Clark (1987) notes that across disciplines, the “nearest thing to common ideological ground” (p. 131) is the gaining of knowledge. Faculty members in differing disciplines voice this as intellectual curiosity, problem solving, or, in current parlance, and, perhaps, Clark would add the term creative thinking. Yet, how these quests for knowledge are expressed reveal how disciplines view knowledge. For example, some disciplines in the humanities focus on problematizing a question rather than arriving at a definitive answer. Other disciplines enjoy more answering “unanswered questions” (p. 131). Clark’s study provides an understanding of the ways disciplines differ.

**Disciplinary Foundations**

One way that disciplines differ is based on how knowledge is constructed and epistemological origins. According to Kincheloe (2008), epistemology “constitutes the branch of philosophy that analyzes the nature of knowledge and what [people] believe to be true” (p. 15). Further, Kincheloe notes that educational epistemology probes what:
we consider valid and important knowledge and which parts of it should become part of the curriculum? How do we figure out what to teach [or learn] and is the knowledge we choose of any worth? How do we figure out what to teach and is the knowledge we choose of any worth? (pp. 15-16)

The study considers three belief systems: Post positivism, constructivism, and interpretivist. Each of the terms described here are umbrella terms, with many varying perspectives and beliefs. Post-positivism can be characterized by the belief that an external reality exists separate from the individual’s experience or perception of it, and that the external reality is knowable and measurable, and therefore explainable (Grix, 2010). Creswell (2009) notes that “the knowledge that develops through a post-positivist lens is based on careful observation and measurement of the objective reality that exists ‘out there’ in the world” (p. 7). In a post-positivist approach, Creswell notes that it can be “reductionist in that the intent is to reduce the ideas into a small, discrete set of ideas to test” (p. 7).

Constructivism, on the other hand, can be seen as having the hallmark of having no knowledge that is independent of the meaning outside of that attributed to it by the learner. Creswell (2009) says that meanings in a constructivist view can lead the researcher to “look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p. 8). For constructivists, learning is about building knowledge within a community of learners that is based on the learners’ experience and the past knowledge they have gained. “Often,” Creswell notes, “the meanings are negotiated socially and historically” (p. 8). Constructivism asserts that knowledge is created by the people involved and as such is in a constant state of revision (Grix, 2010).
An interpretivist epistemology notes that “the world does not exist independently of our knowing of it” (Grix, 2010, p. 84). Interpretivism emphasizes understanding over explanation and that “social phenomena do not exist independently of our interpretation of them and it is these interpretations which affect outcomes” (Grix, p. 84), making objective observations impossible. Rather, interpretivism embraces subjectivity, and that “the world is socially constructed through the interaction of individuals and the separation of ‘fact’ and ‘value’ is not as clear cut as the positivists claim” (Grix, p. 83).

These epistemological positions, while broad, are useful in illustrating if and when epistemology is at the heart of how, and why, faculty react to assessment. While one department may decide that having students recall facts is an appropriate measure of what students have learned, another program may reject that approach in favor of assessing what students do with the content they have learned. Different disciplines value what is legitimate knowledge in different ways in part based on these belief systems. The type of assessment employed to evaluate differing concepts of knowledge must correspond to the epistemological foundations of the discipline to be effective. If faculty members believe that knowledge is gained by transferring knowledge to students, then assessing what students have learned can be accomplished, for example, by a standardized test or other means to demonstrate recall. The degree to which students passed that test would support or contradict the faculty members’ belief that knowledge is gained through exposure. If, on the other hand, faculty members see learning as an interpretative process of problematizing social constructs, then a standardized test that privileges knowledge recall will not illustrate what students have learned. Assessment must be in alignment with instruction to create a true representation of what students have learned. How faculty see students as gaining knowledge is important for the field of assessment in order to
determine how to assess student knowledge. If the assessment is not aligned with the origins of knowledge or the epistemological foundations of a particular field of study or discipline, then the information gained from the assessment is not useful to determine how to adjust methods of instruction and curriculum. There needs to be alignment between how faculty see knowledge and how faculty are a part of the assessment process.

In addition to epistemological differences, faculty involvement in assessment is also related to workload. Budget realities on many campuses have meant increases in class sizes, reductions in the number of faculty members, and assignment of more committee work to those faculty who remain in the department. Faculty members are often burdened with multiple demands, and assessment work is not always acknowledged by the institution. Participating in assessment or accreditation processes is often overlooked in faculty evaluation. Assessment can take time away from publications, grants, and other work that is considered in faculty members’ annual reviews and tenure packets (Romero, 2008), especially in research universities. Banta (1999) notes that faculty involvement creates successful assessment that meets the demands of accreditors, while providing the program with useful information, yet buy-in can be difficult to attain given conflicting messages about faculty work and general workloads.

An Opportunity to Shape Assessment and Accreditation

Several notable observations come from the current state of assessment and the review of literature. First, faculty members tend to resist formal assessment for accreditation despite the fact that faculty members routinely assess students, programs of studies, curricula, and student work—and despite the fact that assessment specialists are supportive of using the assessment that is already in place (Walvoord, 2010). The contradiction seems to be that faculty are deeply
involved with assessment in their customary practices, yet when they are asked to report out their processes or results of assessment, they resist.

At the same time the contradiction exists, the calls for accountability are not going away. If anything, they have been growing since the mid-1980s. Popular publications such as *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roksa, 2011) illustrate a populace becoming more frustrated with higher education’s perceived lack of accountability. Arum and Roksa used the CLA as one of their cornerstones of evidence that higher education is not accomplishing its aims. The CLA is the same exam supported by the Spellings Commission as a standardized test for all of higher education. It is important to note that each time a standardized test for higher education has gained any ground in the U.S., it has failed only due to cost, not necessarily because of a greater understanding about what higher education does or because of the resistance aired by faculty.

But even beyond the calls for accountability, having a structured, reliable, and local system for assessment gives an individual program (and by extension, the institution) an insight into the program practices of teaching and learning, providing evidence in tough financial times of the program’s worth and how well the students are meeting the student learning outcomes. Accountability is important, but the assessment movement can be about much more than assuring that higher education is achieving its aims. Assessment reveals that the dynamic relationship between professor, student, and content, exploring what is effective and how to improve the relationships. Assessment should be intricately linked to revealing how a program accomplishes its goals and outcomes through teaching and learning. Such a process could even be used as a recruitment tool.

The intentions of the federal government and the institutions of higher education are in alignment, with the only difference being the type of data each respects. Higher education
generally respects the complex process of human learning, while the federal government looks to the bottom line: Is higher education “working”? Check yes or no. The review of literature and the history and evolution of assessment reveal that assessment is here to stay and that faculty appear to resist participation in assessment processes. Many of the reports of faculty resistance are based on anecdotal reports from assessment specialists in the field as opposed to formalized research on faculty perspectives.

Higher education stands at a crossroads of being able to significantly shape assessment of student learning, particularly what data is valued, or resist the entire process, leaving the federal government and accrediting agencies to define what is valued and make decisions from those values. Individual faculty members seem to constitute the greatest resistance toward assessment. Why? Supporters of higher education find the question critical. Without faculty member support, the road ahead for assessment looks bleak.

An important component of assessment and faculty involvement is understanding faculty roles in, and attitudes of, assessment processes. The following chapters provide an overview of the study that seeks to fill the gap by providing an explanation of the study, as well as an analysis of the research data.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to determine what faculty attitudes toward assessment are and what contributes to those attitudes. Interviews with individual faculty members provide their perspectives, experiences, and how they construct those experiences. Qualitative research is used in the study to explore the “what” faculty attitudes are and “how” those attitudes are constructed, echoing Creswell’s (2009) assertion that qualitative research is used to explore the “how” or “what” questions of a study. The study asks: What are faculty attitudes toward assessment? What factors influence faculty attitudes toward assessment? In order to address these questions, a qualitative approach as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is used.

Research Design

The tradition of qualitative research allows for a full exploration of faculty member attitudes, including a deep understanding of any contradictory behaviors which allows for follow up questions and the incorporation of any unexpected phenomena. Naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) provides an opportunity for individuals to tell their stories in a way that allows for multiple perspectives to be developed, while privileging faculty experiences. Faculty’s nuanced perceptions of assessment, accountability, and teaching and learning all influence their attitudes toward program-level assessment.

The research design grows out of my previous work with faculty where I observe that faculty initial reactions to assessment often give way to more nuanced perspectives when the conversation continues. Based on those observations, I want to create a research design that provides the participants time to explore their own perspectives and to reflect on their possibly contradictory beliefs, opinions, behaviors, and beliefs. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) note that
qualitative research is “rich in description of people, places, and conversations and not easily handled by statistical procedures . . . [Qualitative research] investigate[s] topics in all their complexity, in context” (p. 2). I choose qualitative research as a study type in order to get the rich descriptions and contradictions from faculty.

My intention in conducting the research is to provide space for the participants to freely express their thoughts without judgment so that I might better understand how assessment is placed within their perspectives of faculty work and life. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that:

what is salient to us is that, first, no manipulation on the part of the inquirer is implied, and, second, the inquirer imposes no apriori units on the outcome.

Naturalistic investigation is what the naturalistic investigator does, and these two tenets are the prime directives. (p. 8)

Following Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) advice provides the rich descriptions necessary to understand faculty attitudes toward assessment. Because qualitative research allows the data to be descriptive, the participants’ stories can be told in their own words and from their own perspectives.

The intent of a qualitative research design is to keep focused on faculty perspectives. In order to keep the focus on faculty perspectives, the interviews were loosely structured (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), with a set of designed questions but also with a willingness on my part to talk about what the faculty members found important about assessment. I did not have a set agenda going into the interviews about what I thought the faculty would or should say, but encouraged them to speak at length on their experiences in the program with assessment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As long as the topic was assessment, I did not attempt to influence faculty members’ comments. When the topic strayed from assessment, I gently directed the faculty members back
to the topic. Part of what makes the qualitative methodology a good choice for this research is that the way faculty members talked about assessment provided as much as data as what they said. All of the interviews were recorded, except for two interviews when participants requested that they not be recorded. In those cases, I took detailed notes.

Consistent with a research approach grounded in qualitative design, the most appropriate method for data collection is interviews. The focus on faculty attitudes that drives this study points to interviews as more effective rather than, for example, focus groups or other types of data collection. Individual interviews provide faculty members an opportunity to openly and confidentially express their opinions without concern about how it might affect their promotion or standing in the department. Interviews also allowed time for me as a researcher to establish a rapport with the faculty that conveyed acceptance of what they had to say. I interviewed faculty in their offices to better understand their working environments and to make the interview on their own “turf.” If faculty suggested another location, I accepted the suggestion without comment, but did take note (in case it provided more information for the research) about why faculty said they wanted to talk away from their offices.

In all, the methodology and methods allow the participants to fully explore their own ideas about assessment in a non-judgmental environment. The methodology, methods, and the theoretical framework of social constructivism all work together in the idea that faculty have constructed their perspectives and approaches to assessment. The qualitative methodology and interview methods provide the participants with a chance to explore their ideas and talk them out, providing the rich detail to understand how, and in some cases, why they constructed their attitudes toward assessment.
Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism best frames the study’s approach as it recognizes the importance of culture and context within a society to construct knowledge (Kim, 2001). Social constructivism acknowledges that knowing is created through the process of taking knowledge that is already established within a community, adding interpretations of individual experiences and then constructing knowledge based on new experiences (Burr, 2003). Because knowledge is negotiated through human activity, constructivism allows that there are multiple realities, meanings and interpretations (Kim, 2001). Constructivism is especially relevant to the study because much of how education is constructed is influenced by Dewey (1938), who espoused that education should be more than a student memorizing knowledge. Instead, education should engage the student starting with what the student already knows and with the educator perceiving the student not simply as a body to carry out repetitive tasks or a brain to absorb facts. That is, that students and faculty construct knowledge. Dewey saw the student as a complex entity who must engage with the process of education to gain from it intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally. A student-centered education considers what students already know and have experienced. According to Dewey (1960), “If we see that knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene, then the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action” (p. 196). This view of the learner as central to the process of education indicates that the learner is the constructor of the knowledge. Dewey’s use of constructivism is relevant for what he contributes to understanding about the teaching and learning process. His work is also relevant in terms of how faculty assess student learning.
Given the interconnectedness between faculty members’ understandings of assessment and teaching and learning, the research provides space for trends to emerge, rather than being deduced. The process of assessment is essentially constructivist in nature: Faculty members, based on their existent understanding of what they students should know or be able to do, assess students’ abilities in the particular discipline. Based on the results faculty receive from the assessment data, which is often not conducted to the rigors of formal research because of the inability to control variables, faculty make either changes to their teaching and curriculum or gather more information by further assessing students. Assessment itself is a process of understanding what students have learned and how students gain knowledge and is integral to the teaching and learning process. For the study to embrace a constructivist approach is to understand the complexities of teaching, learning, and assessment. In the same way that learners are central to a constructivist pedagogy, so too should faculty be central to a constructivist view of assessment. Faculty collectively are the constructors of what students are taught, how they are taught, and how faculty know when and what students have learned.

The review of literature illustrates that calls for accountability are often coming from those who are financially invested in higher education (e.g., the federal government and corporations). While assessment and calls for accountability are individual, often separate constructs, they are frequently inextricably intertwined because they both start from the same question: “What are students learning?” However, the constructs of assessment and accountability are distinctly different. Assessment is an attempt to answer the questions “What are the students learning?” and “How do teaching, curriculum, and more influence learning?” A call for accountability can be considered an attempt to answer the questions “What are students learning?” and “Does what the students are learning justify the amount of funds invested in
education?” The questions beget very different answers because they come from distinctly different perspectives. For those focused on the bottom dollar, the complicated answers to all of those questions can be frustratingly vague—and sometimes assumed to be an attempt to avoid the simple “yes/no” answer requested. For those focused on teaching and learning, outside calls for accountability are often perceived as a further demand on the teachers’ time—and a suspicious demand at that. For those who devote themselves to scholarly pursuits, having to prove in specific ways what students have learned can be frustratingly limited. Because a liberal education is not always a product or measurable skill, that indefinable added quality has been difficult to assess, making answers to the calls for accountability a less defined answer. Because of these often competing understandings of assessment, constructivism provides a theoretical framework to examine differing attitudes about how the assessment works within the system of higher education.

Within a given institution, how relationships have been developed between faculty members and administration or between faculty members and students can highly influence how assessment and accreditation are handled. If, for example, there is a history of mistrust between administrators and faculty members, requests from the administration for faculty members to participate in accreditation can be ill-received, even more so if a context of budget cuts and austerity have been first established. If, on the other hand, relationships built on trust between administrators and faculty exist, requests for participation in accreditation can be met with work already completed (or ongoing) for assessment. The pre-existing social, economic, and political contexts can influence how assessment and accreditation are approached and integrated by faculty. In the study, constructivism is used to frame the study questions and perspectives and is also used to provide a context for data analysis.
Positionality

An important component of any qualitative study is the role and perspective of the researcher. I come at this project with two perspectives—as a practitioner with experience working in the field of assessment and as a researcher who resonates with learning as a process that is shaped by teachers and learners and best understood based on personal experience. As a practitioner, I deeply believe in higher education and the roles faculty play in meeting the goals of higher education. In my position as an Assessment Specialist, I support the faculty in doing the difficult work of teaching and assessing their students. As class sizes grow and faculty feel more burdened, I am tasked with becoming more effective in my job at supporting faculty to manage their loads so that the mission of the institution succeeds.

