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THE UNKNOWING KNOWERS: FACULTY AND
THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

by

Topeka Small Williams

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Higher and Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

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Accountability of higher education is a prevailing concern of state and federal governments. Six regional accreditation agencies provide one avenue of accountability. The purpose of this research is to determine how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. A deeper understanding of how faculty members make meaning of the experience will help higher education constituents to determine if changes in the process are necessary.

The college included in this study is Ourown Community College (OCC). This college was selected based on having undergone a recent accreditation process. The faculty members who participated were chosen based on the following criteria: they were employed at OCC during the accreditation process and throughout this research.

The research employed three sources of data. First, the faculty members in this study participated in three individual interviews. Second, two focus group discussions were held. Third, a document analysis of the final accreditation report by the regional accreditor of the college was performed.

The first and second faculty interviews focused on questions that describe their perspective of the experience. The third faculty interview addressed gaps or inconsistencies in information from the first two interviews. The focus group discussions consisted of general questions about the accreditation experience. The document analysis of the final accreditation report focused on faculty comments and data in the report that further illuminate the faculty members' understanding of the accreditation experience. Furthermore, this analysis completed triangulation and reinforced reliability of the study.

The qualitative data collected were analyzed for their relationship to the research questions in this study. The data were analyzed for common themes, significant differences, and descriptive quotes that embody the inner thoughts of the participants. Five themes became significant. Faculty made meaning of the accreditation process based on feeling:

1. befuddled and bewildered;
2. disconcerted and disoriented;
3. disconnected and detached;
4. unfamiliar and unidentified; and
5. the desire for collegiality and collaboration.

The faculty stories revealed that when faculty are informed about the process by those whom they feel most comfortable and familiar in settings where they do not feel threatened, they gain more knowledge about the process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Accountability, accountability, accountability. This is the message that is coming from the U.S. Department of Education. The former secretary of the department, Margaret Spellings, pushed the requirement that higher education prove its claim that it is providing a quality education that ensures U.S. citizens are ready to compete in the global job market (Carnevale, 2007). The Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the agency charged with carrying out this system of checks and balances, has sanctioned six regional accreditation boards whose responsibility is to ensure that colleges and universities in America are meeting rigorous standards that make them viable competitors in higher education. Accreditation status lets the world know that an institution is one of quality and to prove it, the institution has submitted itself to the voluntary process of accreditation. The six regional accreditation boards are: the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (The Higher Learning Commission, 2007). All of these are named for the part of the U.S. in which they accredit higher education institutions (While there are other accrediting agencies, this research focuses on regional accreditation).

Colleges and universities voluntarily submit to the process of accreditation to show their constituents that they are meeting rigorous standards and continuing to improve over time. “The accrediting organization ... sends a team of peers to review the institution or program and, based on its standards, the accrediting organization makes a

judgment about whether accredited status is achieved” (Eaton, 2003, p. 3). The regional accreditors use a list of five criteria that a higher learning institution must meet in order to receive accreditation: mission and integrity; preparing for the future; student learning and effective teaching; acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge; and engagement and service (The Higher Learning Commission, 2007).

Overview of the Regional Accreditation Process

The Council of Higher Education Accreditation (2006) provides an overview of and definitions related to the process:

The five key features of accreditation are:

- Self-study: Institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance based on accrediting organizations' standards.
- Peer review: Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty and administrative peers in the profession. These colleagues review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programs after the self study is completed. Peers comprise the majority of members of the accrediting commissions or boards that make judgments about accrediting status.
- Site visit: Accrediting organizations normally send a visiting team to review an institution or program. The self-study provides the foundation for the team visit. Teams, in addition to the peers described above, may also include public members (non-academics who have an interest in higher education). All team members are volunteers and are generally not compensated.

- Action (judgment) by accrediting organization: Accrediting organizations have commissions that affirm accreditation for new institutions and programs, reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programs, and deny accreditation to institutions and programs.
- Ongoing external review: Institutions and programs continue to be reviewed over time on cycles that range from every few years to ten years. They normally prepare a self-study and undergo a site visit each time (p. 5–6).

All these components involve huge amounts of time, energy, and manpower on both the sides of the accreditation agency and the college or university that is undergoing the evaluation. As a matter of fact, the process of accreditation, from start to finish, can last as long as 3–4 years and even longer if an appeals process is included. Then the ongoing external review is constant. So in essence, the process never ends.

Statement and Significance of the Problem

The process of undergoing an accreditation review is intended to inform an institution of the things it is doing right and identify areas for improvement. After the process is complete, one would expect a positive shift in the behaviors of those who have been a part of this process to answer the items that have been highlighted. However, the question remains, how do the faculty members of the institutions that undergo this process view this experience? This question can be answered in part by examining how faculty members make meaning of the experience.

As the years progress, the budgets of higher education institutions continue to be constrained due to competing demands for services and state funding that has not grown as fast as needed. These constrained budgets create tuition increases for students. Of

course, budget shortages create competition between state institutions for state higher education dollars. As a result, institutions must show they are more worthy of the dollars than another state institution because they better meet the needs of students and the state (Ewell & Wellman, 1997). Thus, colleges and universities must prove their worth and institutional effectiveness as assessed by the accrediting process. However, the accrediting process has been said to produce more bad results than positive (Neal, 2008) which creates a need to determine where and how the accreditation process is disconnected from increased institutional effectiveness. Since the largest constant in accreditation is faculty, studying how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process may provide valuable insights to accreditation agencies.

This study has the potential to produce valuable findings for higher education. The age of accountability overseen in part by accreditation agencies has come. With fewer fiscal resources available to colleges, only those that are able to prove their worth through documented improvements in all areas will be able to receive the funding needed to keep their doors open. This study illuminates the thoughts of faculty members about the accreditation process. Once this information is discovered, accreditation associations and colleges and universities can begin to address the concerns that faculty members have about the accreditation process. From here, problems can be resolved, amicable compromises reached, and more positive changes in the process can be made to enhance faculty members' perspectives that relate to the accreditation experience.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. This will be generally defined as how faculty

members construct knowledge about the accreditation process. Without this, there is no frame of reference and no way of knowing how to change the process in a way that is meaningful to faculty members. In higher education, as in every sector of life, changes do not *just* occur. Changes should be justified by research before time, effort, and money are invested. The body of knowledge that will be constructed following this research along with what is already known could help to justify change in higher education and its accreditation processes.

How do faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process? This central research question guided a phenomenological study in which faculty members' stories about the experience were captured. This central research question was supported by several sub-questions: how did you feel during the experience; describe your actions toward accreditation efforts during the experience; explain your level of understanding of the experience; explain your view of the relevance of the process; and describe your overall perception of the accreditation experience.

Definition of Terms

The terms used in the study and their definitions are as follows:

- *Accountability*: Accountability is “a diagnostic form of quality review and evaluation of teaching, learning, and programs based on a detailed examination of curricula, structure, and effectiveness of the institution, its internal review, and quality control mechanisms” (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2006, p. 3).
- *Accreditation*: Accreditation is “a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programs for

quality assurance and quality improvement” (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2006, p. 3).

- *Assessment*: Assessment is “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4). “The goal of assessment is to examine the qualitative and quantitative evidence generated about student competence and to use that evidence to improve the learning of current and future students” (Palomba & Banta, 2001, p. 13).
- *Regional accreditors*: Regional accreditors are “faculty and/or administrative peers in the profession [who] review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programs after the self study is completed. [They] comprise the majority of members of the accrediting commissions or boards that make judgments about accrediting status” (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2006, p. 5).
- *Self-study*: Self-study is defined as “the review and evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of an institution's own academic programs, staffing, and structure, based on standards set by an outside quality assurance body, carried out by the institution itself. Self-studies usually are undertaken in preparation for a quality assurance site visit by an outside team of specialists (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 5).
- *Site visit*: Site visit is the “evaluation by a team of peer reviewers who examine the institution's self-study; interview faculty, students, and staff; and examine the structure and effectiveness of the institution and its academic programs. Usually

results in an evaluation. Normally part of the accreditation process, but may be initiated by the institution itself” (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 5)

- *Standards*: Standards are “the level of requirements and conditions that must be met by institutions or programs to be accredited or certified by a quality assurance or accrediting agency. These conditions involve expectations about quality, attainment, effectiveness, financial viability, outcomes, and sustainability” (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 5).
- *Team report*: A team report is “the report of the evaluation resulting from a site visit by assessors of a particular institution or program. Results in an accreditation or quality assurance recommendation or denial (an adverse action)” (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2002, p. 5).

Limitations of the Study

Several factors influenced the results of this study. The study sample comprises a criterion based sample of faculty members of a community college who were employed there during the accreditation process. The demographics and cultural backgrounds of the participants may not be typical of those in other parts of the United States. Since the sample is not representative of the larger population of community college faculty members, the results cannot be generalized to those in the same positions in other academic settings in the United States. In addition, the study is descriptive in nature and is not designed to establish causality.

Outline of the Study

The five chapters in this study follow a logical progression, starting with an introduction to the problem of how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process, Chapter 1. The theoretical framework included in Chapter 2 contains the relevant literature to build a foundational understanding of social constructivism theory and how the theory applies to the accreditation process and faculty. Additional topics, such as the historical perspective of accreditation, the concept of social constructivism theory, studies on faculty and social constructivism, and gaps in research are also discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 covers the research methodology used to conduct this study, including information regarding participant selection, collection and analysis of data, and an overview of the faculty participants. Chapter 4 contains data and analysis of the information collected during the study. The bulk of the information presented relates to how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. In Chapter 5, the implications of the study for practitioners and recommendations for future research are included.

CHAPTER 2

STUDIES RELATED TO FACULTY AND ACCREDITATION

The former Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, ascertained that accreditation agencies needed an overhaul to focus on paying more attention to student learning and ensuring that the information gleaned through this process became available to the public. As a result, the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education sought to push accrediting agencies to do this, but was met with fierce opposition from higher education institutions that believed accreditation in its then-current state was effective and a change would diminish its effectiveness (Brittingham, 2008). One reason why Spellings' recommendations were opposed by those in higher education and accreditation bodies was that she sought to regulate higher education from the platform of federal government.