I have worked at Washington State University for the past 18 years, mostly in staff positions. I have been an adjunct and have been on a faculty appointment, as well, for approximately five of the 18 years, yet all of my time on campus can be characterized as doing faculty support of some kind. Even during my time as faculty, part of my appointment required that I support faculty members in teaching. I have done faculty development workshops, course design, and for the past four years have been working to support faculty in doing useful program assessment work. I have positive relationships with faculty, even with faculty members who resent assessment efforts. In addition, I have conducted workshops outside of higher education focusing on how to create opportunities for growth out of conflict.

Much of the research into assessment has been focused on encouraging faculty members to participate without necessarily understanding their attitudes about assessment and why, if they are resisting, they are not readily participating in assessment. My background in conflict management and my belief in faculty have led me to be curious about how faculty approach
assessment. My experience with faculty has generally been that faculty with assessment experience did not resist assessment. These faculty may not look forward to assessment, but I did not notice them resisting it. Faculty with limited assessment experience generally are initially resistant to working on assessment, but once useful data is gathered, resistance gives way to curiosity and a willingness to participate.

But even with a willing faculty, time is often limited. I am sympathetic to faculty members who often juggle their research, teaching, and service with increasing demands on their time. As the economic downturn limits revenue for many institutions, faculty members are often called upon to pick up the slack. From my perspective, the quality of the institution rests on the quality of the faculty. A talented and engaged faculty can still make a poorly run institution effective in producing competent graduates, but a well-run institution cannot save poor teaching. In other words, the faculty have the largest impact on whether the institution meets its goals or even gets close. While I may be accused of idealizing the faculty, I disagree; if I idealize anything, it is the institution and its mission. I simply see faculty as being the primary people for carrying out that mission.

My own experiences with, and appreciation for, faculty and assessment led me to wonder why the common wisdom in the field of assessment is that faculty are resistant. I began to realize that more complexities that influence faculty attitudes toward assessment might exist than I had read about or experienced. My positionality shapes the study’s the methodology as well as the methods. My commitment is supporting faculty members authentically, and to that end, to understand the complexities and details of faculty attitudes toward assessment.
**Methods**

Recognizing the complexities of assessment, the study is focused on faculty attitudes. Given the role individual experience plays in the focus of the study, a qualitative approach is most relevant. Qualitative research, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), is used for the thorough investigation of specific stories and perspectives. Since the focus of the study is on faculty perspectives and attitudes, a qualitative approach is relevant and suitable. In particular, I rely primarily on interviews with faculty to learn more about their perspectives on the assessment process.

**Setting.** The study is based at one institution that is located in a small university town with a population of about 24,080. Approximately 12,000 undergraduates attend the university. The institution was included in the study based on its size, complexity, and experience with assessment. First, it is a large, research-intensive university that offers over 100 degrees in eight different colleges, all while responding to state, federal and industry demands, and retaining faculty members who excel at research. The complexity of the university exemplifies the multi-layered contexts and complexities many research intensive universities face. Like many institutions of higher learning, this university has faced a number of economic challenges in a state which is mandated to balance its budget each year. These financial challenges are representative of what many universities have been facing over the few years. Finally, the institution has undergone significant leadership challenges: In the past ten years, they have had several different presidents. Their provost has also recently accepted another position, and several dean positions have new leadership as well.

Within the university, an office of assessment has one staff member overseeing assessment and accreditation campus wide, with two additional administrative support positions
assisting. The institution’s regional accreditation cycle was set to culminate in an imminent visit. In addition to the regional accrediting reporting requirements, the university responds to their state government with annual reports. The assessment office supports all programs on campus to assess and accredit their graduate and undergraduate programs. The assessment office has chosen to do so with an electronic system of reporting that marches programs through assessment. For example, programs all collect data in the spring, analyze data, and distribute reports in the fall. At each step of the way, the programs update the reporting system of their progress. The same schedule is set for all programs across the campus.

The Programs. Within the campus, as within many institutions, all programs respond to regional accreditation. Additionally, some programs respond to professional accreditation. Professional accreditation differs from regional accreditation in that the process is discipline-specific, often with set benchmarks and is conducted through a peer review with faculty in the discipline. Regional accreditors require institutions to set their own goals and student learning outcomes, often leaving them much leeway in their assessment processes. The study focuses on three different programs: Two with only regional accreditation and one with regional and professional accreditation. The study includes all three programs to incorporate a range of epistemological approaches, accreditation, and faculty perspectives. This range of differences provides opportunities to see what impact, if any, the differences may have on faculty attitudes.

Physical Sciences. The study includes a program in the physical sciences in order to include faculty who have a science background and a program with professional accreditation. The department is noted for their academic and professional reputation. The faculty also reported that there is strong, mutual respect between the chair and the faculty. Many of the faculty have enjoyed a long tenure in the department. Because of the complexities of their
accreditation types and standards they must meet, the program provides an excellent example of a science discipline with multiple priorities and as such is an excellent choice for inclusion in the study.

Research suggests that the programs in physical sciences have limited experience with research related to teaching and learning (Dirks, 2013), a claim which makes sense considering their primary research and publication are about the physical science in which they are engaged. Based on the program’s quantitative research approaches and the way they describe their worldviews, the program can be seen has having a post-positivist theoretical approach (Creswell, 2009) in that their approach as a discipline to knowledge is that the there is an objective reality and they intend to lead their students to an understanding of that reality.

The program engages faculty and students in experiential education through traditional laboratory experiences. The program website also notes funding from outside sources from federal agencies, private trusts, and major industries. The faculty work with and collaborate with colleagues and institutions around the world. They are very concerned with the placement of their students into good positions and their reputation both within the professional discipline and within higher education.

The program has professional accreditation at the bachelor’s level through a professional accrediting agency. Professional accreditation adds complexity to the physical science’s program assessment because very often the requirements of professional accreditation provide specific requirements. The professional accreditor has specific requirements for the number of faculty, the number of contact hours with students, as well as what the curriculum must cover. Additionally, the professional accreditor has specific benchmarks for assessing student learning outcomes, or what students actually learn in the process of attaining their degrees. Nonetheless,
the additional professional accreditation indicates the program in physical sciences is accustomed to having outside standards of excellence applied and evaluated and have had the opportunity establish systems of response for the requirements. The program must respond to regional, professional, industrial, and collegiate requirements from many different sources, all while maintaining their research standing in the field.

The chair inhabited an office he had occupied for over 10 years. The faculty reported overwhelming positive feelings toward the chair and also indicated that students had the same respect for the chair. The chair’s longevity and reputation contrasted greatly with the overturn of leadership at higher institutional levels. The chair was amiable and was willing to be interviewed, but was one of two participants in the study who refused to be audio taped.

Other faculty members were equally welcoming. There were a couple of faculty members who could trace their tenure with the program back decades and several faculty members who were very recent additions within the last couple of years. One faculty member had been, years before, an undergraduate in the same program. It was clear that the faculty held a high regard for each other, their program, and their chair. Students gathered in the halls were very congenial with each other and greeted faculty as they walked by. The program had just submitted their professional accreditation report, and the faculty were confident that they would do well on it. Five of the total six tenured and tenure-track faculty members in this program responded to and accepted my offer to be interviewed.

**Social Sciences.** The goal of the social science program, as stated by the program’s website, is to provide a liberal arts foundation where students study social aspects of society such as race, justice, gender, globalization, and social change. The program does not have professional accreditation. While the faculty note that they are very concerned with their
reputation in the discipline, until the last few years the program participated in assessment in response to its own needs, such as determining why enrollments were shifting or why grades in a particular class were fluctuating, but not in a formalized way.

The program’s approach to research is through social science. In interviews, faculty said that the majority of faculty in the program take a qualitative approach to research more often than quantitative. Based on the program’s research approaches and the way they describe their world views, the program can be seen has having a constructivist theoretical approach (Creswell, 2009) because the goal as a program, and generally as faculty, is to construct reality and create experiences to support their students in constructing reality. This program has significantly more faculty members than the other programs in the study. At the time of the interviews, the program had 14 faculty members, ten of whom were available for interviews. The department includes two different degree programs. The study includes both programs because they are both social sciences programs working on assessment as one program and because the faculty members generally work closely together. The faculty offices are in the same building, without separation between the two programs; a faculty member from one program may have an office next to another faculty member from the other program. Faculty meetings and other meetings include faculty from both programs. Faculty members also reported working with each other regardless of program. The close proximity suggests that the faculty members are more likely to influence each other’s construction of assessment. Including all faculty members from this departments ensures that all of the faculty attitudes and perceptions are included in the study.

No faculty members refused to be interviewed outright; although four faculty members did not respond to my requests or were on sabbatical. The other 10 faculty members were gracious in giving their time and in being frank with their opinions. The chair was newly
appointed, but had been a long-time faculty member in the program. The faculty members’ seniority in the program is split: There are a number of faculty who have been in the program 20 or more years, but a significant and growing number of faculty who are recent additions to the program within the last five years. Senior faculty members noted that the newer faculty were receiving higher salaries than the faculty who had been there longer. Amongst those newer faculty, however, there is still salary discrepancy as the newest hires continue to be offered even higher salaries. Even with this potentially tension-causing fact, the faculty reported congenial relationships.

Overall, the faculty in this program were very approachable. They spoke about their commitment to students and their concern that administrative concerns, such as assessment, keep them from that work. The faculty describe themselves as productive, active in publishing and conferences.

**Humanities.** The study includes a program from the humanities in order to offer disciplinary diversity to the study. The humanities program website lists “pursuit of wisdom and truth” as one of their major primary intellectual endeavors. The study includes this program because it is a discipline within the humanities that focuses on the liberal arts. The program has five faculty members including the chair. Students can get involved in program offerings through an undergraduate club and journal. The website did not note any other experiential opportunities for students outside of what the institution itself offers.

The program is not professionally accredited and has limited experience with official assessment as requested by the institution and state or federal government. The program engages in pursuits of the mind. Based on the program’s research approaches and the way they describe their world views, the program can be seen has having an interpretivist theoretical approach
(Grix, 2010) in that their goal as a discipline and generally as a faculty is to interpret reality and to lead students in understanding and interpretation of reality. The chair reported that the program engaged in informal assessment, but saw assessment data gathered by the institution or accreditors as a potential and intentional threat to the program’s existence because they believed that the assessment results would be used for reprioritization. Based on this perceived overt threat, the humanities program’s approaches to the demands of regional accreditation are likely to be different from the other programs, adding an additional degree of diversity to the study.

The program has five tenured and tenure track faculty. While the number of tenure and tenure track faculty is low, there were several adjunct faculty at the time of the study. Of the five tenure track faculty members, two faculty members declined to be interviewed; one politely declined through email, citing his busy schedule. The other faculty member, the assessment coordinator, responded only after a drop-by visit and was adamant, not only that he would not participate, but also refused to give a reason. In interviewing the chair, I was assured that the assessment coordinator was quite congenial and approachable, but he was resolute in his refusal to say anything to me except, very distinctly, “I prefer not to.” The other faculty members were polite in their participation and enthusiastic when they discussed their assessment process. Of the three interviewed, one refused to be audio recorded.

The chair of the program is also a director over other programs, but noted that this program’s discipline is at the heart of higher education. The program sees itself, he noted, as the antithesis of routinized or standardized forms of assessment. The director is mid-career and has been at this institution since 2013. The other program faculty were also mature in their careers, except for one recent hire. The faculty who agreed to be interviewed were friendly, but remote,
often expressing confusion about the connection between assessment requested by central administration and themselves.

In sum, the three programs in the study provide a range of disciplinary differences and assessment experiences and approaches to include as many divergent perspectives on assessment as possible. Further, the programs were selected based on disciplinary diversity and varying approaches to knowledge development and teaching and learning processes. The programs were specifically chosen to provide a variety of faculty experiences within each of the program contexts. The participants themselves were all from these three programs; all were tenure and tenure track faculty who agreed to be interviewed and be included in the study to provide as many potentially differing experiences and perspectives.

Participants. The focus of the study is on faculty members within the three program contexts described above. Three faculty members from the humanities program agreed to participate, as did 10 faculty members from the social science program and five faculty members from the physical science program. These numbers include the chair within all three programs. The program from the humanities and the physical science had a significantly smaller faculty than that of the social science. The added diversity of a large program and smaller programs contributes information to the study and provides an overview of all three programs and can help to contribute to understanding based on context. The participants in the study are 18 of the 25 faculty members combined from three programs. Within each program, assessment may be a wide-spread activity with many faculty members participating. Alternatively, assessment may be the responsibility of a single faculty member while the rest of the program is largely uninvolved. Any number of arrangements may exist. The intent of this study is to learn about
faculty perspectives on assessment within the faculty members’ contexts, including their involvement in assessment.

I conducted faculty interviews on the campus of a large, land-grant, research-intensive institution within the programs and offices of the faculty members in order to be as convenient for the faculty members as possible and as recognition for their time in participating in the study.

**Interviews.** The primary method for data collection was interviews. I conducted interviews with the participants in the study throughout the course of two semesters. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) that included questions about what comes to mind when participants hear the word “assessment,” what experiences have led them to that view, and their roles in assessment (see Appendix A for the complete interview protocol). Interviews typically lasted an hour; although, some interviews went as long as an hour and a half. Several interviews with newer faculty who had less experience with assessment were as short as half an hour as they often had no experience or many opinions themselves, but talked about what they had heard from their more experienced colleagues. Interview questions were open-ended with the intention of allowing faculty members to articulate whatever they wanted regarding assessment. When participants hesitated on a reply or demonstrate discomfort with a topic, I often asked for more information and allowed pauses as necessary to give participants time to speak their minds.

While on the campus and throughout the research process, I wrote field notes of my impressions, taking detailed notes. My intention was to capture as much data as possible for a rich description in the study. Interview questions were open-ended with the intention of allowing faculty members to speak and reveal as much as they would like about their experiences with assessment and accreditation. In addition to interviews, I reviewed the institution and program
websites to gain understanding about the context of assessment. Information from the website is used to augment understanding of the interview data and results.

**Documents.** Several sources of information were considered in the study to validate information. The study considered the websites of the individual programs and the institution. The websites provided historical information about the programs, information about the programs’ epistemological stances, learning goals, and more. This information was used to provide a rich description of the program and to provide a context in which the interviews took place. Additionally, I had documents provided to me from the research participants. These documents were often copies of senior exit surveys, assignments, syllabi, and more. The documents provided information about how assessment was happening in the program. Sometimes faculty wanted to demonstrate how the administration was exerting power over the faculty members by demanding data or changes in syllabi, or they wanted to show that their measures were in alignment with their student learning outcomes. Both the website information and the documents were used as auxiliary information to provide context for faculty attitudes and sometimes evidence of their claims. The faculty interviews and information from the websites and documents all served to provide multiple sources of information for the analysis.

**Data Analysis.** In analyzing the data, I used a content analysis approach. Content analysis is a systematic approach to analyzing text. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that while rules apply to content analysis, “[they] need not be finally formulated until the end of the inquiry” (p. 337). Thomas (2003) states that the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (p. 238). My intention in using content analysis with an inductive approach was to get a sense of the data without
imposing any preconceived ideas or thoughts about faculty and assessment, but rather to ground all of the codes and themes in the faculty’s words and descriptions.

Once the interviews were completed and stored, the transcription process began. I transcribed each interview and then read through them all several times. The first time I read the transcripts, I underlined the quotes or sections that capture what I heard often during the interview and transcription processes and taking notes of what I noticed from the interview. I re-read the interviews again simply taking in the information and continuing to underline quotes that were expressed often throughout the interviews and transcripts or that captured a spirit expressed throughout the interviews.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe content analysis as developing a coding system by looking for regularities and patterns, and then writing down words to represent the topics and patterns. From these codes, Bogdan and Biklen recommend developing a list of coding categories from which emerge the themes. Following the coding process described by Bogdan and Biklen, I copied and pasted each of the quotes into an Excel spreadsheet. I read through the assembled quotes and began writing a word, in the adjoining column, that captured the main perspective of the quote. For example, for the quote “I have lingering anxiety that assessment is all about elimination [of positions]” was originally coded as “threat.” Following Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) advice, once all of the quotes were classified, I began to look at codes that seemed similar. For example, the quote coded “threat” was compared with another coded “fear.” This process led me to see that the codes of “threat” and “fear” both belong to what became a larger theme of “fear.” By the end, the themes of “fear,” “faculty see assessment as a call for accountability,” and “faculty like assessment” emerged. As I read through the interviews and then the quotes, I looked for ways the interviews revealed the underlying beliefs or perceptions.
faculty had created about assessment and how faculty make meaning of the assessment process. I worked to set aside my own ideas in order to fully understand the perspectives of the study participants. As I did, I noticed that many of their perspectives overlapped, some of their perspectives were consistent across discipline, age, status, and more. Some of the perspectives were deeply influenced by what the individual faculty members understood to be knowledge and their experience with providing information for outside reviewers in the past. As I read through the interview transcripts, the perspectives of the faculty emerged, demonstrating how they have taken information within their community and combined it with their understanding and experience of assessment. The way the participants’ perspectives of their work, assessment, and knowledge began to intersect creating for each of them a new construct of assessment. Individual themes emerged that supported the creation of these constructs.

Once I had the themes identified, I looked for information in the interviews and documents that might contradict what I had found. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), negative case analysis is a process that “eliminates all ‘outliers’ and all exceptions by continually revising the hypothesis until the ‘fit’ is perfect” (p, 312). Lincoln and Guba acknowledge that insisting that there be zero exceptions is “too rigid” (p, 312). In the study, for example, fear was a theme that rather quickly rose to the surface. I re-read the transcribed interviews looking for places or ways that data might contradict the theme. In addition to the practical aspects of data analysis, the theoretical framework was particularly helpful to analyze the data because social constructivism recognizes that how people make sense is an interplay between their past experiences, the social context, and their current experiences. Based on the interviews, it was clear that the faculty members had developed their reactions toward assessment based on the current culture of the institution and within the contexts of their programs.
**Trustworthiness.** In a qualitative study, researchers are concerned with establishing reliability in the rigor, or trustworthiness, of their data and their interpretations. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) note that “qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study” (p. 40).

In order to establish trustworthiness, I conducted member checking by sending transcripts of the interviews to the participants for review. I emailed the complete transcript to each participant and asked them to review the transcript for accuracy, and I also encouraged them to add or change any information that they want to convey. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), member checking is the “most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking ensured that the data analysis I conducted reflects the stories and information from the study participants. Participants had ample opportunity to read through their transcripts, send additional information, make corrections, or ask to speak to provide additional information to the study. All participants in the study were given time to review the transcripts and to contact me to provide feedback.

Additionally, I employed peer debriefing by contacting a noninvolved peer to read a sampling of the interview transcripts and to provide me with what she saw as the general themes from the interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that peer review is the “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (p. 308). The peer debriefer colleague read the interview samples, making notes about her general impressions. We then met to discuss her impressions, which were in alignment with my own. My overall goal was to ensure that my interpretations of the data were reliable. I maintained confidentiality throughout the study by keeping the names and programs of the study
participants, as well as the institution they belong to, coded in a locked desk drawer. The study employs interviews, member checking, peer debriefing, as well as documents and the programs’ websites to provide a diversity of information and demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research, adding rigor to the data through triangulation and multiple views on the data.

Consent. An important component of any study is consent. I worked with the Institutional Review Board at my home institution, Washington State University, and the study’s institution to receive approval to proceed with the research. I presented a letter of consent to each study participant, each of whom signed the letter of consent before the interview began. I requested interviews via email and included the letter of consent (see Appendix B) with that initial contact so that the faculty members could review it before agreeing to be interviewed and would have an electronic copy of the letter for their records. I also offered a hard copy of the letter for the faculty to keep before starting the interviews.

An important part of the study has been establishing rapport with participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Rapport is particularly important given the focus on attitudes and perspectives. I worked to form collegial and warm relationships with the faculty members through my contacts at the institution, as well as professional and personal contacts I have with staff and faculty at the institution. In my interactions with faculty, I emphasized my role as a graduate student studying assessment and mentioned my professional role as assessment specialist only when specifically asked. My intention was to create a relaxed, nonjudgmental atmosphere with faculty as a student who has come to learn from them, rather than as administrative professional with preformed judgments about the faculty or their work in assessment. I aimed to be as neutral as possible to understand what faculty might earnestly offer as their experiences and attitudes.
Limitations. As with any research project, the study has limitations. The study is limited to certain programs in one institution. Because the research is qualitative the results are not generalizable to other programs or institutions. Trends that emerge, however, provide a starting place for a larger discussion of faculty members’ perceptions of assessment and accreditation to be followed by additional research regarding faculty attitudes and the causes of those attitudes. The study is likely to create more questions than it answers. However, the intention of the study is to begin a larger conversation within the assessment community that is based on research. Further, my hope is that this research questions the assumptions of faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment.

Another limitation is the perceptions and attitudes I have developed in my years of faculty development work. Staying vigilant against my own assumptions is essential toward an effective analysis. In particular, my assumptions are that faculty members indeed are resistant to assessment, that they have little expertise or experience with assessment, and that they have a general mistrust toward administration. At the same time, I sympathize with faculty members, whom I regard as the work horse of the academy, responsible for research, teaching and learning, service, guarding academic freedom, and more. While my perception are based on my 16 years’ experience of faculty support, I recognize that these perceptions are based on my experience alone and that many very different perceptions exist. My empathy and connection with faculty as well as my assumptions were tempered with an openness and willingness to set those aside and hear what the interviewees are actually saying, rather than trying to fit their interviews into my pre-existing constructs. In spite of these limitations, the study contributes to the conversation about assessment and faculty involvement.
Summary

The intention of the study is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of faculty members in higher education toward assessment. The study’s scope is limited but with a rich description of the interviews and the faculty members’ environment, employing a constructivist analysis of the interview data. Because so little research has been applied to faculty members’ attitudes, it is important to set aside all assumptions about faculty members and their reactions toward assessment, and to remain open to the way the faculty have constructed their own experiences. I have used a constructivist framework to frame the study, analyze the data, and present the results. Constructivism is particularly relevant to the study as it supports a Deweyan understanding of education and, by extension, assessment. Based in a sound epistemological and theoretical perspective, the study should lead to insights that have not yet been discovered in the field. The primary goal of the study is to begin to understand faculty members’ attitudes as part of supporting and creating a culture of assessment. Understanding faculty perceptions toward assessment is a first step in recognizing what steps need to be taken to encourage faculty perception as well as what additional research can support faculty involvement. The following chapter provides a review of the findings from the research.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of the study is to determine faculty attitudes toward assessment and the factors that influence those attitudes. The field of assessment research is largely inhabited by assessment staff and leaders, not faculty members involved in assessment. The perspective of the field of assessment then is primarily written by those who work with faculty and not the faculty members themselves. Based on 18 faculty member interviews, the study gives voice to faculty involved in assessment.

Five themes emerged from the data analysis. The first three themes were common across all disciplines. The final theme demonstrated the impact discipline had on faculty responses to assessment. The first theme of the study, Faculty Embrace Assessment, reveals that faculty across disciplines are actively involved in assessment, often at the program level. Faculty in the study expressed a desire to assess their teaching and their students’ learning. Assessment initiatives that grow from that desire were supported wholeheartedly by the faculty. At the same time, faculty expressed frustration when people or organizations outside of their own departments requested participation in assessment. The second theme, Faculty Frustration with Assessment demonstrates that faculty have seen data leave their departments in the past, often associated with assessment and not be used, or be used in ways that do not support faculty who are already feeling overburdened. This experience leaves faculty with a resistant attitude replete with cynicism and outright hostility. The third theme, Faculty Fear Assessment, shows that many faculty members believed that assessment data, once it left the department, would only be used to make budget cuts, eliminating their positions, departments, and even the disciplines themselves. Faculty distrust how data will be used when it leaves the department. Because of
faculty fear and frustration with outside requests for assessment or information, many faculty members in the study reported seeing the term “assessment” as being an intrusive and destructive force in their professional lives. The fourth theme, “Faculty See Assessment as a Threat” demonstrates that faculty construct “assessment” in a negative light, often to the point that faculty do not see the useful, effective assessment work they do as fitting in the definition of “assessment.” Rather, assessment work that is useful to them, faculty see as part of teaching and learning but not assessment.

The fifth theme, “Discipline Matters,” illustrates that the epistemology of the disciplines influenced how faculty view evidence of student learning, which greatly impacts their approach to assessment. Because the disciplines varied in what they considered to be valid knowledge in their students, they differed when they attempted to provide evidence that students were learning. When faculty members from different disciplines talked about what they reported as student learning, they varied in what they considered evidence of learning. Table 1 provides and overall summary of the findings.
Table 1

*Themes and Summary of the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Embrace Assessment</td>
<td>Faculty members embrace authentic student learning assessment that is faculty driven and responsive to the needs of the program and the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Frustration with Assessment</td>
<td>Faculty members resent the imposition on their time and resources, especially when information cannot be used or will not be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Fear Assessment</td>
<td>Faculty react to assessment with fear that the information may be used to make cuts to their positions, departments or even disciplines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty See Assessment as a Threat</td>
<td>Faculty members generally construct “assessment” as a threat to their professional time and potentially their jobs and not as a useful tool to better understand teaching, learning, and the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Matters</td>
<td>Disciplinary epistemology matters in how faculty and programs interpret what student learning is and how that learning is reported.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings were guided by the theoretical framework of social constructivism, which asserts that knowledge is constructed within a group of people, such as a program in higher education, based on the individuals’ current experience and their past experiences (Kim, 2001). Because different individuals and groups of people will construct differently, there is room for multiple views of the truth. The faculty construction of assessment, fear, and frustration illustrate that faculty are creating the concept of “assessment” as a threatening process, even when assessment of student learning outcomes can be separate from the processes of reprioritization and program review. The concept of assessment is seen as so negative that when faculty create their own assessment processes within the program, they did not see that work as assessment. Finally, the disciplines within higher education demonstrate the multiple ways of viewing “truth,” as disciplines view knowledge through their own lenses. Because
constructivism allows for multiple realities, the programs’ disciplines influence how they view assessment.

**Faculty Embrace Assessment**

Generally speaking, faculty members have a positive reaction to internally-driven student learning outcomes assessment where faculty own the process. Faculty members actively participate in assessment that is internally driven in order to gain information about teaching, learning, or the curriculum and is in response to their program’s or students’ needs. Faculty construct this kind of assessment as useful, and they willingly engage in it. Faculty members even consider assessment to be an effective way of holding the program and themselves accountable for what students learn. What faculty members are describing is formative assessment that is internally driven and that is designed by faculty and specific to the program or disciplinary context in order to improve and sustain student learning.

Faculty members recognize the importance of assessing student learning. Some faculty saw the word “assessment” in a positive light when they understood it to be directed by the faculty and internally driven. “Assessment is an incredibly important part of the educational process,” said one faculty member in the social sciences in reference to the internally-driven assessment done by the faculty in his program. “You can’t have,” explained another faculty member in the social sciences, “[good education] without having good assessment.”

Faculty reported that they worked with other faculty members on an informal basis to check their perceptions of student learning. One faculty member in the physical sciences stated that the internally driven assessment “allows me more than my own data point as a foundation, which [can be] very shaky. If I’m having a problem with a class that’s a very different issue to address than if a class is having problems with a program.” This faculty member sees
assessment as a way to check her own experiences and assumptions about her experience in the class. Assessment strengthens her ability to respond to the needs of her students. The faculty members in the study demonstrated a deep commitment to teaching and learning. Faculty members find their internally-driven assessment useful for the insights it gives them in support of doing effective work.

Additionally, faculty members noted a need to be accountable, even as they complained about the external calls for accountability threatening academic freedom. The faculty members who observed the importance of accountability noted that the accountability need not be threatening to the individual faculty members’ approaches to teaching and learning or the existence of the program itself. One faculty member in the social sciences succinctly stated, “There’s academic freedom and all that, but yeah, there also needs to be accountability.” The findings from study suggest that faculty members did not so much express a problem with being accountable, but rather how those calls for accountability were mandated. When assessment is driven by the faculty in response to a need for data, faculty members even embraced assessment which stands in stark contrast to their reactions to calls for assessment that are driven by administrative mandate.

Linkon (2005) and Schilling and Schilling (1998) note that faculty members in higher education have some deep concerns about “professional decline” that could potentially be caused by assessment. Linkon (2005) talks about faculty concerns this way: “[Faculty] witnessed the deleterious effects of assessment on public image and professional independence of K-12 teachers, and [they] fear the same professional decline will happen to [them]” (p. 30). Regardless of those concerns, Linkon asserts that faculty believe that an assessment that is
faculty-driven and tailored to meet the needs of the program and discipline could be an effective tool for improving the teaching and learning and demonstrating accountability.

Faculty members from all three programs reported that they were already participating in internally-driven assessment necessary to run the program. Because this type of assessment was so widely accepted and embraced that faculty often did not even see it as assessment. Instead, for many faculty the word assessment remained constructed as a threatening outside call for accountability, and so faculty did not understand that the work they were doing to improve teaching, learning and curriculum was assessment. Because I used the word assessment, it sometimes took an hour of questioning for faculty members to recall some of the assessment work they were doing on their own. Each program described an internally-driven assessment process that provided them with necessary information to sustain or improve the curriculum or teaching and learning. Further, faculty members discussed grading, giving feedback, and other forms of course-level assessment that are inherent in their work. “It’s what we do,” said a social sciences faculty member. “I mean . . . as a professor, that’s what we do: we assess. And whether that’s just our students, getting a grade, or a senior who’s done well on the exam . . . . it’s a key integral part of what we do.” Other faculty members agreed: “We always assess,” explained a humanities faculty member. “We’re assessors.” Repeatedly, faculty members expressed the nature and extent of the assessment work they do: “You’re always assessing the students’ work: exams, papers, whatever and giving them feedback on how to make it better and decide whether they learned anything or not” (physical sciences). Faculty members overwhelmingly expressed that assessment is deeply imbedded in their work. Faculty members embrace assessment as a way of faculty life when they have ownership and see it as intertwined with the teaching and learning process.
The assessment work that faculty members do happens at different levels. At the course level, faculty members grade student papers or give feedback to other student work. Additionally, faculty members conduct classroom assessment techniques and look at course evaluations to get feedback from students about the course content, the teaching methods, and more. Based on this information, faculty members make changes to improve the curriculum and the teaching and learning of the class.