Much of the literature that speaks to accreditation does not specifically discuss the faculty's perspectives of the accreditation process. Instead, most of the literature focuses on the problems with accreditation, how it should be done, who should do it, and why the process is important. However, the need for deliberate and extensive study on how faculties experience and make meaning of the accreditation process is essential to determine how the accreditation process benefits higher education.

Historical Perspective of Accreditation

Neal (2008) gave a substantive historical account of how accreditation came into existence:

In America, the Tenth Amendment is clear—education is *not* one of the powers delegated to the federal government. As a consequence, state charters traditionally guard schools against federal control, and colleges and universities are run by lay boards of trustees secured from federal interference, thanks to Daniel Webster's

suit before the Supreme Court in 1819. American higher education thrives because of this freedom. Various academic protocols—such as academic freedom—rightly protect it, while institutions assiduously defend their autonomy. Various associations emerged in the late 19th century to differentiate colleges from high schools. Over the years, these bodies developed voluntary criteria to identify the characteristics of a sound educational program, in a nongovernmental system of peer evaluation. (p. 24)

As discussed previously, regional accrediting associations for public school governance were already in existence when the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, was passed in 1944, but these regional accrediting bodies, North Central, Southern, Northwest, New England, Western, and Middle States grew another limb that extended into the world of higher education. Each association created a separate division that governed colleges and universities. There was a need to protect federal education funds and war veterans from exploitation by counterfeit institutions that were looking to prosper. To deter such institutions, it became customary that a legitimate, degree-granting college or university that wished to receive federal financial aid funds would subject itself to the voluntary regional accreditation process which included a self-study and a periodic team visit (Thelin, 2004). "Accreditation [emerged] from concerns to protect [...] and to serve the public interest" (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2006, p. 3). The policy that regional accreditation be secured by institutions of higher education in order to receive federal funds was designed to protect federal funds, colleges and universities, and students.

Subsequently, regional accreditation associations continued to influence higher education by policing it to ensure standards of uniformity and quality. The standards that govern these private accreditation institutions were and still are established by the colleges and universities that were/are members of the associations. These associations

were called to this regulatory service to prevent the squandering of federal student aid dollars through diploma mills or colleges that did not meet the standards of accreditation after the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Not many years later, "...the 1952 legislation designated the existing peer review process [used by accrediting agencies] as the basis for measuring institutional quality; GI Bill eligibility was limited to students enrolled at accredited institutions included on a list of federally recognized accredited institutions published by the U.S. Commissioner of Education" (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2006, p. 3). Though these regional accrediting agencies had been around, it was not until 1952 that each of them established a division that governed higher education.

Theoretical Framework

In social constructivist research, "rather than starting with a theory, inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Ultimately, a constructivist's main concern is how individuals make meaning of an experience, and they believe this meaning is subjective and valid. Social constructivists have been associated with the general psychological theory of social constructivism which will be used to ground this study. A simple explanation of this theory is people make meaning of the world in which they live and work based on their environment and culture, and interactions with those in their environment and culture. Culture is best seen as the source of human behavior (Crotty, 1998, p. 54). In other words, Crotty suggests the shared beliefs and practices of a group dictate that group's behavior. With this theory,

Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences-meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These

meanings are varied and multiple The goal ... is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. (Creswell, 2009, p. 8)

The views studied have been shaped by the participant's interaction with others and "historical and cultural norms" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). This theory proposes that "individuals hold a variety of views in relation to a situation and there is a focus on understanding these multiple meanings" (Roux & Barry, 2009, p. 4). The individual and the learning that takes place as a result of the social context is at the heart of social constructivism. "It would appear useful, then, to reserve the term 'constructivism' for epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on the meaning making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Furthermore, "constructivism... points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). As social constructivism relates to this study, faculty members have different views of the accreditation process. If social constructivism theory holds true, how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process is based on social constructs, e.g. social interaction with other people in the higher education environment and norms of the environment itself. The faculty members' stories give an idea of what interactions and norms within the higher education environment shape the way that they made meaning of the accreditation process as individuals and as a group. The social constructivist theory holds that two people looking at the same thing never see it the same way. We each hold a distinctive view of reality that is shaped by our experiences (Kim, 2001). The faculty members' stories relayed in this study elucidate each faculty members' version of reality and the social constructs that influenced the making of this reality.

Related Studies

Faculty Role in Accreditation

The faculty role in accreditation has been firmly established by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), both of which are highly influential organizations within higher education. The AAUP is considered an authority on faculty related matters while CHEA is considered to be an authority on accreditation matters. The AAUP, by its own admission, was created to define “fundamental professional values and standards for higher education.” Since it was founded in 1915, this organization has defined the roles of faculty members in many ways. AAUP (2008) reminds its constituents of its original stance on faculty involvement in accreditation:

AAUP defines the role of faculty in accreditation in its 1968 statement *The Role of the Faculty in the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities*. The principles include the following: the self-study should be a ‘cooperative effort’ involving administrators and faculty; institutions should encourage faculty participation; and the evaluation of academic programs and conditions affecting academic freedom, tenure, faculty governance, and faculty status and morale should be ‘largely the responsibility of faculty members.’ (para. 3)

Furthermore, AAUP (2008) believes that faculty should be heavily involved in the accreditation process and related activities such as the self-study to ensure that the faculty voice is heard throughout the process. In one of its committee reports, AAUP (2008) holds that faculty involvement should be welcomed by administrators and rewarded as much as any other service that the faculty provides to the institution. AAUP (2008) says,

Faculty members often ask how they can add value to what may seem to be primarily an administrative function. Yet issues such as curricular design and effectiveness, assessment of students’ academic performance, student retention and graduation rates, quality of academic advising, and appropriateness of cocurricular activities are central to the [accreditation process]. Because of their training and direct contact with students, faculty members are in the best position

to provide analyses of these issues. And they possess the research and analytical skills not only to identify deficiencies in processes and outcomes but also to develop methods for improvement. (para. 5)

The Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is the single agency commissioned by the United States Department of Education to govern the body of regional accreditors in the United States. This agency has been called “the accreditor or accreditors.” In its list of effective accreditation practices, CHEA (March 2010) also recommends extensive faculty involvement in accreditation: “accrediting associations work to broaden and intensify faculty participation in accreditation review, benefiting from their expertise in deciding and judging goals and evidence for student achievement” (p. 2). In a later report published by CHEA (September 2010), participants [in a meeting called by CHEA with higher education accreditors, administrators, faculty, staff, and students] expressed the need for faculty to be more involved in the accreditation process but went on to “indicate that [faculty] are [already] ‘consumed’ by accreditation, with time and other resources diverted from the vital task of serving students” (p. 4). So while there is a need for more faculty involvement, faculty feel that the time spent on accreditation tasks could be better spent on the constituents who faculty consider to be their primary responsibility, students. Palomba and Banta (1999) agree that students and subsequently, the assessment of their learning, should be the primary role of faculty at any institution of higher learning. They believe that when the assessment of student learning is paramount in the duties of faculty members, it is then that faculty members are able to see assessment as more than another activity to complete for accreditation but important and worthwhile. Though a conflict in priority between administrators and

faculty is apparent, the role of faculty in the accreditation process has been solidified by both AAUP and CHEA.

Impact of Accreditation on Faculty Members

Several studies have been conducted on the impact of the accreditation process on faculty. Brase (1964) studied curriculum changes at selected two-year colleges initiated by the evaluation process used by the Middle States Association of College and Schools accrediting body. He asserted that:

During the 1-year period following accreditation committee visits to four junior colleges, the author visited these institutions and studied their self evaluation reports and the visiting committee reports in an effort to determine the effects of the accreditation process on the quality of instruction. While actions were taken as results of both the self-studies and the committee recommendations, the latter accounted for most of these actions. The visiting committee recommendations are the most influential change stimulus in the accrediting process. Changes in curriculum were most numerous. (Brase, 1964, abstract)

This study implies that the accreditation experience does indeed bring about changes, as accreditors' recommendations influenced faculty to undertake curricular changes.

Nichols (1995), in *Assessment Case Studies: Common Issues in Implementation with Various Campus Approaches to Resolution*, found that faculty members have an increased desire to play an active role in the self-study portion of the accreditation process and an increased desire to become a member of accreditation peer committees. By becoming members of peer committees, faculty indicated an interest in affecting institutional effectiveness and student learning assessment procedures from inside the accreditation process. Nichols (1995) concluded:

Clearly the best motivation situation existed for faculty 'buy-in' [of accreditation practices] when faculty: originated the process, did not feel threatened, and were provided with a substantial role in shaping the process. Indication of the intent of the institution to use the results in a formative manner early in the [accreditation] process was found to be a key in faculty motivation. (p. 16)

This study shows that faculty members want to be a part of the accreditation process and highlights yet another important view that faculty members hold about the accreditation process. Giving faculty members a sense of empowerment “also went a long way in [making the accreditation] process work for the improvement of the institution’s academic programs” (Nichols, 1995, p. 18). Increased responsibility in creating and evaluating learning objectives was yet another influence of the accreditation process on faculty academic life (Nichols, 1995). This study did highlight the faculty members’ voices as they relate to the accreditation process, but singularly illuminating their stories would have provided even more valuable data on the views and assumptions of the faculty members’ experience with the accreditation process.

Another interesting finding by Fisk and Duryea (1977) was that as a result of accreditation processes, faculty unionization increased. It seems that faculty members felt threatened after the experience and felt a need for bargaining power with accreditation agencies and other governing bodies. Hearing the faculty members’ stories about the experience has the potential to give a clearer understanding of why unionization increased and to focus on how faculty members arrive at their perceptions about the accreditation process. Yet, there is a gap in understanding because this research does not fully represent the faculty members’ voices and how they make meaning of the experience.