Faculty members also participate in program-level assessment. Program-level assessment can occur with faculty members rating papers against a rubric, by having discussions about the curriculum or a cohort of students, administering standardized tests, and other measures. Assessment at the program level gives faculty and the program information about the curriculum by assessing how well a cohort of students is performing. Sometimes the assessment is a formalized process that happens at regular intervals, but just as often, the assessment can be an informal process the program conducts to inform planning and curricular improvements. All three programs in the study reported doing program-level assessment beyond what was required by the regional or, in one case the professional, accreditor. While the program-level assessment for accreditation had more formalized processes, the program-level assessment that was internally driven had both formal and informal processes and tended to be viewed positively. When assessment leaves the ownership of the program, faculty can become fearful and frustrated with the process. With the ownership of the process, faculty often respond positively to assessment.

Part of formative assessment is that it is carried out in ways that reflect priorities of faculty and their programs. Based on the findings from the study, it is evident that each program conducts its own assessment. In the social science program, faculty members conduct focus
groups of their students. In order to put students at ease, faculty members for sub-disciplines within the social sciences interview each other’s students. With this method, students in the focus group (often a class period devoted to the purpose) most likely have not taken classes with the facilitator of the group, leaving students to feel more comfortable in speaking their minds. The faculty members responsible for those focus groups report that students seem to enjoy the participating in the groups. The faculty members then analyze the information from the groups and share the results with the faculty members in general. Beyond this measure of assessment, faculty across the program report that they enjoy the conversations about curriculum and what students are learning so that very often the conversations spill over from official program meetings into the faculty members’ time they spend socializing with each other. A faculty member in the social sciences talked about the additional program assessment her program conducted:

We do a level of qualitative analysis with our chair interviewing, outgoing seniors and undergraduates, which is great. . . I think that’s probably where we find the most valuable information, in our senior and graduate student surveys, which has spaces for them to do qualitative analysis and discussion and commentary on the program. And those are useful to us; I think that’s a useful survey.

The same faculty member noted that the required assessment (a pre- and post-test) was less useful: “I don’t feel like it’s measuring what they learn.” As faculty members described their excitement with the informal assessment they conduct, it seemed that they see the assessment as so integral to who they are as a program that they could not keep from doing it and they truly embraced the process.
In the humanities program, one professor talked about an electronic resource for students that he had taken over from another faculty member. He had noticed in his own classes, as well as in conversations with colleagues, some deficiencies students were exhibiting. He also noted that the electronic resources, which students reported using, did not cover those deficiencies. The faculty member was excited to improve the resources—and then to test whether students had accessed the resources, and if they had, he wondered, was there a difference between the students who had used the resources and those who had not? He planned on sharing the data with the program. When I asked this, the faculty member was not at first aware that what he was describing was assessment, but then he was sure that such assessment would not “count” for the outside calls for accountability. He said simply, “I’m doing this as part of my own interest” and not something that anyone outside the program might be interested in. In addition to this type of assessment, the humanities program also discussed looking at course evaluations and informal discussions as a way to determine where students were prepared for the curriculum and where they noticed students needed more support.

In the physical science program, there was so much mandated assessment going on that it seemed there would be no time for any additional assessment work. The program not only responds to academic program evaluation (which was in progress during the study) and program-level assessment for regional accreditation, it also had professional accreditation from an accréditator with a reputation for being rigorous. Faculty members expressed frustration with the amount of assessment reporting they were required to do, but they were excited to see the results from the professional accreditor because they believed that when they received feedback from the professional accreditor, they would score well. One faculty member voiced it this way:
Especially after you finish your [professional accreditation], you get the report and it's exciting to see. Like, what was the things they talked about like a reward/explanations they had . . . [My colleagues] don't want to personally write the report or anything but they want to hear what was the outcome. And everybody was like keen on listening to that.

Their attitudes toward the regional accreditor and for the then-ongoing program review were less positive. They did not necessarily feel as threatened as the other two programs; the study found that this program knew its undergraduate programs would not be cut or diminished in any way and saw the process as a waste of their time.

Yet, faculty in the physical science program still conducted their own informal assessment. For example, the chair of the program conducts an exit interview with each of the graduating seniors every semester. Unlike the social science program who conducted focus groups with faculty members, the students did not know, the physical science program had students talking to the chair, who they knew quite well. The program, however, had thought out the implications of this decision and found that the chair was so widely respected among students that they likely would have no fear talking to the chair, but rather know that their words were landing with a person who could make a difference. The chair listens to each student and then takes what students have reported works well and what does not and shares the results with the faculty at large. For those individual faculty members who need to make a change, the chair approaches those faculty privately to discuss the results. Interestingly, the chair did not report these interviews as assessment work he does in the program. The chair was very matter of fact about the enormous amount of his time that assessment takes up, but did not report he was doing
additional assessment. The senior exit interviews came to light only in interviews with other faculty in the program.

The social science program, the humanities program, and the physical science program all participated in voluntary program assessment that was faculty designed and authentic. They often did not see this work as “assessment” because they had constructed assessment as a threat to their discipline; the work they did to improve their teaching, learning, and curriculum did not fall in that definition, and so the faculty understood the work as part of their teaching and learning and not as assessment. The findings connect with what Walvoord (2010) asserted that “assessment is so natural we have been doing it all along . . . . It happens all the time in responsible programs and programs” (p. 3). “It’s just kind of seen as part of the expectation of the faculty,” one faculty member in the social sciences reported when referring to assessment. Yet, as faculty recounted the internally driven assessment work, they were very clear about its value and embraced assessment. Another faculty member in the social sciences said, “It’s those informal conversations that occur where I probably learn the most.” The study reveals that assessment is an integral part of faculty life. The assessment that all of the programs voluntarily participate in have faculty buy-in and is responsive to the needs of the program or discipline. Yet, when the assessment is not internally driven, faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment take a distinctly different turn.

**Faculty Frustration with Assessment**

When assessment efforts and other calls for departmental information originate outside of the department, faculty have generally negative reactions. Specifically, faculty members recounted several scenarios that fuel their frustration. Faculty reported that they often do not receive feedback on the information they supply. As often, faculty notice that there are no
resources to do the assessment in terms of budget allocations or faculty time, which sometimes leads faculty to create assessment measures that faculty know are not reflective of student learning.

One faculty member in the physical sciences related a time when the administration required “over a million dollars” of additional faculty time in an unfunded mandate to participate in institution-wide assessment, with no rewards for doing so. He recounted:

When the president got the final report about [assessment] and the faculty senate pointed out all the anomalies in the whole thing, they decided it was an entire waste of time and discarded it. If you look at the lost time of the hours faculty time spent, it was over a million dollars. And it was, ‘Oh this is going to be meaningless information because everybody just made bogus numbers’—made up numbers if you didn’t have them to make it look good. And so the whole thing was discarded as invalid information and nothing happened.

Rather than making up bogus numbers, a faculty member in the social sciences expressed her frustration with taking assessment seriously and working hard:

It’s a lot of frustration because it takes a lot of work to collect all that data, compile it, look at it, remember to do it, right? And we don’t get any feedback from the university. It’s not like they ever say, ‘Oh, you’re doing a really good job at assessment.’ They just say, ‘Here do all this extra work, and we’re not going to recognize you for it and we’re basically just going to critique it every year, and say you need to do better.’
Whether faculty conscientiously work on assessment or make up numbers, the process is frustrating with little useful feedback. For faculty, there is no carrot or stick to participate outside of their own initiative, only an additional time drain.

The chair in the social sciences said that in recent years, all faculty members have had an additional assessment requirement added to their position descriptions. He stated that the requirement calls for faculty to assume responsibility for outcomes, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Additionally, faculty members must supply their syllabi that list at least one assignment that could “reasonably” be used for assessing the program’s student learning outcomes. “That’s invasive,” said the chair. “I craft assignments for particular reasons in the context of the class . . . It’s like you’re a poet. Do whatever you want but you have to put this couplet in there.”

In other interviews, faculty members reported that not only was there no release time or other financial recognition of faculty time, there were also no resources on campus about how to design the assignment, how to gather the assessment data, or in any other way how to comply with this new part of their duties. When asked to whom they would reach out or what resources were available to them on campus to meet this demand, none of the faculty members could cite a resource. “I have no idea where I would find that person,” said a faculty member in the social sciences who felt his field prepared him for assessment but wondered what other programs would do. “I would probably just bury my head in the sand and hope it would go away.” These new requirements are on top of pre-existing annual reports and sporadic demands for accountability. Faculty also reported that when assessment revealed changes needed in the program, there were no funds to make those changes. Without the financial support, assessment becomes a frustrating cycle of seeing what’s missing and not being able to respond. The
frustrating cycle creates an unreceptive faculty who view assessment as intrusive to their work and in opposition to effective teaching and learning. Another faculty member in the same department described a growing sense of frustration that led to resistance against assessment:

It all just is [sic] more work, it makes our jobs more difficult, and less time for other things. And I didn’t get a PhD to spend all my time doing bureaucracy, or bureaucratic work. So I think . . . it’s not just assessment, it’s all kind of the other things that have been connected to this business model of . . . the university that causes me frustration.

Faculty portray a relationship with an administration that is unconcerned with their experience with assessment in general and their frustration with the workload and type of work that is expected of them. For some faculty members, the load becomes too overbearing.

Another faculty member in the physical sciences, who has 12 years of experience as chair of his program, expressed frustration with regional and professional accreditation. According to him, the professional accreditor changes expectations and the program is expected to keep pace. The chair mentioned that in universities with larger programs there is a specific position devoted to handling all accreditation and assessment. In smaller programs like his, the majority of responsibilities fall to one person, even as the entire faculty must be involved. The end result is that the chair was responsible for coordinating the assessment in the program. “It’s not fun,” he said, “because there is no support.” He heard from the institution only regarding the deadline for the annual report or for additional reporting requirements. “It takes too much time,” he sighed. “I quit.” Indeed, this chair, who was widely praised by the faculty members in his program, resigned the chair position and returned to his faculty position during the study. For this faculty
member his frustration with assessment led to him leaving a successful leadership position as chair.

In the social sciences program, one faculty member had done assessment work for the past 20 years. She could recall many different assessment initiatives. She recounted doing assessment and finding that changes could be or should be made, but there were no resources to make the changes (e.g., smaller class sizes or offering an additional class). “It’s like all the emphasis is on the assessment rather than providing resources and time to implement changes.” For this faculty member, who says she is supportive of assessment, finding the changes that need to be made is disheartening because she is aware that they will not be able to make them: “The things that we can change easily, we have been doing that all along anyway. We always talk about our curriculum,” but those changes that require additional faculty time or budget allocations to produce measurable results could not be made due to a lack of resources.

Other faculty members also told of assessment efforts that did not apply to the “real world” or anything actually happening in the program. Another faculty member in the social sciences said, “I think I’m frustrated a lot of the time just because it comes up during grant season, so it’s like that thing we have to do that I don’t like doing that does take a lot of work.”

One faculty member in the social sciences exemplified his growing frustration as he recounted his time as chair. He had been chair of his program for almost two decades, having only in the last few years returned to the role of faculty. He remembered the start of his time as chair as being a time of hope and optimism for him, even though he noticed that the chairs’ meetings were filled with older professors (“at least half of them had beards”) whom he considered cynical. As this faculty member observed these chairs, he found himself wondering if he would eventually lose his hope and optimism as well. After he talked about his bitter
frustration with departmental politics and assessment initiatives, I asked if he had become cynical like the chairs of his younger years. He thought for a long minute. “I’m just terribly disappointed . . . . in how colleges and universities are run now . . . and that professors have to spend so much of their time doing these assessment projects.” What he categorized as a disappointment cultivated over many years, looked to an outside observer, very much like cynicism and frustration.

A younger faculty member in the humanities, also in a leadership role, discussed his growing dissatisfaction and cynicism about administrative requirements. While he acknowledged the value in the informal assessment his program completes, he seriously questioned the usefulness of calls for accountability. Having watched for several years as assessment data went unused or ignored, he saw no incentive in responding to external calls for assessment or other information with comprehensive information about the program. “What I’m looking for,” he said, “[is] a passing grade. I need a 70. And if I get a 71, I’m going to be unhappy with myself.” Even though this program leader acknowledged the need for accountability and the need for student outcome assessment, his frustration has led him away from contributing anything more to the official calls for accountability than was absolutely necessary. “We always assess, we’re assessors,” he insisted, “but this blanket-level reporting to a central system is – I don’t believe in it, nobody in this college believes in it. So, we just do it because we have to.”

The negative attitudes toward assessment have resulted in faculty members not being completely forthcoming, or at times possibly fabricating “bogus” numbers, as one faculty member asserted. Instead of revealing how much students are learning or what programs are doing, these assessment efforts have resulted at times in the opposite: Reports that are not fully
representative of student learning or with “bogus” numbers at worst. Faculty involvement and authentic engagement is crucial. Without them, assessment is a practice in futility. While faculty expressed frustration, they became even bleaker when they talked about compensation and resources for participating in assessment.

Calls for accountability tend to come without a budget, and the faculty time that is spent working on assessment is often added to faculty members’ “service” requirement. For faculty who want to learn how to assess well, few resources exist. The resources will not arrive, and there will be no follow-up from any level of administration, according to the faculty. One faculty member in the social sciences also wonders about the effectiveness of the assessment. “So it seems to me that assessment is the end game when it should be a means to an end.” Faculty who see the usefulness of assessment are stymied by the lack of support. Another social sciences faculty member reported:

As far as I’m concerned, there’s too many administrators that don’t have anything to do and so they try to find things to justify their existence, but they never provide more resources. It’s always at the expense of the faculty. So, I’m not saying that some of these aren’t good ideas, but it’s the fact that they don’t provide additional resources to implement them.

These experiences contribute to the faculty feeling frustration with a process that is futile.

A few faculty members reported that they were the designated assessment coordinators for their program and that assessment work counted as general service for their programs. One of these faculty members in the social sciences noted that the assessment work counted for such a small amount of her entire position description that if she worked hard on assessment, it would not improve her rating—just as not doing any work would not damage her overall job.
performance: “[Assessment work is] like 5%, right? So I could get a zero for doing nothing, or I could get a five, the highest score possible, and it is not going to have a penny’s worth of difference on my evaluation.” When told to do the assessment, faculty members reported they were expected to complete the work in addition to their current duties. When the above faculty member asked the administration how to fit in all of the work, little support was offered: “Their response, of course, is, ‘Be creative, find a way to do it.’ Which means, ‘We don’t have a clue what you should do or how—we’re going to make you figure out a way anyway.’”

Assessment is an unfunded mandate to faculty members who see no incentive to complete it well which inspires frustration in the faculty. When they do respond with assessment data, faculty members believe the data could be used against them or their program, so faculty tend to be very cautious about what they report. Faculty members resist assessment efforts or create assessment that meets the very minimal requirements. The lack of funding has contributed to the faculty’s negative attitude toward assessment. Without the resources, faculty cast a suspicious eye on the motives of the administration demanding assessment participation.

The data also shows that some faculty distrust for administration at the institutional, state, and federal level exists for two main reasons. One reason is that faculty members see student learning outcome efforts as a way to standardize higher education and create in higher education that same rigid standardization that some see in elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. Standardization has been attempted many times in the history of U.S. higher education, often through the use of a standardized test. Faculty see this type of move by the administration as a way to control, or even eliminate, their disciplines and programs. The second reason faculty members distrust administration is that faculty members were not part of the assessment
decision-making process and have no ownership in the process. Faculty were frustrated they were not involved with assessment and that the work they already do seemed not to matter.

[The administration should] find a way to let us incorporate the assessment that we already do into the system, in a way that’s not cumbersome. Maybe – of course, see, they won’t accept this, but if I could write up a page explaining how I assess my class and changes I’ve made as a result of it . . . I noticed that the students are – this is something real, I’m telling you a real thing – that the reading ability in the students’ is getting worse and all the time. So I’ve noticed that through our conversations in class and the test, I realize that they are not getting the reading like they used to. And so I could find new things to find a way to deal with that. Reading quizzes, or more discussions about the reading, or giving lectures about ‘Don’t listen to your iPod with your telephone – you’ve got to focus.’ And if I could – it would be time consuming, in a way, to write that up. But in a way it would less time consuming than what they’re asking us to do now. Or if we could just write up something that says what we did to assess our program (social sciences).

Without ownership of the process, faculty members resist what they interpret as outside control over their disciplines and programs. The findings resonate with previous research that suggest that faculty members in higher education have watched the assessment process be taken out of the hands of faculty members in K-12 education and have not been impressed with the results (Linkon, 2014).

Since 2001, assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education has taken place in the shadow of the No Child Left Behind Act that affected K-12 schools, how students were
assessed, and the consequences for schools with poor results. Faculty members find themselves concerned that the Act could be repeated in higher education, standardizing the diverse disciplines and institutions of higher education. With that standardization comes a lack of respect of teaching that faculty in higher education see happening with K-12 teachers. Linkon (2014) noted that K-12 teachers:

were once respected and trusted to do their jobs well. But as attention has shifted to the performance of individual teachers and schools, as measured by standardized tests, teachers have become the scapegoats for all failures of the American educational system. (p. 30)

Not only could faculty members lose the professional freedom once associated with their roles as professors, the respect of the position itself could be eroded and faculty members blamed for what their students learn or do not learn in class. Linkon (2005) notes that “the deleterious effects of assessment on the public image and professional independence of K-12 teachers” (p. 30) could happen to professors as well.

Faculty members in the study stated both their concern for standardization of assessment and the lack of respect inherent in it. One thing that is disturbing, said a faculty member in the social sciences, “is the sort of trickle up version of the No Child Left Behind, teach-to-the-test syndrome.” The desire, said this faculty member, is for assessors to find “something to document.” From his perspective, higher education is a complex process that defies a single number to determine success: “People just in general aren’t willing to do the really hard assessment, the diachronic assessment of education that . . . would be the revealing part of understanding people’s educational process.” For this faculty member, the process of learning
and of assessing is glossed over by the easy answer of a standardized test that leaves faculty with little time to teach anything but the test in order to stave off criticisms or attacks on their jobs.

Other faculty members saw the connection between No Child Left Behind and program-level assessment as well: “I think this is more No Adult Left Behind, and you know all the testing and the regimented standardization that is always added. As I see it,” he continued, “it’s meddling” (social sciences). Still yet, another faculty member in the humanities saw the assessment efforts as a “re-radicaliz[ation] of universities.” Universities, he said, “have been turned into vocation-oriented places,” absent of the liberal arts. No Child Left Behind repeated at the university level “is a deliberate effort . . . to force us to measure educational outcomes,” which he saw as targeting the humanities.

The concerns voiced by faculty over No Child Left Behind are founded. In 2006, then-President George Bush commissioned then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, the same author of No Child Left Behind, to investigate higher education. Spellings found, among other things, that college students were not learning and the institutions of higher learning were resistant to accountability. Spellings’ proposed solution was a mandated standardized test (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2007). While that test was not adopted, it is only one of many attempts over the years for the federal government to implement a standardized test in higher education (Brittingham, 2009; Shavelson, 2007). For those faculty members concerned about academic freedom, the barriers of logistics and funding are not enough to protect higher education in the long term. The concern the faculty participants in the study mention associate student learning outcomes assessment with attempts to standardize higher education.
Faculty members’ frustrations about the assessment movement are encouraged by the lack of involvement of faculty in assessment. Marrs (2009) reports that the reasons for resistance is the fear that assessment is a “monitoring system” and that assessment is imposed from some external authority and does not support the day-to-day teaching and learning. Faculty members in the study report that rather than be asked what types of internal assessment they are already doing and how that assessment might be used for program assessment, administrators simply make demands for specific reports or data. Given that faculty believe budget decisions could be made with the information they provide, they further believe they have little choice but to comply, often having little notice to do so. “We had to get [the assessment requirements] done, you know, in a few days, and they come up with another and another and another,” one faculty member in the social sciences explained. “And this just went on all semester and it was driving me crazy.” The sporadic demands for rapid responses reinforce faculty members’ perceptions that their perspectives are not welcome in assessment: “No administrator has ever come to a meeting and told me, ‘This is the value of [assessment]. This is what is helpful about it; this is why we’re doing it.’”

A way to get past faculty fear and frustration about assessment is to include them in the process. One faculty member in the social sciences acknowledged that if the administration were to include faculty perspective in the process of developing and shaping assessment, it would require “administrators to do things differently than they have been doing it,” but without including faculty members, the administration creates a system that is ineffective. Faculty members report that the way assessment is being handled at the study’s institution does not consider faculty life and the result is that faculty see no reason to trust the administration that makes the calls. The faculty see they are protecting themselves and their programs by providing
only information that places the program in the best light or by resisting the calls altogether, responding as minimally as possible. Ewell (2002) and others (Suskie, 2009; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003) note the same lack of incentives for faculty to participate in assessment, all of which suggest that an open and genuine relationship between faculty and administration is hampered, creating an atmosphere of frustration, and often fear as well.

**Faculty Fear Assessment**

When faculty encounter externally driven assessment, they often fear how assessment data will be used. Sometimes the fear becomes physically present for faculty, but in every case where faculty exhibited fear associated with assessment, they were afraid that their positions, departments or even their disciplines would be lost. In all three departments, faculty believed that the assessment data that was gathered at the institution or higher levels was used to judge the departments and decide their worthiness. The faculty in the physical sciences exhibited less fear because they believed that they would be safe from cuts due to the higher number of enrollments they had and that the enrollments had increased over recent years. One faculty member in the physical sciences said it succinctly: “Are they going to cut [us]? Probably not . . . . They’re going to cut the one thing that’s growing [the university]? Probably not.” Further, the physical science department believed that their regional accreditation was prestigious enough that the university would not want to lose them. Nonetheless, the physical sciences faculty believed that the outside calls for assessment and other data were not to be trusted.

In the humanities and the social science departments, however, the fear was more palpable. Often, these faculty reported having visceral reactions that lead to fear and frustration. One faculty member in the social sciences described “cringing” in response to the word assessment. Another social sciences faculty member, who was experiencing acid reflux at the
time of the interview, was sure the cause of her discomfort was the topic of assessment. Another social sciences faculty member described having “a knot in the middle of my chest.” A humanities professor made guttural noises in response to the word assessment. When questioned, the faculty members said their fears were sometimes tied to how the assessment would be used in faculty evaluations, but more often the fears were related to how assessment data would be used to make budget cuts or eliminate positions. One humanities faculty member noted that in times of abundance if a program needs more money, the university might invest in that program. In times of scarcity, however, a program can be “gotten rid of.” The administration is doing program assessment, a social science faculty member said, “so they can rank us and then get rid of us.”

The belief, and sometimes fear, that assessment was used to make cuts was prevalent across the programs. For faculty members in the social sciences and humanities who were worried about their enrollments or graduation rates, the fear was even more palpable. Faculty worried that their individual positions could be cut or that the whole program would be closed and tenure would not save them. One social science faculty member in particular related how the fear of cuts had influenced her life. She was finishing her degree at another institution when in 2008 her partner’s job outside of higher education was eliminated due to budget cuts. The faculty member and her partner faced a sudden crisis. Referring to the economic crisis of 2008, she explained:

We went from making a lot of money and we had a nice condo . . . to making nothing in two weeks. It was a feeling like the rug was pulled from us, and seeing our friends go through that [as well], because people . . . lost their homes, foreclosed on.
She and her partner were quick on their feet, working with the bank when their condo was sold short and finding positions. Yet, the fact that they survived that upheaval brought this faculty member no comfort, only the residual fear that they must always be prepared for sudden economic loss. “There’s just this feeling,” she reported, “that things could all of a sudden turn really bad because we survived this crash, and we’re always thinking about what else we do if that happened [again].” In anticipation of another crash, this tenured faculty member was enrolled as a student in classes at her institution preparing herself for another field, should the need arise. Her partner, again gainfully employed, was preparing a backup plan as well. This couple had a lot of flexibility and were making themselves even more flexible, but they still experienced the fear of cuts, especially, this faculty member noted, because she was unsure how the institution would use the assessment data they gathered.

A faculty member in the humanities asserted that external demands for assessment have always been malevolent, especially toward the humanities: “Assessment is political. I mean, it was created for politics. It’s imposed for politics. It’s part of an overall scheme to drive certain fields out of existence, and it’s been successful.” This same faculty sees the importance for internally driven assessment as useful in improving the program. Assessment in general terms, however, he saw as “dangerous,” because of the political uses of assessment.

Faculty fear is not acknowledged in the research about assessment, and the faculty reported that the fear is not acknowledged by the institution either. “I see the stress on people’s faces,” one social science faculty member reported. “The students don’t, but I know; I hear it. I think that’s what the administration needs to know is that it . . . causes a lot of stress on people.” Assessment has become intricately linked to budget cuts and fear for a number of reasons at the institution in the study: Changing leadership and mandates, calls for accountability to
re prioritize the budget, the economic context of job loss and more. The fear has infiltrated into the faculty members’ professional daily lives. Faculty members in the study saw assessment as a tool used to threaten their positions and the fields to which they have devoted their careers.

Analysis of the data in the study found that faculty members indicated a long-term wariness of living with the threat of cuts, manifesting as a frustration toward assessment. A social science faculty member asserted support for her institution, explaining that she understands why the university wants assessment: “And I also understand why, because states are demanding it, you know, they want to find ways to cut spending, and so they want everyone to do assessment so that they can figure out what to cut.”

These negative feelings are important to acknowledge because they inhibit faculty participation in assessment, and without faculty support and involvement, assessment reports have little value (Muffo, 2001). As faculty members talked about their responses to living with the fear of cuts and an ever-increasing work load without recognition or compensation, they reported increasing feelings and attitudes of frustration, anger, and cynicism.

Faculty See Assessment as a Threat

A related finding to frustration and fear is that some of the faculty reaction emanates from feeling threatened. As faculty attempt to make sense of the many calls for accountability and assessment that surround them, they construct assessment as a threatening process. Faculty can routinely encounter multiple types of data collection: Assessment that serves their program, a call for information from the institution administration to reprioritize funding, calls for accountability from the federal government, as well as annual and other reports from the state. Faculty members reported that it was not always clear how the information would be used from
these different calls. As a result, faculty members often referred to all requests for information as threatening calls for accountability.

The field of assessment constructs a definition of assessment that exists far removed from administrative caprice and budget cuts. Assessment is “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise and resources available, in order to inform decisions that affect student learning” (Walvoord, 2010, p. 2). Walvoord notes that assessment should be systematic; it does not happen sporadically or on a whim, but contains elements of consistent planning and intention. Further, the intention of assessment is to support student learning and the decisions made to improve or sustain student learning. For programs, decisions would include changes to the curriculum, such as adding a course, altering prerequisites, or other changes that would support student learning. Finally, Walvoord suggests that assessment must be sustainable when she states that assessment uses the “time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available” (p. 2).

While the field of assessment is clear about the definition of assessment, research from the interviews found that faculty members have defined assessment as a call for accountability such as reprioritization or budget cuts. Instead of seeing assessment as Walvoord (2010) does, as something useful, faculty have used their interactions with administrations and calls for accountability to construct assessment as a negative process. One social sciences faculty member noted that “[The administration uses assessment] to figure out what they’re going to cut. The word ‘cut’ has come up on occasion.” Other faculty members were equally certain that assessment would result in cuts or dissolution of programs. A faculty in the physical sciences said that assessment was used to “ax the size of things and eliminate entire programs.” Another social science faculty member lamented that the faculty can spend hours preparing reports, but
then never hear back about how well they did or if the information is going to result in cuts. Repeatedly, the idea that assessment was related to budget cuts surfaced throughout the interviews. Faculty members clearly constructed assessment that improves student learning as outside calls for accountability that can result in budget cuts regardless.

The many administrative turnovers and changing assessment initiatives support the negative impression faculty have about assessment. “I really struggle to understand what they want from us,” grumbled one social science faculty member who served on the program assessment committee. In part, this faculty member explained, the lack of understanding came from changing institutional leaders who pursued different assessment initiatives. Another social science faculty member reported that “Administrators go to the same conferences and come up with the same idea and they come back and say, ‘We’re going to do this [new assessment].’” Faculty members reported that inconsistencies from the administration contributed to their reactions to assessment. One faculty member called the changing assessment requirements a “fad,” echoing Ewell’s (2002) finding that faculty considered assessment to be a fad, such as the TQM (Total Quality Management) movement and were waiting for the fad to disappear. Faculty believed that if they ignored assessment long enough it would go away.

Despite the faculty members’ views of assessment as negative, the results from the study reveal that all three programs were involved in program-level assessment that was not related to any requirements at all. Faculty saw this assessment as highly useful, but the useful assessment they did not see as assessment. Instead, they grouped this work in with other duties associated with teaching and learning. Faculty were certain such efforts would not be “counted” by regional accreditors or the institution as demonstrations that the faculty were intent on improving teaching and learning. Yet, it was this work that the faculty reported as useful: “We want to make sure,”
explained a faculty member, “[students] are learning the most and in the proper order. That’s the stuff we get excited about.” A social science faculty member explained she saw more than one kind of assessment:

I’ve learned there’s two different meanings [of assessment]. I think there’s assessment for faculty, which we do through grading in our classes, through observing what students are doing and how they’re talking about the literature or whatever we’re learning in class. So I’m always doing some form of assessment, whether it’s taking notes of what students are saying, or grading their papers, or giving or administering a test. But then there’s the administrative level of the assessment that is something I wasn’t really planning on doing when I entered academia, and I hadn’t been prepared for it at all when I came from graduate school . . . . So I think there is a fear of assessment on that level – that by doing university-level assessments that something might happen to our programs. So, I think because of that fear, at least in my experience, some of us, don’t write it off, but we probably don’t take it as seriously as we take what we’re doing in the classroom.