Faculty Perception and Resistance to Accreditation Processes

Faculty perceptions of the accreditation process and accreditation related activities like assessment are not positive and result in a resistance to accountability efforts like the accreditation process. In an article entitled “Differing Administrator,

Faculty, and Staff Perceptions of Organizational Culture as Related to External Accreditation,” Claire H. Procopio (2010) stated,

For accreditation to have what is termed intrinsic value (i.e. value beyond the accrediting agency’s stamp of approval and access to federal student loans and grants), college accreditation leaders are told they must overcome the perception of faculty and staff that accreditation is simply a pro forma hoop through which they must jump every five to ten years. (para. 7)

There is no wonder that faculty perceive the accreditation process differently when Procopio (2010) further states that “It is probable that leaders of an accreditation effort receive more information, are more highly involved, and are, in fact, in supervisory roles more than their non-committee counterparts,” and “Least satisfied [with the process] are the two groups reporting active and minimal involvement” (para. 27). The study reports that the minimally involved group is faculty. Procopio (2010) goes on to say that those who are “minimally involved” in the accreditation process commonly experience “frustration.” Furthermore, “the additional meetings in reality and/or in perception do not strike personnel as affording everyone the opportunity to be included in discussions, to tap creative potential, to result in decisions being enacted, or to be time well spent” (Procopio, 2010, para. 28). One of the most relevant findings in this research article is:

Faculty need a voice in crafting what they perceive to be a healthy climate, effective information flow, useful meetings, and appropriate levels of involvement.... These findings seem to indicate that very high-end involvement yields some satisfaction with the organizational culture, but simply being asked to participate (actively or minimally) in the [accreditation] process by those who lead drives up frustration. (Procopio, 2010, para. 30)

Schilling and Schilling (1998) identified the perception that faculty have about assessment, one of their main roles in the accreditation process, as one of disdain. Faculty members see it as just one more command for accountability (Procopio, 2010; Schilling & Schilling, 1998). The contempt that faculty feel towards assessment was also attributed

to faculty members feeling “overburdened” with yet another responsibility on already “full plates.” Schilling and Schilling (1998) further stated that faculty members are still uncertain about assessment and this leads to some of their resistance. Another study suggested to counteract faculty perceptions and resistance to accreditation, “encourage teamwork and team building through brainstorming, dialogue and discussion, and joint projects” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, pp. 65–66); and “to set clear and defined roles in the assessment process” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 53).

The faculty perspectives emerge as a result of how faculty experience accreditation. Therefore, it is apparent that the way in which faculty experience accreditation is the greatest predictor of the faculty’s perspectives on the experience.

Gaps in Research

The aforementioned literature guides the current study and demonstrates that there are obvious gaps in the research. As a result of these varying yet incomplete views of accreditation, it is important and necessary to singularly focus on the faculty members’ stories to determine how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation experience. What thoughts are experienced by faculty members when it comes to accreditation? How do faculty members view themselves in the experience? Although the effects of accreditation on institutions as a whole have been studied, as seen with the work of Fisk and Duryea, Nichols, and Brase, how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation experience has yet to be illuminated. By studying faculty, I determined how faculty members perceive the accreditation experience. When this is determined, changes, if needed, can be made in the accreditation process to make sure that institutions, and

particularly faculty members who are one of the most important parts of an institution, are benefitting from the experience.

Brase's (1964) dissertation reported that most changes in an institution are stimulated by the peer visit that occurs during the accreditation experience. While this research is very informative and valid, it was conducted over 40 years ago. His study needs to be repeated in the context of higher education in the 21st century and focused on the faculty member's experience. By asking faculty members to tell their stories about the accreditation experience, a clearer view of the value of the accreditation experience in the lives of faculty members can result. We need to know which parts of the accreditation process are most helpful to faculty, which parts are less helpful, and which parts of the accreditation process can be changed to illicit more positive views from the faculty. The answers to these questions and how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation experience will be gleaned from the collection of faculty members' stories that are amassed in this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This phenomenological study falls under the social constructivism philosophical paradigm as it seeks to illuminate faculty members' understanding of the world in which they live and work. Kim (2001) explains social constructivism and its assumptions:

Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of instruction that are rooted in the perspectives of social constructivists, it is important to know the premises that underlie them.

Reality: Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (as cited in Kim, 2001). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist prior to its social invention.

Knowledge: To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (as cited in Kim, 2001). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

Learning: Social constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces (as cited in Kim, 2001). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. (Kim, 2001, p. 3)

In relation to this study, social constructivism's assumptions propose that faculty members construct meaning of the accreditation process as they interact with each other, the accrediting agents, the institution's administration, and all other persons who are included in this process. This meaning of reality is not constructed until the phenomenon takes place. Prior to this experience, there is no basis for constructing this meaning because there is no shared experience of the accreditation process upon which the faculty members can build meaning. As the process takes place, faculty members construct meaning in their environment through the meetings, conversations, and all other social activities that they engage in with all parties involved in the process.

This study examined how faculty members made meaning of the accreditation process. By examining the faculty members' stories about the experience, the social constructs (e.g., social interactions and environment) that defined the experience for faculty members were revealed. Qualitative research methods were the means of investigation utilized during the study. Creswell (1998) explains that "a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (p. 15).

The qualitative research paradigm is of greatest value in gaining an in-depth knowledge of the subjects and their lived experiences. The phenomenological aspect of the study allows the researcher to singularly highlight the faculty members' stories about the accreditation experience.

Qualitative research has been defined by Creswell (2007) as "an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a

social or human problem” (p. 249). Bhattacharya (2007) wrote that in the realm of education, qualitative research is well received. Qualitative research allowed for the emergence of themes that may not have been discovered through simple surveys that allow no dialogue. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is utilized because of the need to delve into some issue extensively and because measuring something in numbers, as is done in quantitative research, just does not give a clear explanation of a phenomenon. In an effort to understand how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation experience, a researcher must have the actual language that conveys the ideas as the participants verbalized them. The language provides a deeper description than statistical data could. And since the goal of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon, not make a judgment about it as quantitative research allows, it is the best method for this particular study.

Subjectivities

As with any researcher, I would be remiss not to openly acknowledge my own inner subjectivities. First of all, I was an employee of Our own Community College (OCC) during the accreditation experience that will be studied. This very fact proves the point that I have an opinion about the experience. I found the experience to be dreadful, not because of the accreditors but because of my negative perception of the accreditors. I thought the accreditors were investigators who would discredit me and my work as a faculty person. I felt like the college’s administration used fear to make faculty members do what they thought the accreditors would be evaluating. Therefore, there was hostility present before and after the experience. I already had a preconceived notion about what all the faculty members thought about the whole experience. I figured that they would

feel as I felt. My hope was that this study would give faculty members a voice that tells how they made meaning of the experience. I believed accreditors would make faculty members look bad so we would lose our jobs. My skepticism regarding the accreditors and their motives has the potential to influence the analysis of this study.

The fact that I have known the faculty participants for at least 5 years means I could potentially take their answers and reactions for granted. Perhaps because I have had a working relationship with them, I may try to predict or interpret their statements in a way not necessarily authentic to them. No doubt, this could have the potential to color the way the research is reported. However, I am bracketing these biases as recommended by Creswell (2003) and discussing them here in an effort to maintain the accuracy of the findings provided by the research participants.

In an effort to minimize my subjectivities, I used exact quotes from the study participants to reduce my interpretation of their comments. I also used the method of categorizing these quotes thematically, and the quotes that do not fit into any one category were logged and reported in the study. Finally, triangulation of the data via interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis ensure consistency of data, barring the researcher's personal feelings. I also used member checking, a technique that allows the study participants to "check" the transcriptions of their responses prior to publication to ensure accuracy. I employed the qualitative technique of peer debriefing. "[Peer debriefing] is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This was conducted by another colleague who has just recently completed

the dissertation process. This ensured that only what the participants shared is recorded in the documents and that my interpretation of the data is accurate. I set aside all that I felt during the experience when I reported the findings. I have discussed my feelings about the experience in this section.

Site of Research

The interviews and focus groups with faculty members were conducted on the rural campus of OCC. Information from OCC student registration data shows that at the time of the accreditation process, the college was comprised of approximately 1,200 full-time students, 75% of which were African American. Ninety percent of the 1,200 students began on a remedial level in the subjects of math, reading, and writing. One hundred percent of the students came from the surrounding counties. Four of the area high schools were in academic distress because of low standardized test scores; four of the school districts in the area suffer from teacher shortages. In 2003, over 80% of the students who attended OCC were on free or reduced lunch while in high school; this statistic denotes the low economic standard of those in the area. These demographics give an idea about the area where the research is taking place.

OCC employed 20 full-time faculty members and 23 adjuncts at the time of accreditation in 2004. OCC received accreditation with no faults from the North Central Association of College and Schools after undergoing a self study 2 years prior to the accreditation visit in 2003. During the self study, major emphasis was placed on assessing all aspects of the college. I recall from my experience that faculty and staff alike were constantly informed that the self study was taking place but with little other information. Leading up to the accreditation visit, assessing student learning became a

way of life in every classroom, yet it was my perception that little explanation of the rationale behind assessment was given. I recall that faculty members were told to assess because it played a part in determining whether or not the college would receive accreditation. With mounting workloads, underprepared students, and work weeks totaling over forty hours, faculty members were further inundated with assessment activities, meetings, and reports. I thought the constant pressure made faculty members apprehensive about the entire accreditation visit. They did not relish the idea of complete strangers marauding through their student assessments, especially since they were not sure exactly what the invaders were looking for.