The above quote illustrates that faculty see the assessment that is useful to them as a different kind of assessment than that which is required by their institution or accrediting body. In many instances, faculty did not see useful assessment as “assessment” at all. Instead, faculty saw the concept of assessment to be threatening and negative. Social constructivism demonstrates that people, such as faculty, in social settings use their experiences, such as budget cuts and calls for accountability, to construct their current experience (Kim, 2001). Faculty have constructed the word “assessment” to be a
threatening and negative call for accountability. Several issues supported faculty in constructing assessment as a negative. First, a lack of leadership has led to a lack of clarity about what assessment is and how the data will be used. Second, faculty members’ experience with cuts during a time of scarcity has made them view the word assessment in a negative light. Even when faculty members had positive experiences with assessment during their own internally-driven efforts, they did not see that work as “assessment” because that work was useful and they had so firmly constructed assessment as negative.

How faculty perceive assessment, their fear and frustration, as well as their voluntary participation in the internally-driven assessment are similar across all disciplines. Yet, how faculty members interpret the data, report the data, and even what they see as knowledge, differs depending on discipline.

**Discipline Matters**

The manner in which different disciplines assess student learning depends largely on their epistemological approaches. Epistemology, at its core, is about knowledge. Data analysis of the study revealed far more similarities across the programs than differences, but the primary area of difference was the approach of the programs toward assessment based on discipline and perspectives about knowledge. The epistemological differences were demonstrated in two ways. First was whether there was already an established system in place to store data, results, and decisions made from the assessment. The other was whether a formalized method for assessment already existed in the program. These two aspects of assessment are dependent on what the disciplines consider knowledge and how they see students coming to know. While all of the programs reacted to some degree negatively toward outside calls for accountability, the
difference between the programs was why they resisted the outside calls. A central finding of the study is that discipline matters in attitudes about assessment.

As noted in the introduction to the study, assessment refers to the internally-driven assessment that programs do on their own in response to program needs. Calls for accountability are all other calls for information in determining accountability. Regional accreditation, which is simply the accreditors making sure that best assessment practices are in place, is still considered an outside call for accountability because regional accreditation is a form of summative assessment. The programs have distinctly different approaches to assessment and outside calls for accountability, just as their approaches to knowledge are different.

In his hallmark study about disciplinary and faculty culture, Clark (1987) notes there are divisions between the disciplines that create a unique culture in that discipline’s approach to knowledge. Clark asserts that:

. . . to comprehend the divisions of the profession, it is more important to know that individuals are physicists, biologists, political scientists, or English school, or that they are in a medical school or a business school, than it is to know that they are young or old, Protestant, Jewish, or Catholic, registered as a Republican or Democrat—or, increasingly, black or white, female or male. (p. 108)

The discipline’s world view and how they believe students come to learn, its epistemological view, govern how faculty interact in the discipline, in the institution and with assessment. For example, all disciplines in general may state that they value creative or critical thinking, but how they verbalize that concept varies based on how the discipline views knowledge. One discipline may value “problem solving,” while another discipline values “problematizing.” What students produce to demonstrate either their problem solving skills or their problematizing skills may vary.
greatly. Faculty members and programs are left to their own devices to determine how to assess students are doing so successfully. Some disciplines are closely aligned with industry, science, or other fields that have specific systems of determining students are being successful. The findings from the study indicate that each of the disciplines have their own circumstances and practices that influence their approach to assessment.

The Physical Science Program. As researchers and scientists who are oriented toward a post-positivist epistemology that values an objective reality that can be observed and measured, their approach toward assessment was that definitive learning could be reported about their students. There are two primary reasons that the program’s epistemology supported the faculty and program in responding to calls for accountability. First, the program is supported by professional accreditation, affording them a systematic way to conduct, store, and use assessment data and results. Secondly the physical science program uses the scientific method which provides the program not only a way of approaching assessment, but also the belief that student learning can be quantified and reported as a number. The physical science program reacted negatively to outside calls for accountability because they found that reporting data took away from their other duties, and that in the case of regional accreditation, provided the department with no useful feedback. Professional accreditation was seen as being difficult to prepare for, but faculty enjoyed the feedback from their peers.

The physical science program must meet the professional accreditors’ standards every ten years. As such, the faculty and program are well accustomed to proving their accountability. Without the professional accreditation, the program would lose students and fail to attract new students. As one participant shared, “Your reputation is worth nothing if you’re not accredited by [the professional accreditor], you know?” The accreditor has a good reputation with the
faculty and provides the program with feedback after each accreditation cycle. “[The professional accreditation] is extremely important and very worthwhile,” one faculty member reported, echoing his colleagues’ sentiments. Professional accreditation provides the program with concrete assessment steps and also prepares them for the concept of people outside the program demanding accountability. The program is well-acquainted to the accreditation, which has itself become part of the epistemology of the discipline: There is a knowable answer to whether the program is successful, largely measured on whether their students are able to find jobs. The professional accreditor also determines whether there are appropriate faculty and facilities to offer the degrees in the program. The program’s epistemology is generally a black and white, yes-or-no world view where either a program is successful or it is not. Students are either learning what they need to know and so are being placed after graduation or they are not. Responding to outside calls for accountability, which are often viewed as needing quantifiable numbers, is not a new concept to this program or discipline and is in fact deeply woven into their understanding about knowledge. Dewey (1938) asserts that knowledge is constructed from interaction between human beings and their environments. The faculty members in the physical science program have approached assessment as another way of seeking knowledge about student learning and conducted an experiment, just as they would an experiment in a lab. They view knowledge as a distinctly observable and reportable phenomenon.

Beyond the professional accreditation, the physical science program also has the scientific method as part of how they view and create knowledge. These scientists are more involved with problem solving than the humanities, which are more invested in critical and creative thinking (Donald, 2002). For the physical science program, capturing truth in a practical manner is fundamental to the way they understand the world. One faculty member in this
program mentioned that assessment is nothing more than the scientific method, in which all of the faculty members have been thoroughly trained:

You observe some phenomena, you create a hypothesis, you test that hypothesis by either gathering data or running experiments. You analyze, you review, you evaluate, you assess the data, decide whether the hypothesis was true or proven or disproven, and that's the basic scientific method of assessment.

For the faculty members, assessment is an extension of their discipline. In science the aim is to capture the truth, to create results that can be duplicated by other scientists following the same methods (Donald, 2002).

The chair of the program heads the assessment committee to complete the professional and regional accreditation reports, with faculty members contributing and reading the report before submission. Faculty members report a satisfaction with the professional accreditation report regardless of the difficulty because the faculty understand how the information will be used and because the accreditor gives feedback to the program regarding their strengths and weaknesses. This particular program routinely excels at their professional accreditation and the faculty take pride in the process and the results. There is a respect from the faculty for the professional accreditor and participation in the process is seen as a necessity. The faculty members said that the reports for regional accreditation are more confusing because they are not sure what the reports are for or how they will be used. Most faculty members of the physical science program said that they suspect (as faculty members in other programs expressed) that the information will be used to make cuts. These faculty members also report that they do not receive feedback on these reports.
For the physical science program, assessment is well supported by their epistemological view as exemplified by their professional accreditation and the method of knowing, the scientific method, of their discipline. While the faculty were not happy with regional accreditation because of the lack of clarity and feedback, they were nonetheless well prepared to respond to the calls for accountability. The findings from the physical science program in the study help to illustrate how discipline matters as part of the assessment process and faculty attitudes about assessment.

The Social Science Program. The experiences with assessment in the social science program are shaped by the program’s disciplinary approach to knowledge, which tends to be constructivist in that they believe that knowledge is created by the interaction of past experience, social context, and their current experience. In general, faculty in the program view student learning as discernible, but due to the complexity of learning, the assessment processes they value tend to be qualitative and more open to multiple interpretations. A post-positivist test does not reveal what students know, but rather watching the students interact with the subject and their peers reveal what and how much students have learned. Because of the different approach to both knowledge and assessment than the physical science program, the social science program responds to the calls for accountability differently. The social science program faces calls for accountability with two primary hurdles to overcome. First is that the program does not have a built-in systematic approach, such as professional accreditation, leaving them to create ad hoc ways to gather assessment data and results, store them, and use them to make decisions about the curriculum. The second challenge the faculty in the program face is that they feel disadvantaged in reporting their assessment processes that are qualitative because they believe that measured, numerical results are valued over their more constructivist approaches.
The first challenge of the social sciences program to respond to calls for accountability is that they have had to create formalized reports of student learning. The social science program does not have and never has had professional accreditation. As such, the faculty and program have not become accustomed to documenting student learning in a systematic way. Their professional credibility does not necessarily lie in their ability to prove that students are learning throughout the curriculum, as it does with the physical science program’s professional accreditation. Before the institution started to demand annual assessment reports, faculty relied more on informal conversations and other informal methods to gain a sense of what students were learning. This sense of knowing is much less black-and-white than the physical science experienced. Because the social science faculty have few prior experiences with accreditation outside of regional accreditation, their primary experiences with reporting data to the institution are with program review and information required for reprioritization. They see the act of reporting data to be a threatening process.

In the faculty’s disciplinary approach to knowledge within the program, the program is concerned with observing phenomena in a way that can be perceived by another researcher, following the same protocols, in the same way. “Less structured disciplines [like social sciences] . . . have contradictory principles or values that are continually in question and hence require perspective” (Donald, 2002, p. 285). Unlike the physical science program, the social science faculty members in this program use primarily qualitative research, a methodology that by definition resists a definitive, quantitative response, which is what several faculty members insisted was wanted in the calls for accountability and assessment processes called from by campus. One faculty member observed, “[The administration] want[s] quantitative data of some
kind, like a test, like a two-point test. We consider that to be a joke.” Yet, the program felt compelled to comply.

In response to the demand for quantitative data, the program responded by creating a two-point, multiple choice, pre- and post-test for their entering majors and their seniors. The program did not see the exam as useful, even at its inception, but created it because of the pressure the program felt to have a quantifiable number to report for assessment. The intention of the test was to demonstrate to the outside calls for accountability that the students were learning in the program, that value was being added. The questions were created by faculty members in the program and resulted in a multiple-choice test, which is administered in class. Faculty members uniformly agreed that the test was not useful for them or the program. As one social scientist faculty shared:

Most of us are qualitative in social sciences, and the questionnaire that we’re giving out is A, B, C, D, E. It’s not qualitative in nature; it’s quantitative. We felt like it wasn’t the best survey instrument or tool [because] it’s not really evaluating anything.

Faculty members in the social science program widely admit that the test does not serve the program or faculty in ensuring that students are learning the student outcomes or the epistemology of the program. For these faculty members, the test does not speak to them in terms of knowledge. The faculty reported that as researchers they approach knowledge in a more qualitative manner. Accordingly, as teachers they resonate with more student-centered approaches to learning. The multiple choice design of the test does not demonstrate their students’ complexity of learning; it does not demonstrate the ways of thinking the faculty are looking for in their students. For these faculty members, assessment in response to calls for
accountability meant implementing a test that did not match their world view and how the
discipline, in general, constructs knowledge, leaving them uncertain how to use the data or what
the value of the test was, even when they had created it. More than one faculty member
described the test as “goofy,” indicating the lack of value they experience from it. In this case,
the call for accountability not only did not reveal what good practices the program had in place,
it created extra work and data without value.

The social sciences program is hampered in successful assessment in another way: They
have no support in creating an infrastructure to gather, store, or use assessment results and data.
While the social scientists reported feeling prepared to do qualitative assessment measures based
on their discipline, the program did not provide a system to share the information or store it.
Unlike the physical science program that by necessity created an infrastructure to meet the needs
of their professional accreditor, the social science program was left to figure out on their own
how to store and share program assessment data so that the faculty could experience the
usefulness, for example, of the focus groups.

The social science program’s faculty members routinely conduct qualitative research and
felt themselves prepared to do the qualitative type of assessment that speaks to them, but the
program instead implemented a quantitative-oriented test to appease regional accreditors. The
test proved itself to be a waste of faculty’s time because it did not speak to the faculty members’
epistemological view or how they see the teaching learning process. As a group, they are
grounded in a constructivist view. The focus groups provided faculty with detailed information
from students about their experiences in the program that is more in line with a constructivist
framework where students can describe how they came to know course content. In contrast, the
multiple choice exam did not provide useful information to improve the curriculum. The futility
of the test served only to further the impression with faculty that assessment was a waste of time. Without an infrastructure to share the data or conduct program-wide assessments, the faculty could not easily use the assessment that was useful to them: The focus groups. The social science program found no usefulness from participating in calls for accountability and complied with assessment demands only to satisfy demands.

**The Humanities Program.** The faculty in the humanities program viewed learning and coming to know as such a complex and unique process that it defied logic to assume there were measures or ways to speak about a group of students’ learning in a uniform way. In the same way that the faculty as researchers tend to focus on the meaning of experience and texts, they also do the same for their students in the classroom. Calls for assessment that attempt to quantify experience do not resonate with knowledge structures and epistemological foundations that are interpretive. Because calls for accountability are intent on determining if students are succeeding, the humanities program rejected the idea that student learning could be reported in a unified way and instead critiqued the assessment movement itself. The program had no official measures pre-existing and struggled to create measures that would comply with the calls for accountability. Secondly, because they had no professional accreditation, the program had no infrastructure in place to support the collection, storage, or use of assessment data or results.

On an epistemological level, the humanities are “organized around the production of consensual knowledge arrived through contention rather than the empirical testing of theories as in the sciences” (Donald, 2002, p. 236). The humanities program does not necessarily attempt to find a definitive answer, but to contemplate and to complicate the question. Rather than having experiments that can be repeated, the humanities embrace that “controversy is part of the fabric” (Donald, 2002, p. 237). The program was not attempting to construct knowledge necessarily, but
rather to deconstruct and interpret knowledge. Faculty members expressed their frustration with the assessment process: “You can’t quantify Shakespeare. We’re not experienced with quantifiable assessment much. We do qualitative assessment.” Much like the social sciences, the humanities are left to find a way to provide definitive, quantifiable data to a call for accountability that they would prefer to complicate rather than answer. Internally, faculty members use qualitative data and have a high degree of ownership over assessment. External calls that mandate definitive data of student learning lose faculty support and ownership.