One reason OCC was chosen is little research has been conducted about faculty members and the accreditation experience, particularly on the community college campus. And since OCC underwent the process of accreditation while I was employed there, my interest was sparked to learn how faculty members like me felt about the experience. Secondly, I chose OCC because I felt that being at a site where I had been previously employed would allow me a certain amount of insider's information that would not have been afforded at another community college. Because I already had a relationship with the college, gaining access to the study sample was of relative ease as opposed to having to gain the trust and permission of an institution where there were no ties. I did not expect to experience skepticism about my intentions or feelings of discomfort from the participants.

Selecting Participants

The study participants consist of faculty members at OCC. The group included seven faculty members who have been employed with OCC at least during and since the school term when the accreditation process occurred since it was then that OCC's

environment was being inundated with accreditation activities. Criterion-based sampling was used to determine the faculty members' sample. The criteria used to select participants were length of employment at OCC and job title (faculty). Particularly, these subjects were chosen because they shared an employer, OCC, and an experience, the accreditation visit. I am very fortunate to have such a varied pool of participants because all of them are the only faculty members who were employed by the college during the accreditation visit. Faculty members who were not at OCC during the accreditation experience were not chosen as there was no way for me to verify that they had indeed taken part in an accreditation experience. Also, I would not gain the insider's access that I needed to get the richest information because participants that I had not previously worked with may not be comfortable with me. By gathering the stories of the faculty members about the accreditation experience, an understanding of what social constructs define how faculty members construct meaning of the experience were realized. The following synonyms are used in Chapter 4 when identifying participants: Duke, Ann, Jane, Beth, Claudia, Michael, and Barbara.

Risks and Benefits

As with any study, there were possible risks for the participants. For instance, the researcher could not guarantee anonymity. This was impossible considering that the participants are still employed by OCC. The very fact that criterion-based sample selection was used will narrow the possible participants to an exact group of people. In other words, the participants chosen were the only faculty members who were employed during the prescribed timeframe, so it was difficult to mask their identity. However, the use of pseudonyms for the name of the college and the study participants should help

reduce the risk of identification, though not alleviate it. These alias names were used to prevent any information from being linked to a specific participant. In addition, the researcher was well aware that the focus group meetings eliminated anonymity between the study participants. To reduce this risk, I required all participants to sign a waiver to not disclose the identities of the other participants. In addition, I used pseudonyms on all recorded discussions and written materials pertaining to the study. Job termination, alienation, and embarrassment were potential risks to participants. The participants did not receive incentives of any kind to participate in this study.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Three data sources, focus groups, face-to-face interviews, and document analysis, were all used to achieve triangulation of the data (Creswell, 2003). This increases reliability in the study. Further details on methods of data collection and analysis for each of these sources of information will follow.

Initially, an application to the Institution Review Board at the University of Memphis was submitted for the approval of study with humans. Of course, this is a requirement for any research being conducted on human subjects to protect the participants. After IRB approval was gained, I made contact with the Dean of Academic Affairs at OCC to gain permission to access OCC faculty members for the study. This was done to ensure that there were no conflicts regarding my inquiry about the accreditation process experienced at OCC.

Next, I emailed an explanation of the study disclosing all pertinent information to the potential participants to determine willingness to participate in the study. After the initial email, I mailed out consent forms. These forms, again, outlined the details of the

study and requested written consent of participation. Next, I sent out a list of tentative meeting dates and requests for preferred meeting places in keeping with the rules of natural setting as prescribed by phenomenology (Creswell, 2003). The individual interviews were conducted first so that I could build a rapport with the participants. Though the faculty members were already familiar with me, I had not worked with them since May 2007, so I thought it best to get reacquainted.

Interviews

Robert Weiss (1994) believes that “interviews give us a window on the past. We can also, by interviewing, learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us” (p. 1). Therefore, the study consisted of three individual interviews with each of the faculty study participants. In addition, two focus group discussions with the faculty members as a whole group were conducted. The interviews with faculty members were first. The questions asked during the interviews were related to the faculty members’ descriptions of this experience. These questions illuminated faculty members’ thoughts, social interactions with others in the college during the experience, and atmospheric/ environmental conditions at the college during the experience. These questions were asked so that a deep, detailed sense of how faculty members experienced and made meaning of the phenomenon could be gained and understood. Five open-ended questions were asked during the first and second interviews (see Appendices A and B), as recommended by Creswell (2007). Open-ended questions were selected because they tend to expose new perspectives that the researcher could not have predicted. Interview questions for the third interview came about as a result of emergent design. The third interview addressed gaps in the participants’ responses in the first two interviews.

Therefore, those questions “emerge” after the first two interviews are conducted, resulting in emergent design (these questions became Appendix C). Emergent design allows the study findings to guide the direction of inquiry of subsequent parts of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions with the faculty members occurred next. The six questions asked in the first focus group discussion were related to the experiences of the faculty as a whole group, and were dedicated to acquiring the faculty’s collaborated story of the accreditation experience and how the faculty as a whole group made meaning of the experience. From these discussions, the social constructs that define how the faculty made meaning of the experience as a whole emerged. These questions were more general in nature and related to the whole group because the researcher felt like a collaborated story was easiest gained through the use of a focus group discussion. The questions centered on the shared meaning of the entire faculty group as a whole (see Appendix D). The questions asked in the second focus group meeting were also a product of emergent design. These questions were used to fill in any gaps and dispel any confusion related to the first focus group discussion (these questions became Appendix E).

Document Analysis

The document analysis of the final reports submitted to the college by the accrediting agency was used to confirm or deny those views shared by the faculty participants. The documents under analysis reported the college’s strengths and challenges, as well as some recommendations for improvement. These documents were submitted upon the culmination of the process which is signified by the peer visit. It is in

these documents that the peer review team revealed its intended recommendations regarding the college's accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. These documents include two sections, Advancement and Assurance.

Reliability

At the conclusion of all methods of data collection, data transcription for the focus groups discussions and the interviews was performed. The data was transcribed by an independent transcriber who was not related to the study in any way. The transcriptionist was paid a fee for her services. Data were transcribed upon completion of each interview and focus group discussion. The documents that were analyzed were already typed and stored electronically. Then, each study participant was emailed a copy of the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews for member checking (where the researcher asks the participants to verify the data collected for accuracy); this is deemed as the most crucial way to verify trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). After this, necessary changes in data transcriptions were made as a result of the participant's input. It is important to note that only three changes were made as a result of member checking. These changes are attributed to errors of fact related to the names of people being discussed in the interview. When the changes were completed and all data considered valid, data analysis began.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed based on a few techniques that are particularly effective in phenomenological research. Creswell (2007) simplified these techniques in the following manner: since the participants' views are to be highlighted exclusively, the researcher shared her own experience with the phenomenon by bracketing as much as possible her experiences from those of the participants'; noteworthy statements from all data sources were cataloged; common themes from these noteworthy statements were

generated; using direct quotes, the researcher described what the participants experienced, also known as textural description among phenomenologists; how the experience occurred was then accounted by the investigator, also known as structural description among phenomenologists; and conclusively, a combination of the two descriptions were recorded which brought readers to the discussion of the “essence” of how faculty members make meaning of the phenomenon.

More specifically, I used a data analysis technique known as coding as a means of data analysis. Coding evolves from the researcher first describing, classifying, and interpreting the responses gleaned from the faculty members’ interviews. In an effort to achieve saturation—when no new data are being presented by participants—three faculty interviews were conducted. The same questions were asked at the first two interviews, again, in an effort to achieve saturation. The third interview was used to clarify statements and to address inconsistencies in information collected in the first two interviews. After all the stories from the individual interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, significant statements from the stories were separated and then loosely interpreted for meaning. For example, I wrote a note next to each statement describing the context of each statement. Next, the interpretations of the significant statements were categorized by their relevance to each of the sub-questions. Next, there was more narrowing to commonalities between the statements within the categories which evolved into theme clusters, e.g., site visit was intimidating, administration made the experience unpleasant, the accreditation experience needs to be eliminated, the accreditation experience is beneficial for gauging the college’s effectiveness, etc. until I got 5 themes, as suggested by Creswell (2007). I used this process for both sets of focus

group data as well, but only used the common themes that emerged from both lists in the data analysis, as they were the most reliable because they were repeated.

At this stage in data analysis, I began to use the data that did not fit into any of the categories, from both the focus group discussions and the interviews to see if any new themes emerged from the combination of the two sets of data. While no new themes emerged, there were a few significant statements that presented markedly different perspectives from the themes. This anomalous data became the basis for an interesting discussion. In the findings and analysis sections, all the themes gathered were compared with the findings in the document analysis of the final accreditation report that relate to faculty members and their experience during the process. Finally, all data were analyzed in relation to the social constructivism theory. The data collected from the interviews, focus groups, and document analyses were used to address the three main components of the social constructivism theory: reality, knowledge, and learning. For example, the faculty members at OCC were not aware of how the accreditation process worked prior to this experience at OCC. As the faculty members began to be included in the process and assigned specific assignments that were related to accreditation, they began to gain a sense of reality about the process. This reality about the process came into existence after they began interacting with each other in accreditation process related tasks. Tasks such as mandatory assessment of the services faculty provided to students, mandates that were put in place by the accrediting agency and the United States Department of Education, the fact that their abilities and success rates were going to be evaluated and on display, etc. constructed the faculty's reality. As faculty members began to interact with one another and other people within the college environment who were involved in the

process, their knowledge base about the process began to take shape. The knowledge that faculty members acquired about the accreditation process was imparted through their interaction with others. The interaction with administrators, which was most often, resulted in some learning about the process among the faculty members. As the faculty members interacted more with people who were learning as they were and people who were already knowledgeable about the process, i.e., other faculty members, more learning was noted. This significant learning was a result of social interaction that took place in individual conversations, small group discussions, and meetings with other faculty members. As Crotty (1998) explains it, a simple explanation of [social constructivism] theory is people make meaning of the world in which they live and work based on their environment and culture and interactions with those in their environment and culture. The data analysis of this study resulted in support of the social constructivism theory. The stories collected from the faculty members allowed the researcher to confirm an informed theory that has the potential to explain how faculty members learn about accreditation in a more meaningful manner. Once the faculty members' experience as it relates to one accountability measure, the accreditation process, is clarified, colleges can begin to examine and modify ways in which all accountability measures are presented to college faculty. This examination could result in modifications that urge more faculty buy-in and cooperation when it comes to accountability measures.

Consultation

During this research process, many knowledgeable people were consulted for guidance in various aspects. A dissertation advisory committee comprised of four professors from the University of Memphis guided the research. Three of these professors

hold doctoral degrees in leadership areas and are experts in higher education research and the fourth is an expert in qualitative research, among other things.

Dr. Velma Bailey, the person in charge of institutional effectiveness at Our own Community College was also a very valuable resource during this study. Several faculty members who have experienced the accreditation process at the University of Memphis and Southwest Tennessee Community College were informally consulted on their campuses after data collection at OCC for additional information. Then, study participants were consulted for member checks to ensure accuracy of data and a disinterested peer was used for peer debriefing. I also conducted peer debriefings with Latoya Jackson, a disinterested colleague who has just recently completed the doctoral degree. My dissertation committee was the most valuable source of knowledge. The committee's experience with dissertations, qualitative research, and related studies provided me with insight during the entire process.

Ethical and Political Considerations

“Regardless of the approach to qualitative inquiry, a qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports” (Creswell, 2007, p. 141). The ethical issues surrounding this study pertained mostly to the identity of the participants. The participants were informed that their identities would not be hidden. “Furthermore, to gain support from participants, a qualitative researcher conveys to participants that they are participating in a study, explains the purpose of the study, and does not engage in deception about the nature of the study” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 141–142). Because the sample chosen is such a distinct group from OCC, I felt that there was no way to entirely

protect their identity. However, the use of pseudonyms for the name of the college and the study participants should help reduce the risk of identification, though not alleviate it. These alias names were used to prevent any information from being linked to a specific participant. In addition, the researcher was well aware that the focus group meetings eliminated anonymity between the study participants. To reduce this risk, I required all participants to sign a waiver to not disclose the identities of the other participants. In addition, I used pseudonyms on all recorded discussions and written materials pertaining to the study. Since identities were still at risk, member checks were conducted to ensure the accuracy and credibility of information collected during focus group meetings and interviews (Creswell, 2007).

In addition, there is an issue with bracketing. According to LeVasseur (2003), “bracketing, which suspends one’s natural assumptions about the world, is done so that what is essential in the phenomena of consciousness can be understood without prejudice” (p. 411). To some phenomenologists, bracketing is impossible to achieve because it is impossible to be so much a part of the world in which one lives and not allow prior knowledge to influence every part of life, including research (LeVasseur, 2003). Furthermore, LeVasseur (2003) synthesized the ideas about bracketing to create a new definition: “the project of bracketing attempts to get beyond the ordinary assumptions of understanding and stay persistently curious about new phenomena” (p. 420). In other words, there is no way to completely separate from the assumptions that are so much a part of each of us, but we can remain open minded enough to allow new ideas to emerge. Agreeing wholeheartedly, I think it important to raise this as an ethical consideration. As with any research, the views and assumptions of the researcher may

color the data that are collected, especially when the researcher has had the same lived experience as that being researched. To be as objective as possible, the original words of the participants were maintained. In addition, I bracketed my own opinions and identified them as such in the different portions and made a clear distinction between my views and those of the participants. The audio tapes of the interviews and transcription of the data by an independent contractor assisted in bracketing my opinions.

The accreditation process is one of political significance in society. Accreditation is needed for a college or university to receive federal funds such as grants and student loans. Consequently, without this funding that is made possible through accreditation, colleges and universities would have to close their doors due to economic hardship, especially with the rising costs that are currently plaguing higher education. Finally, some institutions of higher education as well as employers will not acknowledge a degree awarded by a non-accredited institution.

Representation

The intended audience for the study is higher education administrators and faculty, members of the accreditation agencies, and state and federal policy makers for higher education. This audience is of utmost importance because it is comprised of the key people who need to know how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. These are the people who can be instrumental in ushering in change. A narrative is the best genre for writing up the study. “This approach includes extensive discussion about the major themes that arise from analyzing a qualitative database. Often, this approach uses extensive quotes and rich details to support the themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 266). More importantly, a narrative was chosen so that the authentic voices of the

group in question can be articulated, not in a summary of charts and numbers, but in dialect that embodies the true perspectives that come from the lived experience. These can be captured best in words. Creswell (2007) explained that two types of narrative styles are commonly employed by phenomenologists. The one chosen for this study utilizes the traditional approach to the dissertation in that the first three chapters are introduction, literature review, and methodology, and the final chapters present the results and discuss its implications.

Furthermore, Creswell (2007) suggested that writers write up the study using forms that they enjoy reading and suggests that researchers not be afraid to try out other forms of writing. Instead of experimentation, I chose one of the traditional modes of representing my study with the intention of not losing my readers by experimenting with a genre that they may not be familiar with or comfortable reading.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this chapter, I describe the findings of the research obtained through three individual interviews with each of the participants, two focus group discussions, and the final accreditation report from the regional accreditors. The study participants consisted of faculty members at OCC. The group included seven faculty members who have been employed with OCC at least during and since the school term when the accreditation process occurred. Criterion-based sampling was used to determine the faculty member sample. Particularly, these subjects were chosen because they share an employer, OCC, and an experience, the accreditation visit.

How do faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process? This central research question guided a phenomenological study which captured the faculty members' stories about the experience. This central research question was supported by several sub-questions: "How did you feel during the experience?"; "Describe your actions toward accreditation efforts during the experience"; "Explain your level of understanding of the experience"; "Explain your view of the relevance of the process"; and "Describe your overall perception of the accreditation experience."

The results of the study are situated around themes. Each of the themes is followed by supporting direct quotes from participant interviews, focus group discussions, and the final accreditor's report. These major themes and supporting direct quotes demonstrate that faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process based on their experiences while interacting with faculty and administrators during the accreditation process. Based on the experiences shared by faculty members, they

developed negative meanings related to the accreditation process. Though the stories told by the faculty members were varied and multiple, analysis of each participant's stories revealed that the experiences of participants were very similar, resulting in the themes that are discussed. The stories told by faculty members and the themes that emerged demonstrate how faculty make meaning of the accreditation process. These stories also pave the way for additional support to the social constructivism theory that has the potential to provide insight about faculty members' meaning-making related to accreditation and other accountability measures like accreditation.

Themes

The data coding, categorizing, and writing around emerging patterns were an iterative process throughout the data analysis. The process of organizing data involved linking concepts and identifying broad patterns. Finally, in order by the number of times the theme was mentioned, faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process based upon feeling:

1. befuddled and bewildered;
2. disconcerted and disoriented;
3. disconnected and detached;
4. unfamiliar and unidentified; and
5. the desire for collegiality and collaboration.

These themes were selected because they were the most consistent within all the data sources and responded to the research questions in the most direct manner. To ensure academic rigor and trustworthiness, participants looked at the data analysis and verified the accuracy of the themes and meanings made around each theme. This was

determined through interaction with me in casual and informal conversations during the course of the study. As stated in chapter 3, the following synonyms are used when identifying participants: Duke, Ann, Jane, Beth, Claudia, Michael, and Barbara.

Theme 1: Befuddled and Bewildered

Faculty members' descriptions of their level of knowledge about the accreditation process revealed their ignorance in this area which led to the first theme: faculty members feeling befuddled and bewildered. This perception may reflect one of the factors leading to faculty resistance to accreditation, as described by Procopio (2010). Barbara reported acquiring some knowledge in a previous experience:

I had taught high school and we had had somewhat of a similar experience so I guess I sort of knew, in general, what it was. I knew that it was going to be an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the institution. I knew that much. I knew it was a very important thing for a college or institution to have accreditation.

Two other faculty members replied with an answer very similar to this. Beth explained: "I had worked previously, not in the capacity of the instructor, but another type of position at another institution and we had been through an accreditation process so I guess I probably knew a little bit more about it than some of the other folks that maybe had never done it." Jane went on to say,

I knew what accreditation meant from my educational career. I knew it was necessary to be able to transfer credits from one school to another. Most schools will only accept grades from another accredited school. So up until that point that is pretty much what I thought it meant and I figure that is what most folks think.

Four participants admitted to being completely ignorant about the accreditation process; here is one faculty member's account:

Well for me, like I said, it would have had to have been my first or second year here so I felt that pretty much everyone else that had been here for a while, but then there were several new people so . . . some of us, we were very green and knew absolutely nothing about accreditation then, you know, the administration,

most of them had been around for a number of years and they were very cognizant of what had gone in the past as far as how the process worked and what they were hoping would be the outcomes for the next one.

The other three faculty members replied, “Actually I knew nothing about accreditation before I went . . . came here at all. Didn't even know when I was looking at colleges that they had to be accredited”; “I had no experience with accreditation before OCC”; and “My lack of knowledge about accreditation was the worst part about the experience.”

When comparing themselves in terms of knowledge to other members of the faculty, participants responded that they believed that their knowledge was comparable to that of their colleagues. Claudia said, “There were some faculty that knew more than I did, but for the most part they weren't really sure of what they were turning in and things like that and it kind of scared them.” Ann’s reply was similar, “It seemed like everybody was involved with the whole we have to figure this out, we have to do this, we have to do that, but with the lack of, I think, knowledge on everybody's part it seemed very scary,” and Duke answered, “As far as the instructors went, we didn't know what to expect and the expectations we did have were not often in sync with what the school's expectations were.” The faculty members who commented agreed that some faculty knew more than others, but the overall sense of ignorance among the entire faculty body was present. As shown in the aforementioned comments, the participants also explained that besides the lack of knowledge about the process, a lack of knowledge about the “school’s expectations” was also apparent. The faculty members were not sure what the college’s administrators expected from them in terms of assessment.