More than just being frustrated, faculty in the humanities program questioned the motives behind the assessment. Most faculty did not participate in official assessment activities, but had one person assigned to those duties. The faculty assessment leader heatedly refused to participate in an interview for the study for no known reason. The faculty member did not know me before my requests to interview him and had not responded to emailed interview requests. When I visited him during office hours, his manner turned cold, and he over enunciated his words as he expressed his lack of interest as soon as he heard the request was about assessment. The reasons for his refusal are not known, but an interview with the program’s leader revealed a belief that formalized assessment efforts were part of a long-standing federal intention to eliminate the humanities. The program leader noticed that the current wave of outcomes assessment started in the mid-1980s with Ronald Reagan as president. He believes that the wave of outcomes assessment was an attempt to eliminate the humanities from higher education by requesting that programs submit data that is quantitative in nature. The program leader pointed to the perceived need to quantify results of student learning. He noted that more than one research university has attempted to “kill philosophy, but instead of getting rid of it, they put it with [another program].” An institution, this faculty member pointed out, “is not a university
without a philosophy program.” The humanities program questioned the motive for the assessment, what Donald (2002) noted as the production of knowledge through “contention rather than the empirical testing of theories” (p. 236).

A faculty member in the humanities program saw assessment as a tool intentionally forcing liberal arts out of higher education:

The people who came up with this idea, the Reagan administration people, were specifically looking for ways to push the liberal arts out of education by focusing on things that are test-able: mathematics, literacy, basic historical facts and knowledge, not more interpretative and normative sorts of ideas.

For the humanities program, assessment presents a supposition with which the discipline disagrees, namely that knowledge is quantifiable. Instead, the program seeks to deconstruct that which seeks to measure its students’ performance. The program agreed that assessment and accountability were important, but they were highly suspicious of any standardized system to measure student learning. Therefore, any participation in assessment they see as inherently discordant with their discipline and a more interpretive world view. The outside calls for accountability force the program to report data and results that the faculty believe to be bogus representations of student learning and creates an environment rich for hostility, especially toward one who wants to talk about assessment for a study. “Assessment is political,” one faculty member who participated in the study reported. “It was created for politics. It’s part of an overall scheme to drive certain fields out of existence and it’s been successful.”

Because they are speaking from a place that can seem contentious, the program is often viewed as unwilling to be accountable. Indeed, the Spellings Report of 2006 reported as a finding that the faculty seemed unwilling to be held accountable, a sentiment which can inspire
the wrath of congress and its constituents. The humanities program faculty, however, were clear in their support for both authentic assessment and accountability, but not on the terms of those whom they consider gunning for their discipline. An authentic report of student learning seems at best difficult for the humanities program.

The findings from the study make clear that how faculty in a particular program and discipline view knowledge shapes how they react to and participate in assessment. Epistemology more than program size, faculty rank, and experience with assessment efforts influenced the faculty members’ responses to outside calls for accountability and university driven assessment processes. The physical sciences program with an epistemology grounded in post-positivism and a penchant for clarity around learning and a system for collecting, storing, and using data generally found the outside calls for accountability a nuisance, with professional accreditation yielding useful feedback. The physical sciences program suspected they were under scrutiny for budget cuts, but the faculty felt confident in their ability to respond to the calls for accountability adequately. A faculty member stated: “[This reprioritization] is another one of these big hand-waving exercises that you know we have to do it because the state Board of Education mandates it, but are they going to cut [our program]? Probably not.” The physical science program also enjoys the security of being a discipline that is appreciated by institutions and governments who look to quantitative numbers in determining the success of a curriculum. In general, while the physical science program sometimes found reporting data to be an annoyance, they did not feel as directly threatened by it as did the other two programs in the study.

The social science program faculty were also convinced that the data would be used for cuts, but believed the outside call for accountability to inherently challenge the disciplinary knowledge production. In response, the program created a “goofy” test to have numbers to
report in order to survive any budget cuts. The humanities program struggled more than the other two programs because they disagreed with the premise of the assessment: Prove, as all other disciplines prove, that your students are learning. Their interpretivist epistemology is not easily communicated to university calls for accountability with set reporting requirements. Those making calls for accountability often look for quantitative results and rely on post positivist measures such as standardized tests. For the physical science program, the post positivist approach resonates with how they view knowledge, even as the faculty found the assessment to be a nuisance. For the social science and humanities programs, faculty feel at odds with calls for accountability because they view knowledge as emergent and not easily quantified.

Discipline matters. Each of the programs resisted outside calls of accountability but for different reasons. If assessment is to be authentic and genuinely capture what is happening within programs and with student learning, discipline must be taken into consideration. Standardization may work for a generalized type of knowledge, but for student success within the disciplines, the assessment must be responsive to disciplinary differences and grounded in disciplinary perspectives on teaching and learning.

Summary

Faculty members do indeed resist outside calls for accountability and university approaches to assessment. In part, the resistance comes from fear, frustration, faculty bundling the concept of assessment with outside calls for accountability, and discordant views about knowledge. In addition to the challenges, faculty embrace it when it is integrated and shaped internally. Across the disciplines, faculty members viewed assessment as a call for accountability. In an atmosphere of budget cuts, faculty members routinely saw assessment as a threat. Understanding assessment as a threat led faculty to fear that the information they
provided for assessment would result in budget cuts. The fear manifested in negative attitudes toward the concept of student learning assessment often inspiring visceral reactions in the faculty. Faculty members also expressed a deep distrust of leadership at the institution, state and federal government, much of the distrust founded in their own experience in higher education, but also in the experiences of teachers in K-12 education.

Despite the negative environment, faculty members across the three programs reported that they still assessed student learning. These efforts were often less formal and were in response to the faculty members’ or program’s need to understand what and how students were learning. These types of efforts were received well with faculty who saw themselves as assessors of student learning. Faculty members voiced a need for assessment to ensure good teaching and learning and also to ensure that the programs and faculty members were held accountable. Often, however, faculty members did not believe that these assessment efforts would be enough to appease those making outside calls for accountability.

While all three programs expressed similar ideas about assessment as a call for accountability, fear, and even embracing informal assessment, one area where the programs differed was in terms of epistemology and ways of constructing knowledge. In determining what and how students are learning, the programs took very different approaches based on their theories of what constituted knowledge. The findings from the study suggest that when assessment is at the program level in ways that reflect disciplinary structures that there is buy in and even excitement about assessment. The fear, frustration, distrust of administration, negative attitudes, and understanding about what assessment is all indicate that the path assessment has taken to date at this institution is not as effective as it could be. Chapter Five includes
approaches and recommendations that could provide assessment practices that encourage participation of faculty members in the process.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The purpose of the study is to understand faculty attitudes toward assessment and the factors that influence attitudes. Eighteen faculty members from different disciplines offered their experiences engaging with assessment and calls for accountability. Their experiences provide understanding about faculty attitudes toward assessment and calls for accountability. The study utilizes qualitative methods to collect and analyze the data intending to provide rich data and descriptions of the faculty views about assessment along with the factors that influenced those views. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the overall findings that create a larger context for future research and recommendations for practice.

Dewey (1938) says that individuals are the creators of their knowledge, taking their previous experiences and information from their social environments to construct new knowledge. The assessment process is inherently constructivist in that it is about how faculty make sense of what students are learning. Accordingly, constructivist theory frames the data analysis and the presentation of the results because at the core of assessment is the need to understand the teaching and learning process. A constructivist perspective turned out to be particularly relevant for the study. First, how faculty are shaped by their disciplines and their epistemologies highly influences what students learn and how they learn it. Whether or not students are actually learning, the process of assessment, is another construction of what faculty believe the student experience to be. Finally, faculty members also construct their attitudes toward assessment, based on their past experiences, the current social, economic and political, and the newest demand for information.
Major Findings

The research questions that guide this study are “What are faculty attitudes toward assessment” and “What influences those attitudes?” There are two prevalent viewpoints related to assessment as reflected by the literature and the findings for this study. The first viewpoint includes assessment conducted by people who are skeptical of higher education and want to ensure that the money invested in it is being put to good use and that the graduates are competitive with graduates from other countries (Brittingham, 2009). In this view, the assessment is summative: It sums up the educational processes that faculty have implemented. Summative assessment determines if students have achieved the learning outcomes sufficiently or at least enough to justify the money spent. Summative assessment determines the value of the program without necessarily providing information for the program to improve. In terms of feedback, summative assessment is “obtained at the end of a course or program” (Suskie, 2009, p. 23). Incorporating summative feedback is difficult because the purpose is to determine what has happened in the educational process, not what is currently in process, be that process a class, a semester or a reporting cycle. Another viewpoint of assessment in higher education is that assessment informs the educational process, improving both curriculum and teaching and learning. This viewpoint is formative assessment, and the intention is to give feedback to educators during the process so they can make improvements as they are teaching (Suskie, 2009). The overall summary of the histories of these two types of assessment run parallel to the reactions of the faculty in the study and the related major findings.

Assessment and outside calls for accountability are present at the program and institution level in very different ways. Data and results from the outside calls for accountability tend to be summative in nature, and the findings demonstrate that faculty respond with fear, frustration, and
distrust to the calls for accountability. Faculty members reported that they distrusted the outside calls for accountability because faculty thought the data would be used to make budget decisions and had not been involved in the process of developing the measures or ways their programs would be evaluated. Furthermore, faculty were frustrated at the lack of resources available to them with the unfunded mandates of assessment and accountability. The study findings are reflective of themes in the literature (e.g., Linkon, 2005), indicating that faculty members see in these requirements a lack of faith in their work. Faculty view formal calls for accountability, especially where the information they provide could be used to make cuts to their programs or positions, in a negative light. Linkon expressed faculty frustration about assessment this way:

Like other professionals, we [faculty members] believe that we should be trusted on the basis of our training, our continuing professional engagement, and our practice of rigorous peer review. Further, we believe that our work is intrinsically valuable, not merely a contribution to the economy. We see the social value of our work as the production of thoughtful, critical citizens and new knowledge. (p. 28)

Faculty can read the fear that higher education is not working or not worth the investment as a lack of faith in their work. Outside calls for accountability make a value judgment about a program and are like a final grade on an exam without any chance for revision. It is a statement of final value. Because mistrust is so high and calls for accountability can be a tool to create a numeric value of a complex system, faculty do not trust the outside calls for accountability as an adequate way for teaching and learning to be measured.

Student learning outcomes assessment, on the other hand, is similar to the comments written on a students’ paper for revision; the intention is to support evolution of the student’s process and learning. In the same way, student learning outcomes assessment in higher education
does not declare a final value, but rather provides information about how to improve teaching and curriculum. When faculty see assessment as a formative process, there is a high level of support and participation. Yet, when faculty members hear the word “assessment,” they associate it with the outside calls for accountability and not the assessment they do to improve their own curriculum and teaching and learning. A high level of ownership among the faculty creates a positive and integral assessment process. Faculty in all three programs in the study report that they participate in additional assessment efforts, not mandated by calls for accountability, but conducting assessment that is useful to the program. Student learning outcomes assessment allows the institution and programs of study to assess their students locally, using information they learn as they learn it, and allowing faculty within the program to define knowledge in ways that resonates with disciplinary knowledge. Student learning outcomes assessment provides information as the education process happens, allowing those in charge to form the program based on results.

A major finding of the study is that disciplinary context shapes faculty attitudes about assessment. Disciplines deeply influence what the faculty in a particular program see as knowledge and how to report student success of that knowledge. If faculty believe that students must memorize and repeat information as a way of demonstrating their knowledge, asking these students to complete their recall on a test is an appropriate approach. If, however, students are to problematize a text, a standardized test would be a poor demonstration of what students have learned and how they have been taught. In the same way that faculty construct and shape knowledge, the assessment process is a reflection of the learning process and must be in alignment with the disciplinary epistemology.
Faculty attitudes toward assessment are shaped by the national discourse about the purpose of assessment, whether the intention to determine the worth of higher education or whether the intention is to support higher education in improving or sustaining quality. Faculty attitudes are also shaped by their epistemologies and disciplinary structures. The physical science discipline was more comfortable with delivering a straightforward answer to a complex problem, even if they do not like having to answer the call for accountability. Disciplines that are accustomed to more qualitative or interpretative approaches, such as the humanities and social sciences program in this study, find themselves stymied to answer a question whose premise they find at fault. The findings of the study suggest that when assessment is formative and faculty-driven at the program level, the assessment produces useful information to improve teaching and learning. Solid assessment approaches need to reflect a need for accountability and the improvement of teaching and learning. The findings further suggest that faculty members have constructed “assessment” to be a threat. In addition, there is a national discourse about educational priorities. Given the prevalence and focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), it is not surprising that the physical science department did not discuss fear the way that the humanities and social science departments did given that the humanities and social sciences are areas that have had to fight for legitimacy. Faculty attitudes are shaped locally at the campus level but also at the disciplinary and national levels.

Throughout the interviews, faculty member attitudes about assessment were dependent on the kind of assessment that was being discussed. If the assessment happened within the program and was faculty owned, faculty expressed satisfaction with the assessment and the results. If faced with an outside call for accountability, faculty members experienced fear, frustration, and distrust. Across all three disciplines, their initial reactions were negative, even
visceral, at the first mention of the word “assessment.” Faculty members were verbose in their descriptions of the way assessment interfered with or, they feared, controlled their other duties. These kinds of assessment were those that were externally driven and often summative. As the conversation continued, faculty began to discuss another kind of assessment they were doing that they often did not consider assessment. The other kind of assessment was initiated at the program level or by individual faculty who were curious about student learning. These types of formative assessments included informal faculty discussions, formal interviews with students, analyzing use of program resources, and more. Many faculty did not consider these internally initiated assessments as “counting” on the official annual assessment reports. There is a tension between what faculty feel like they have to do to meet institutional demands and requirements for assessment and the type of assessment they do as a matter of course and of good program practice.

Part of the reason for faculty members not connecting their own assessments with official calls for accountability is the way in which they constructed the word “assessment,” which to faculty had an overwhelming negative meaning. Because of their fear that the calls of accountability will be used against them, faculty do not see the benign assessment that is faculty owned in their own programs as assessment. By definition, to the faculty, “assessment” equates to threat. In short, because the assessment they do internally is not threatening, they do not see it as assessment.

Faculty member trust of the administration was negatively impacted because of the downturn in the economy and the massive cuts the institution had undergone, along with the large number of transitions in leadership. Further, faculty bundled previous negative experiences with calls for accountability with ideas program-level assessment used to improve teaching and
curriculum. In doing so, faculty constructed the idea of “assessment” to be a threatening concept because it has been tied to budget cuts and program reprioritization. The threat was so strong that even when I directly asked faculty what kinds of informal or local assessment they might be doing that is not reported, they could not think of a single example. In fact, it was often well into an hour conversation before faculty members could think of these assessments that were not demanded by an outside authority. In at least one case, the faculty member responsible for doing the internally driven assessment never mentioned it in his interview. Instead, other faculty members talked about the usefulness of that assessment.

When faculty members initiated and owned the assessment process, their reactions were positive. The informal assessments faculty members did were considered positively, but then also not considered “assessment.” These were characterized as “great,” “really important,” “helpful,” and more because the faculty often did not see this type of work as “assessment.” Instead of assessment, faculty saw this informal work as satisfying their curiosity, or harvesting information they needed to make their program successful, but they did not, at least initially in the interviews, call it assessment. One of the aspects of owning the process for faculty is that they are sure of the purpose of the assessment and how the data will be used. They do not need to struggle past their distrust of the administration. Further, they were not reacting to what they perceived to be a call for accountability; rather than having to prove their worth, they were gathering data to be more effective.