Finally, the limited knowledge of the process reported by the faculty participants had some impact on how they made meaning of the accreditation process. All of the

faculty members commented on this aspect with parallel sentiments. The following quotes represent a summation of the data. Duke expressed,

If you tell me in clear terms what to do I will be happy to do it, but if I am unclear and I don't understand then it tends to make me just want to put it on the back burner because it just boggles my mind too much to even think about it because I don't know what to do . . . and I guess if you wanted to combine it in a nutshell, there was a lack of clarity as to what we were supposed to be doing, so I asked my co-workers and they helped me figure out a lot.

Ann provided an extensively reply,

Really the only thing that I knew about accreditation would be assessment from Dr. [Name Deleted] and a couple of other people along the way, but as far as the actual accreditation committee that was going to come in here . . . I *assumed* it was going to be a committee. . . I *assumed* that they would look at things like graduation rates or assessments again or I don't know maybe there are test scores that they would look at. They would probably check our syllabus out very carefully. I would imagine they would look at all of the minutes for all of the various committees that we have around the college to make sure that the committees are actually doing what they are supposed to be doing, making sure there is lots of oversight, checks and balances to everything it is not just one person signs off and off we go with it and it has been reviewed by the people who have the knowledge to review and have the power to make it an informed opinion on whatever it is that they are reviewing. So I was *guessing* they were going to do all of that, but the specifics of what they were actually going to be checking into, I didn't know. I just tried to make my assessment look good because *as far as I knew*, [emphasis added by speaker] that was what they would be looking for.

Jane added:

I remember being told at a meeting to do this or that and when the time came for it to be done, I did it. I don't necessarily think I did it the way it was supposed to be done. I was probably afraid that if my numbers didn't look good that I might not have a job so I probably manipulated it so that they would look good because I didn't understand exactly what I was doing. I was new to teaching in a college and I am pretty new to this institution. I had never taught college anywhere else before so I just wanted to get through it and make everyone happy. So I gave numbers that I thought would make everyone happy.

In a similar fashion, another participant said, "We feared and dreaded it because we didn't know what to expect and it wasn't explained to us well enough so that we could

understand exactly what our role was.” To further elucidate the participants’ feelings about this theme, another participant responded,

I don’t think accreditation has really been talked about a whole lot. There has been things within the accreditation process we have spent time focusing on but more from a learning/teaching perspective instead of we have to do this because there is going to be an independent audit that is going to occur on us so I don’t think that part has ever really been mentioned a whole lot by Dr. [Name Deleted] and a couple of other people and still that is all we knew is that it existed but again not really what it was for, what part or role, but come to find out it seems we have a pretty big role in it, but you know, no one ever told us really that that was the seed, that was where it came from was the accreditation.

Michael’s answer was much like other faculty members:

I wished they would tell us the real reason why we are doing this. Don’t get me wrong it wasn’t all smoke and mirrors. It is not for the sake of doing it. I think the idea was to make the learning experience better for the students with these assessment techniques inevitably supported the accreditation so we could have seen it in a bigger picture, seen the whole picture and say hey this is your part of it and sometimes it helps people to make their decisions, to feel better about why they are actually doing this.

Jane had more to say that was relevant to this theme: “We really didn’t know a lot about what we were doing and that was part of the problem. The higher ups would send us things, you need to get this done and this done and this done and sometimes we would have no clue.” Barbara articulated this feeling: “It seemed like the higher ups knew all about the accreditation process and we knew nothing.” Ann added: “I wanted to know what [accreditation] is. I mean you know that you are pulling for a specific goal, but you really don’t know your role in it and you don’t know exactly what you need to be doing. It is kind of like walking on a balance beam. I would rather have the whole pad there than just the little balance beam.” Claudia also mentioned:

Well most of us had no idea what to expect. We didn’t know really what was necessarily going on initially. There was a lot of confusion, a lot of meetings. Things of that nature that we didn’t know...feel that we knew what we were doing in the meetings. I guess we weren’t really prepped enough, and it was a

long, drawn out process. There was a lot of frustration, because it was taking up class time and work time and stuff like that. You could tell that the administration was on edge about it, and we were all getting the impression that, yes, our jobs were on the line on this, and it was. Obviously it was, because without the accreditation we can't do what we need to do. We wouldn't be able to be here now.

The faculty ignorance theme that emerged from the faculty stories was apparent to the Higher Learning Commission peer review team. This observation, categorized as a weakness in the final report, is evidenced by this quote: “The linkages between the strategic planning, Operational Planning and productivity reporting processes need to be clarified among faculty and staff in order to minimize loss of focus within the institution.” (Higher Learning Commission Final Report, 2003, p. 4). While this quote does not explicitly refer to faculty ignorance about the accreditation process, the processes mentioned—strategic planning, operational planning, and productivity reporting—are all intricate parts of the accreditation process. So much in fact, that if an institution's employees fail to articulate knowledge in this area, a weakness is cited. In addition, the team report stated: “Despite some concern over the potential duplication of effort and lack of understanding on the part of faculty and staff, the internal planning processes of the college are extremely well defined and focused.” This further establishes that the Higher Learning Commission peer review team was able to detect the faculty's ignorance during the experience that the faculty stories expressed several years after the accreditation visit.

The aforementioned comments demonstrate that faculty felt as if they were not included in the knowledge loop of accreditation. Faculty responses noted no knowledge, insufficient knowledge, confusion, and unclear expectations when it came to the first theme. The comments related to this theme also relate to other themes. This is notable

because it is the most prevalent theme, and it is also the theme from which all the others may derive. Furthermore, the comments made in the final report from the Higher Learning Commission imply that the faculty's ignorance about the accreditation process was evident. Both the Higher Learning Commission and the faculty stories validate the existence of this theme.

Theme 2: Disconcerted and Disoriented

The participants' reports allowed for identification of the second theme: faculty feeling disconcerted and disoriented during the accreditation process. The faculty comments reveal in no uncertain terms that they felt negatively about the experience. These feelings reflect one factor that may lead to why faculty members are "one of the least satisfied groups in the accreditation process" (Procopio, 2010, para. 27). Furthermore, the participants reported some of the reasons why they felt so negatively. For example, Barbara commented about feeling intimidated and tense:

Well there was the feeling that, certainly we wanted to make a good showing because these folks were from the State Department and you know we wanted to represent ourselves well so. . . you know, I don't know of another word right off hand, but it was kind of intimidating. It was kind of intimidating because, like I said, that was early in my time here and that may have made me feel a little bit more tense than some others in the process but I just thought this was very important for the college and I know I didn't want to be the one that messed up.

Michael's feelings of inadequacy were articulated:

I kind of felt inadequate, you know, because it was a learning curve because a lot of it was that I was involved in a lot of the day to day operations of what was going on. I wasn't so much plugged in to the overall picture and like what percentage or what we were doing for how long a time and what were our results and all of that. So, you know, it was a learning curve for me and like any job or committee it is still my beating heart, you know, it is still another committee. I learned a lot of things that I would not have known at the time.

Ann also had negative feelings as well and described what she considered to be the worst part about the experience:

I think the worst part would be, like I said, the tension that, you know, perhaps that we would do that and there was a lot of tension, to be frank, in the faculty at that time. I think if there is a sense of resentment or unfairness, I think that is going to color everything throughout the process. Well, yea, I think it colored everything, but I don't think there was like any special reaction directed toward accreditation that was different in any way. I just think it was sort of a malaise that went over everything.

Other comments related to negative feelings were given by other faculty members. Duke said, "Well I guess that was probably my first year that I was here. I remember it was a very intense experience" While Jane thought: "I think that we were fearful and negative and certainly dreaded it, but there is more than one word for it." Beth's comment was a bit more detailed:

During the actual accreditation... once they were actually here working on everything everybody seemed to be very uptight...extremely stressed... it seemed like people were pulling at their hair trying to make sure that every t was crossed and every i was dotted, all the paperwork was filled out and constantly getting asked did you turn this in to me and did you proofread this or are you going to proof this? Do you have anything else to say at this point? Do you have any proof to back up your assessment responses? Things like that.

The predominant word used to express the negative feelings that faculty experienced was "stress." The following comments demonstrate that all participants used the word "stress." When describing the feelings they endured during the process, Michael said: "It [the accreditation process] was really stressful. Everybody let us know that it was going to be a big deal, but I don't think anybody was expecting it to be as big a deal as it was."

Jane explained:

I was a square peg in a round hole because I don't come from an academic background, okay? Not even at that time. I had been with the school for three years. I was on my third year and I was still getting used to academics. I didn't see that as being a bad thing. I was learning a lot, but like I said before mostly stress

because of how much emphasis they placed on it and the impression that we got if this didn't do well it would mean jobs and time... it isn't anything I would look forward to again.

Barbara's comments were just an extensive as Jane's:

Actually I have spent some time trying to remember back to this to be prepared for this interview and I just remember being frustrated that I didn't know what to do and how to do it. I didn't feel like I would get enough instruction. I didn't understand my student's answering one question on one test and it being carried through the semester to the end was really going to show if I was an effective instructor or not so I didn't really think it was really worthwhile, but of course I had to do it so I did and it was a pain in the rear and stressful.

The next comments reflect a succinct but telling view about the negative feelings experienced by faculty during the accreditation experience. Claudia replied: "It just scared me . . . I never felt secure in those years with what I was supposed to be doing. It was a stressful time for everybody." Duke added: "The first thing that comes to mind when I think about the process would probably be frustration and stress. There was a lot of that." Ann told me, "Last time we went through accreditation, everybody seemed really stressed out about it some of it was difficult for everyone, but they were just always stressed out and I think the mood was all different." Richer descriptions came from Beth and Jane:

One word that comes to mind is stress . . . stress, just lots of stress because you fill out a form and you don't know if you are putting the right stuff on it. If you needed something from two years ago and didn't know you needed it two years ago you had to sit there and look and dig for it and you know we only had to keep student papers for a year so how are you going to find the stuff from three years ago... yea, no, stress, yea, stress.

The first word that comes to mind... probably stressful and after that something intense and very task oriented. You know it is going to be a long process and with a lot of steps and we need to start early and start working on it. That is more than one word, but...

Ann added another perspective: “Faculty stress was attributed to not knowing what we were doing, not knowing how it is going to affect anything that kind of thing. Faculty don’t like to not know.”

The final report from the Higher Learning Commission (2003) indicated that “The team found that people were willing to work together but that the College must improve campus communications and explain its expectations” (p. 5). This quote supports the faculty comments that the college’s expectations were not clear. The faculty articulated that negative feelings came from not knowing the college’s expectations and that there was a willingness among faculty to do what they were required to do for accreditation, if they knew exactly what was being asked of them. One faculty member said, “If they would have just told me what to do, I would have done it.” The faculty and peer review team both noted that the college needed to do a better job of making expectations known to employees.

The aforementioned comments demonstrate that the predominant feelings that faculty felt during the experience could be described as disconcerting and disorienting. These negative feelings were articulated with word “stress” most often than any other word. Faculty explained that this stress could be traced back to lack of knowledge about the experience. Faculty comments also illuminated that the stress could also be attributed to the accreditation related work load that became a constant during the process. This workload was described with words such as “paper work,” “forms,” “long process,” and “digging up stuff.” “Fear” and “frustration” were also commonly used to describe the process. One faculty member even alluded to a possible loss of jobs if “we didn’t do it right.” Faculty responses related to the theme of positively negative feelings were

detailed and revealed several sources for the negative feelings. One of which was highlighted in the Higher Learning Commission final report as well, not making the college's expectations known to faculty.

Theme 3: Disconnected and Detached

The participants' reports allowed for identification of the third theme: faculty feeling disconnected and detached from the value of the process. Faculty members described their feelings about the disconnection and detachment in terms of their seeing only limited value in the process and the activities associated with the process, and not realizing the relevance of the process to the institution as a whole. This demonstrates that "college accreditation leaders must overcome the perception of faculty...that accreditation is simply a pro forma hoop through which they must jump every five to ten years" (Procopio, 2010, para. 7). The comments reveal that three faculty saw value in the process only in terms of course transferability and funding: "I only know that it was important that we be accredited so that our courses can transfer because without that accreditation we are just a school for money and that is not what we are and then we really, really wanted the ten year accreditation." Claudia said, "Aside from the value that it meant to our students of being able to transfer their credits to a 4-year school, the amount of stress and number of meetings and things like that that we had to do to go to I really didn't see any other value to it at all." Or as Michael put it:

I probably would have been more agreeable had I known what [accreditation] was really for. Now if somebody told me that it had to do with accreditation and I knew that accreditation had to do with us getting more money because that is what it all in my mind comes back to how much money are we going to get then it would have made more sense to me. Then I would have said oh, okay, now I see the light at the end of the tunnel, but if we were just supposed to be doing this stuff for learning/teaching reasons, some of it was good, some of it was bad, from a money perspective I would say that it was all pretty good.

The meetings associated with the process seemed to be a source of contention for four of the participants. “The meeting included making changes to the mission statement for the school and things like that and if you weren’t an administrative type of person it was hard to see the true value of jumping through those sorts of hoops.” Another faculty member put it this way:

I felt like it would be a lot of work for very little payback. Not that I would do any of this to be mercenary or anything it is just that what it comes back to is what is the real value? How is this going to affect my day to day? You know all of the work that I am not getting done because I am in meeting after meeting after meeting as opposed to what the end result is going to be.

Stated in a similar vein was “So as far as going to the meetings later on after you felt like you already knew it I didn't feel like there was a whole lot of value in that, but then again we have new people all the time show up so I understand why we have the meetings.”

Ann described the meetings in this way:

Yes, I believe that we had some other meetings that dealt with assessment where we might even do activities that dealt with assessment, but as in a lot of the meetings that I attend I find them to be a waste of time. Maybe I got a little help or knowledge out of a few, but mostly it is just I feel like they feel like they need to have meetings so they come up with something for us to do.

Claudia added, “...at this school we are very, very busy and you don't waste one minute's time and I feel the process was a waste of time.”

Finally, one participant felt that the accreditation process was only important to the extent that “[she] didn’t screw up.” As the same individual went on to say, “Well I felt like I was important to the process to the extent that it was important that I didn’t screw up. I wanted to make sure, you know, that if I was asked something by someone in the hallway that I knew because I was very new and I still didn’t want to screw up.”

Another faculty member expressed that the process seemed more like a mandate through which the college had to suffer:

It just seems that [accreditation] is mandated from above us, passed down, so and then it gets passed down to us and it gets passed down to everybody that gets involved in it and it is a way to prove that we are doing our job so that the State Department can give us the license to do it and it is just another form of bullshit that the Government places on us, whereas personally I think that evaluating should be done in a whole different way. I personally think. I know it has to be done, but I don't think filling out forms and backing it, you know, you can make anything on a piece of paper that you want and then for one or two days you can make it look like you are doing that.

The faculty members' comments describe feelings of disconnection and detachment from the value of the accreditation process. Two faculty members' comments revealed that the only value they were aware of was the fact that transferability of courses is tied to accreditation status. What is interesting to note is that faculty did not mention the relationship between Title IV funds and accreditation status. Some faculty did not find any value in the accreditation process and some of the related activities, such as the meetings that were described as "a waste of time" and just "something for us to do." Other faculty members described their value/and or relevance as insignificant. For future reference, it is important to note that none of the participants mentioned any personal or professional value of the accreditation process, only the perceived value of the process to the college.

Theme 4: Unfamiliar and Unidentified

The participants' reports allowed for identification of the fourth theme: faculty feelings that their role was unfamiliar and unidentified. Faculty members described their roles clearly in terms of their insignificance or their ambiguity in the accreditation process. According to Nichols (1995), an institution loses faculty buy-in when there is an

absence of a clear and significant faculty role in the accreditation process. All seven of the faculty members' responded about their role at least once while telling their story of the process. The responses show that faculty felt as if they had a very small role in the process, an unclear role, or that the faculty role was limited to assessment. The most prevalent perspective shared by the faculty was that their role was limited to assessment. Michael said, "Other than the meetings, there was nothing... yea, nothing except assessment." This perspective is documented briefly with the following two participant quotes: "Besides the assessment part, I don't necessarily remember if there was any other role" and "All of a sudden assessment took on a new priority. It is almost an overwhelming priority for faculty folks during this time." Richer descriptions of the unfamiliar and unidentified role follow. Duke explained:

Assessment seemed to be the most important role, most likely... I gathered my information and data for assessment because you can't really get accredited unless you know what your faculty is doing because if they aren't teaching something that goes across the board then how are you going to get that to transfer to another school?

Beth reported something similar:

My primary responsibility was in the assessment. I got this idea because quite frankly I wasn't asked to do anything else. I know that... and that was just me, personally. I know that other faculty members may have served on certain committees, but I didn't. I was pretty much down in the trenches that sort of thing.

Michael responded along the same lines: "What other role does the faculty have in it besides the assessment piece? I have no clue. . . really I don't. I mean accreditation is one of those things so that our classes can transfer and make sure that we are teaching those things that we need to teach so I guess faculty is the teachers in the assessment needed for accreditation." Barbara defined assessment and another responsibility as her major role: "I feel like as if my major role was I may have answered some questions

about evaluating this or that part of college it seems like maybe. I cannot remember for sure, but I feel like another major thing was to turn in my little numbers about my class assessments.” Interestingly, three participants illuminated their clearly ambiguous roles which did not mention assessment responsibilities:

My role, okay. . .my role was basically to know those things about the college and to just be prepared and it was to be very, very familiar with what was in the catalogs and should I be asked any questions then I would have to properly respond to those. So yea, that's uh... that's it; nothing major.

Beth said:

Okay, well, I remember we had like little sub-committees that met to evaluate where we were in certain objectives or I guess roles in the college. So I remember each of us had certain areas that we did research on and we sort of came up with a compilation of what we had found and then it folded into some sort of report that we did. Now I don't know if that was a report that we did for the accrediting body or it was maybe just something that went to the administration and then they looked at it and decided maybe, you know, this, that or the other about if we had accomplished that or what, but I remember it was like we all had a piece and I remember part of my piece was I typed it up too.

Ann explained, “Mainly I helped the other faculty. Made sure that they got what they needed and to turn in any of the stuff that I needed to turn in. I don't know. I think I became a comedian at that point too. Oh, yes, that is the best way to handle stress.” Duke shared that:

Besides assessment, I did syllabus updates and stuff like that... to try and update the syllabus for the GEO's, the program outcomes, the course level outcomes, which again rolls back to assessment but we did change the syllabus around quite a bit. I think school-wide we did that. The master syllabi, I guess that would affect accreditation.

Though the role of the faculty was clearly ambiguous to some of them, the assessment role that was detected by some faculty is supported by the final report given to the college by the Higher Learning Commission peer review team. “The faculty have developed a new set of general education objectives and a new process for assessing

those objectives,” and “The faculty have made great progress in the assessment of student academic achievement and are using the assessment data to inform planning and budgeting as well as to improve student learning,” confirm the faculty’s role in the accreditation process being mainly that of assessment of student learning. While it seems logical that the faculty’s primary role would be assessing student learning, other roles faculty should play in the process (such as student advising) were not discussed to any great extent within the faculty stories or the Higher Learning Commission final report. However, the committee did comment on the apparent lack of knowledge about other processes that are linked to the accreditation process, such as strategic planning, operational planning, and productivity reporting. Furthermore, faculty disclosed that besides assessing student learning, other roles in the accreditation process were ambiguous to them. However, the final report listed this general comment: “Staff and faculty service contribute significantly to an institution’s effectiveness” (Higher Learning Commission Final Report, 2003, p. 2). This implies that faculty should have additional roles that should be evident when the peer reviewers are evaluating a college for its overall effectiveness, such as “service.” Service may be defined as duties outside of the classroom for faculty.