The research questions that guide this study are: “What are faculty attitudes toward assessment?” and “What factors influence those attitudes?” The response to the questions is complex on one hand in that attitudes are tied to epistemology, culture of disciplines, and institutional context. On the other hand, the response is fairly straightforward, and the data
analysis from the study reveals that faculty members’ attitudes toward assessment depend on whether the assessment is internally-driven, local, faculty owned process or whether the process is externally-driven calls for accountability. When faculty are not integral to assessment processes, they experience fear, frustration and distrust toward outside calls for accountability, but the internally driven assessment is widely accepted by faculty, sometimes enthusiastically, as part of the process of teaching and managing the curriculum. The analysis also reveals that faculty routinely thought of the external calls for accountability and rarely saw their internal efforts as “assessment.” This understanding of assessment led to faculty responding to the word “assessment” in general with fear, negative attitudes, and distrust. Finally, the discipline epistemology strongly influenced what faculty thought about formalized assessment processes and how well they were able to respond to calls for accountability. Faculty attitudes are variable because they are constructed based on the faculty members’ context and their construction of the concept of assessment. Assessment is a complex process that clearly presented a challenge for faculty in the study. The study highlights how knowledge, discipline, and faculty attitudes are intertwined. The findings from this study point to the need for additional questions for future research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The study examines faculty attitudes toward assessment and some of the factors that contribute to those attitudes. The findings provide essential baseline information and suggest that more research is needed about faculty attitudes toward assessment, the roles and responsibilities for assessment are and can be assigned, and whether professional organizations can provide support for disciplinary assessment.
Additional research about faculty attitudes toward assessment in different contexts is needed. Research about faculty resistance to assessment in different institution types and with a greater variety of institutions will give insights to what changes are needed to encourage faculty ownership of the assessment process. The findings in this study demonstrate that some of the faculty resistance stems from the assessment processes lack of consideration of the discipline or epistemology. Further research into additional disciplines and institution types are likely to shed more light on the complexities of both faculty resistance to and participation of assessment. Understanding faculty resistance is crucial in creating effective assessment practices as well as in enrolling faculty into assessment.

Further exploration about faculty involvement and responsibilities in the assessment process would be useful. Faculty can feel excluded from assessment processes and decision making, yet the assessment that faculty conduct under their own impetus they encounter with acceptance and sometimes enthusiasm. Research should be conducted into how assessment offices can be staffed with tenure track faculty who report to the provost’s office or with shared governance processes to include faculty. Knowing if such a reporting structure would make regional accreditation the concern of the faculty as well as administrators would help institutions and faculty determine how best to create shared governance.

Future research is also needed into how staff currently support faculty (who may be new to designing assessment) and how that relationship might be changed in response to any changes in responsibilities. How faculty can support assessment needs further exploration to determine the most effective ways to assure faculty members have ownership over the process. It would be helpful to conduct research in settings with different types of assessment structures to understand faculty behaviors in different assessment systems.
The role of professional associations in assessment needs to be further explored.

Findings of the study point to the role of professional accreditation as support for the physical science program by providing benchmarks, standards, as well as methods for organizing and storing assessment data, results, and decisions made based on assessment. While not every discipline has professional accreditation, disciplines do have professional organizations well situated to determine benchmarks and other standards for assessment. The degree to which these elements of assessment are already provided to disciplines to support assessment needs further research. Additional research could investigate the feasibility of professional associations supporting their disciplines with assessment. Among the questions to research are: Are there resources to support such an endeavor? How would the information be shared with disciplines?

Professional associations are grounded in the epistemology, and how they could be leaders in assessment for the disciplines needs further research. Peer review is a revered practice in higher education, and it would be helpful to know if the member organizations should take on the responsibility for articulating not only the value of the discipline, but through assessment, how that value could be articulated.

The goal of calling for additional research is to get additional information that supports changes in the way assessment in higher education is conducted. Insisting that faculty members participate in an assessment that they see as threatening or antithetical to their discipline is not likely to produce results that most accurately reflect what students are learning. Ultimately, the goal of the study is to encourage faculty member participation and ownership in assessment. In addition to recommendations for research, based on the current research findings, I offer some recommendations for practice.
Recommendations for Future Practice

In order to support the practices based on the literature and findings from the study, institution administrations can implement essential changes to encourage faculty participation and ownership in assessment. Updated practices related to assessment can help yield more authentic results about student learning and guide resources to be influence best practices in teaching and learning. The following recommendations are intended to improve the processes and include faculty ownership.

Provide institution support for assessment. Until assessment is adequately funded, faculty have few reasons to believe that assessment is important outside of the ways that assessment can be used to harm their programs or positions. Institutions and programs should clearly articulate how assessment will be funded and provide funds. Without support, assessment is an unfunded mandate that will continue faculty frustration. Until assessment is funded, institutions and programs should find ways to support the individual faculty members who are tasked with assessment. Even when budgets are tight, finding a course release, an additional month’s pay, or other compensation is essential for supporting effective assessment practices and methods.

Clearly define and adjust assessment roles and responsibilities. Higher education has been practicing student learning outcomes assessment for the last 30 years, yet the institution in the study lacked clear guidelines for what roles administrators, faculty, staff, and students had for successful assessment. Instead, assessment requirements were determined by the administration, and the programs were expected to meet those expectations without providing input on the process. Institutional administrations and faculty senates should consider the way assessment is assigned to programs, chairs, faculty, and other staff. Successful models that allow faculty the
greatest latitude in assuming responsibility for what kinds of assessment methods and measures should be the focus of determining roles and responsibilities. Administrations and faculty senates can take some of the mystery out of assessment by clarifying roles and responsibilities of assessment for the institution.

Faculty members should be active in assessment processes. Assessment, the same assessment they willingly participate in on their own, can be a vehicle that helps articulate their discipline’s worth to the voters and government. Avoiding the process leaves the government and people to make their own assumptions about that avoidance and further allows other voices to speak about their value. To trust the process, faculty, specifically the faculty senates, should take active roles in defining what assessment is and how it should be used. Often faculty members in the study have referenced their over-burdened work schedules as why they do not participate in assessment, yet assessment can be a way of gaining agency and voice both within the institution and on a national level as well, especially if the professional associations take responsibility.

*Clearly delineate and define the differences between assessment and other calls for accountability.* Assessment of student learning outcomes should not be used for program prioritization of spending. Assessment data is formative data that does not provide the value judgment that summative data does. Therefore, using assessment data to make budget decisions is impractical. In my study, I could not find an instance of student learning outcomes assessment data being used to make budget decisions, but faculty still believe it might be used in that way.

The clear delineation of differences between is more about communication between faculty and the administration in support of student learning. The administration and faculty should be clear about what types of data will be used for budget cuts if necessary, but a faculty’s earnest
intention to improve or sustain student learning will not be used against them. If a program discovers that students are not meeting one of the programs’ outcomes, and they work to improve their result, they should not be punished for that work with a budget cut. More importantly, faculty should know that the assessment process will not result in financial punishment. Faculty and programs that are responding to student needs should not be penalized. Further, faculty need to be reassured that their authentic desire to increase student learning (or sustain it where students are at least adequately performing) will never be punished by budget considerations. The findings demonstrate that campuses would do well to have communication and policy aligned in ways that make clear how assessment data will be used and how program prioritization and budget cuts will be made.

*Assessment should be discipline-based.* Although institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to demonstrate that their general education programs are preparing students in a more universal way, the disciplinary programs of study that provide the basis for most institutions necessarily focus on preparing students within a particular disciplinary context. Any type of standardized assessment ignores the necessary complexities of the disciplines and constrains faculty responses to be something that they may not consider representative of their programs. The study suggests that with these constraints in place, the faculty created “goofy” tests in order to respond, or they supplied “bogus” numbers. Institutions should lead the way in supporting higher education by basing assessment in the discipline so that the program can have ownership. The next step is for the institution to allow each discipline to define success of its student learning outcomes. Many disciplines are leading conversations about assessment practices. Campuses would do well to incorporate disciplinary perspectives and practices.
Student learning outcome assessment has been active in the U.S. for the past 30 years, but has only recently made an impact on the institution in the study. Supporting assessment through funding, clearly defined roles and uses for assessment as well as allowing assessment to be discipline-based will support faculty members in participating in assessment in authentic ways that demonstrate fully what is happening in higher education with rich detail.

**Conclusion**

Many institutions of higher learning have disenfranchised faculty members from the assessment process as student learning outcome assessment has grown. The study findings demonstrate that faculty attitudes toward assessment are shaped by discipline and campus context. For institutions to be successful, faculty need to have ownership over the assessment process.

In attempting to respond to calls for accountability, institutions have attempted to respond quickly, which can result in sudden demands on faculty time for information. In this process, however, administrators do not consider faculty buy-in. The result has been a lack of trust that leaves faculty members deeply suspicious of assessment. One of Spellings’ (2006) findings was that institutions were resistant to accountability. While this resistance is likely influenced by the lack of trust, it may also demonstrate the gap between how the calls for accountability are received and how the various disciplines respond to those calls. Administrators should be more sensitive to shared governance and the need for faculty to own the assessment process.

At the same time, faculty members should reclaim ownership over the assessment process through actively engaging in assessment that can be used for calls for accountability and allowing assessment to support them by articulating their discipline’s and program’s worth. Assessment can also support changes to curriculum and instruction. Faculty ownership over
assessment supports the professionalism of the faculty members and their institutions.

Accountability is not the enemy to faculty; in fact, faculty members in the study argued in favor of being accountable. Instead, accountability is an important part of the assessment process, but no more important than the need to support teaching and learning with data, regardless how that looks for each discipline.

Faculty attitudes toward assessment are shaped by campus, disciplinary, and national contexts. Much of how faculty respond to assessment depends on relationships between faculty and administrators, as well as the climate on campus including how accountability and accreditation has been handled in the past. When faculty experience having a sense of ownership over the process of assessment, as well as how the assessment results will be used, their participation in assessment is increased. Campuses need to be intentional in how they request information from faculty and disentangle reprioritizations from assessment of student learning.

Additionally, faculty members’ disciplinary approach to knowledge influences how faculty view teaching and learning, and by extension, assessment. Assessment that is not standardized but rather unique to the disciplinary approaches encourages faculty understanding of assessment as a useful tool and further encourages participation. In order to gain information about assessment of teaching and learning to both improve curriculum and instruction, as well as to provide an accurate picture of what students are learning, faculty participation is essential. Responding to faculty concerns is the next step in improving faculty participation and creating positive attitudes toward assessment.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interview questions were crafted as a starting place to explore the attitudes and reactions of faculty members toward assessment. Follow-up questions and pursuit of relevant tangents will also be pursued.

Below is an outline of an introduction and questions to be asked of faculty members who agree to participate in the study:

Assessment is generally described as the collection and analysis of data for the purpose of improving student learning. In the classroom, assessment happens often through verbal feedback, written comments, grades and more. A faculty member tends to have a good sense of what students in their particular classes are learning. At a program level, assessment is the systematic collection and analysis of information to improve student learning and to determine if the program is reaching its stated outcomes, and if not, how to better ensure it does.

My questions today focus on program assessment within your department, and generally speaking, faculty members view of program assessment.

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “assessment”?

2. What experiences have led you to this view?

3. How do you hear assessment discussed by your colleagues in your department?

4. Please tell me about a specific example that stands out in your mind of how your colleagues in your department have discussed assessment.

5. How do you hear assessment discussed outside of your department?

6. Please tell me about a specific example that stands out in your mind of how you have heard assessment discussed outside of your department.
7. What is happening with assessment in your department?

8. Who is involved in assessment in your program?

9. Why are those specific individuals involved in assessment in your program?

10. What is your role in assessment?

11. What does that role entail?

12. How did you come to have that role?

13. How do you feel about that role?

14. Why do you feel that way?*

15. How do your colleagues tend to approach program-level assessment work?

16. Please give an example that shows that approach.

17. What is the main value to you of being involved (if they are, which you will know by this question) in assessment?

18. What would encourage you to participate in program-level assessment? (if they do)

19. What discourages you to participate in program-level assessment?

20. Is there anything else you can tell me that would support my understanding of your experience concerning assessment?

21. General follow-ups: Can you tell me more about that? Can you give me an example of that? What in your experience has led you to this belief/thought/opinion?

Please note: Follow-up questions were asked as appropriate.
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Attention: Study Participant

RE: Faculty Perceptions toward Assessment and Accreditation

From: Kelly Ward, Professor, Principle Investigator
Becky Dueben, Ph.D. Candidate, Co-Principle Investigator

Researcher's statement
This letter is regarding the research project that Kelly Ward Ph.D. and Becky are conducting
through the Washington State University, College of Education. We are asking your consent
to conduct this research as approved by the WSU institutional review board number XXXX.
The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you
decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask
questions about the purpose of the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a
volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have
answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This
process is called ‘informed consent.’ I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

Purpose and Benefits
The purpose of the research project is to gain an understanding of the perceptions of Native
American students toward online degree programs, primarily those offered by state
universities and colleges. Benefits to the participants may include a better understanding of
themselves, their perceptions of higher education in general, and technology-mediated
programs more specifically. Benefits to society may include a better understanding of how
online higher education can be tailored to meet the needs and desires of aspiring Native
American college students in order to provide a viable, desirable access point to higher
education for Native students. Access to higher education contributes to improved economic development in communities, and improving the viability of online programs for Native students may improve graduation and retention rates for those communities.

Procedures

This project will be conducted during the spring and fall 2013 semesters, during which time interviews will be conducted and recorded. All participants will be given a sheet outlining the description of the research and a consent form from each agreeing participant will be collected before session begins. Any participant not giving consent will not be used in the research project. Participants consenting to the study will be informed that they may discontinue their involvement at any time.

Participants will be asked to review the research results to ensure accurate representation by the researcher prior to publication.

Risks, Stress, or Discomfort

There will be minimal risk associated with your participation in the research. A risk is minimal where the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed study is not greater, in and of themselves, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. During the interviews we will address perceptions of assessment and accreditation in higher education and within the participant’s own department, and strong emotion may be evoked. However, these conversations will occur in a very supportive, non-judging, confidential environment where participants discuss openly and participate at their own free-will.
**Confidentiality**

Participant confidentiality is of utmost importance to the project; therefore, students’ names will be coded to ensure anonymity throughout the study and into any publications that may come from the data. All personally identifiable material will be kept solely by the researcher and destroyed at the conclusion of the project.

**Subject’s statement**

This study has been explained to me. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can contact Becky Dueben (rdueben@wsu.edu). If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661. After review, please check the boxes below that you consent to and then sign and date the bottom line to acknowledge that you understand and give consent to the research project.

I consent to having information collected from:

- [ ] Audio recordings of the interview
- [ ] Note taking by research assistant during the interview
- [ ] Follow up questions used for clarification after the interview
- [ ] Review of research findings

Researcher __________________________ Date ________________

Participant _________________________ ____________________ __________

Signature __________________________ Print __________________________ Date