The faculty members describe their predominant role in the accreditation process as assessment. Only three faculty members were aware of any other roles assigned to faculty during the process. Three faculty members reported their “other” roles as committee members, report writers, and curriculum writers. In addition to faculty member responsibilities, one faculty had other job responsibilities that related to helping other faculty with their assessment. Therefore, she highlighted the latter as her role in

accreditation. This was done under the assumption that everyone in the room during the discussion knew that she had assessment responsibilities of her own as well. The Higher Learning commission report (2003) mentioned that faculty had done a good job with assessment and other curriculum-related tasks like creating general education outcomes for the college. This is the only place in the report that implied that the team detected an area where faculty work was evident. This implies that the team recognized the faculty's work in the area of assessment because faculty work was most evident here. This observation in the final report is consistent with the faculty stories which recounted that assessment was the only known role that faculty played in the process; any other roles were ambiguous to faculty. Thus, the theme of unfamiliar and unidentified role was developed.

Theme 5: Collegiality and Collaboration

The participants' reports allowed for identification of the fifth theme: faculty desire for collegiality and collaboration during the accreditation process. Dominant facilitation on the part of the administrators was how knowledge was primarily presented to faculty via meetings, but faculty prefer and learn more in the presence of more collegiality and collaboration which is most apparent to faculty when there is peer-to-peer social interaction during the accreditation process. Palomba and Banta (1999) explain that one way to counteract faculty resistance to accreditation processes is to allow faculty members to learn from one another. Faculty members described the way in which they gained information about the process through social interactions in terms of the purveyors of the knowledge, the venues used to disseminate knowledge, the most effective social interactions in terms of faculty knowledge acquisition, and their preferences for learning

about the accreditation process. All participants commented in depth about their experiences related to their learning through social interactions. Jane's comments begin this section:

Okay, well, of course it all [information about accreditation] came from the President of the College and at this institution we also had supervisors and I am not sure what we called them. I think it all came down that there would be committees to review where we were in xyz areas. I am not sure how we were picked to go into those areas because I did do some work in student services then at the time so that may have been how I wound up in that particular niche, so . . . Well certainly here at OCC, I mean, we had formal meetings. . . I remember we went through a series of formal meetings and some of which were very serious and some of which were playful.

Duke has a similar perspective:

Okay, it would have been certainly those who were the VP's of the College who helped me to construct knowledge about the process. They shared with us in meetings at the time here we did not have program coordinators. So everything came from the VP's of the college and then someone, I believe it was Dr. [Name Deleted], was hired specifically to come in and to bring us up to speed on what to expect and what we would be doing and sort of chunking it down into areas that were leading us all up to the momentous event in the future. So that is how the knowledge was dispersed.

Beth's reply mirrored Duke's:

Dr. [Name Deleted] was in an administrative position and specifically hired to come in and I think undoubtedly she had had experience with this before in some capacity so I know... I don't think she was here full-time on campus, but she came in for so many weeks at a time to lead through the process.

Ann's description also includes Dr. [Name Deleted]:

It was probably in the first big group meeting saying that we were going to become accredited and these were the things that were going to be on our General Education Outcomes and they put the paper on the wall for us to write things about and put the stickers on. I think it was led by Dr. [Name Deleted] and whoever the VP of student affairs was at the time.

Ann further recollected:

I think the thing that I most remember is a full faculty staff meetings where they [administrators] were trying to get us to learn the general education outcomes and

the mission statement where one of the administrators dressed in leather with a whip trying to be very comical about it, trying to make it less scary because I think everybody was kind of scared of it and sticker books because we had to answer questions and we were playing a little challenge about the general education outcomes and the mission statement. Dr. [Name Deleted], Dr. [Name Deleted], Dr. [Name Deleted], they would hold information sessions and things like that at meetings. They were actually the ones dressing up in the leather so it was kind of funny.

Duke added:

There were countless, countless meetings. The number of meetings about accreditation that we had to start going to was just . . . if I remember correctly it was just huge the amount of time we spent in meetings with my class load and the kind of class that I teach, I am in the lab a lot. I am in here, well, outside of class, preparing equipment, maintaining equipment, making sure things are ready for the next class so it just seemed like so much.

Michael commented that he may have received information from a venue other than a meeting:

There might have been some emails. I am not sure. If I read them I don't remember, but I would say meetings [are] the form that we used. It would have to have been the administration that facilitated the meetings. Administration would have been the origin of the accreditation meetings for sure.

Worth noting are three faculty members' comments which presented very distinct views of their interactions and how they gained knowledge about the process. These views show that some faculty members credit other faculty members more than administrators for teaching them about the accreditation process. Beth reported:

Quite honestly most of my knowledge came from one of my colleagues, Mrs. [Name Deleted] who had been here for twenty years at that particular time and she was my mentor in explaining to me that we had specific things that we had to do for assessment and ultimately their accreditation process. I don't remember her precise title, but she was essentially the lead instructor for the Developmental English and Reading part of the Communications Department. I would give Mrs. [Name Deleted] the most credit for teaching me about the process. I think that there have been a lot of people that have been responsible for and I mean first and foremost, [Name Deleted] and Dr. [Name Deleted] and we would always have the first Friday meetings and certainly he would tell us how important it was and the role that we each had and how we fit into the whole of everything. Certainly, Dr.

[Name Deleted] and the various leaders of academic learning, Vice President's of academic learning, two of my supervisors, all of those people have been instrumental in teaching me along the way of what I should do.

Claudia's comments aligned with those of Beth:

I'm sure that administrators helped me to do whatever I needed to do to some extent, but I got most help from my colleagues of like how are you going to do this and then following somebody as an example rather than necessarily what I heard because I couldn't take what I heard and actually use it. I had to have it processed by somebody else who could understand it and what they meant in order to put it down on paper. I attribute my knowledge to faculty more than anything. All I know is that [Name Deleted] and I would meet with [Dr.[Name Deleted], and she always talked way over my head, but she was always so sweet. She would repeat it and then I would get with [Name Deleted], or [Name Deleted], whoever was with me and together we would pull it through. [Name Deleted], knew more than I did. [Name Deleted], came in and I shared with him what little I knew and we struggled through it together.

Claudia went on to elaborate more about her inability to learn the material in the meetings that were conducted by the college's administrative team. The faculty interaction and knowledge communicated through colleagues worked best for her when going through the accreditation process:

During the process, I most enjoyed the camaraderie of all of the other instructors when you say, '[Deleted Name] I am stupid with this can you show me?' I never grasped the information in those big meetings and I was afraid to ask questions. I mean you shared an office right beside mine and I think you did all of the English things for people. Well there are only two business instructors and it was left up to the shoulders of we two, whoever we were, and so I would know very little and so sometimes I would ask a question here and there and just going to the meetings and looking at other people when they would roll their eyes and I would roll my eyes I knew that they didn't know any more than I knew. I would probably have gotten fired if it weren't for the help I got from my colleagues.

Claudia further stated:

Well when we all came here, we were all new. We had the time and it was a small enough college that we kind of had a bonding. We kind of shared things and you got my help and I got your help and any time. [One faculty member] would run to me and say, "How do you do this?" and I would tell her and we just felt good about sharing things. She knew about rubrics and I didn't. So I just felt there

would be somebody to help and I remember asking questions of my co-workers that I was afraid to ask at those big meetings with administrators.

Duke agreed:

You and I both know it; when you are trying to teach somebody something and they put up that fear block that they are only learning a small percent. So when Dr. [Name Deleted] was sharing with us I had that block up there. I was afraid any minute she was going to ask a question that I couldn't answer, but when I would go to other faculty and ask what she meant, they would say this is what she meant. They would kind of break it down into laymen's terms that I could understand then I could go and do what I needed to do. Other faculty provided a relaxation, a confidence. Now we are such a big college now that that buddy system is not going to keep developing with other instructors or it hasn't because we are so busy because our classrooms are busier than they used to be, but the camaraderie that we all had in 2003, 2004 and 2005, that was a wonderful thing. Don't get me wrong, Dr. [Name Deleted] probably didn't intend to put fear there; it was probably that she was talking way above my head and I was never confident enough to say, you know, I don't know what you are saying could you please repeat that. I just sat there and hoped somebody else understood and then we would get it done.

In addition, four different participants commented on their preference for more interaction and dissemination of information by their colleagues rather than administration. Barbara said:

Faculty never conducted any of the meetings, not that I remember. I don't know that we really knew what was going on as far as that is concerned. I know that we have several faculty members now that know what assessment is and I don't think they knew what it was back then. It would have been good to see more of [the faculty] who knew what was going on presenting.

Though Michael was indifferent about who presented the information as long as learning took place, he did indicate his preference for faculty to present the information about the accreditation process:

I didn't care who I learned from either/or faculty; it didn't matter to me . . . it is just presented and you are either going to learn it or you are not. It probably would have gotten presented better by the faculty. They probably would have been more robust and a little bit easier to follow.

Jane was skeptical about faculty presenting the material but agreed that faculty teaching the information would have worked better:

I think probably there were not enough faculty members around at the time and maybe not so many now that had been through that process and so maybe just hearing from someone... another faculty member about the process. That might have helped a little bit about, you know, made it seem a little bit less ominous.

Beth indicated how she would have handled teaching faculty about the process. These comments demonstrate that she too would have preferred that faculty explained the accreditation process to other faculty:

If I were doing it, I probably would have gotten faculty from each department and sat down with them and explained exactly what I wanted each department to do and then let them go back and talk to the adjuncts or talk to whoever is in their department and let them know one on one exactly what is expected. That way I would feel like it was more saturation of everyone here instead of these people dictating to us something that we didn't really grasp what it was that they wanted us to do but that is the way I would handle it.

The faculty stories describe activities and social interactions that were dominantly facilitated by administrators. This leadership influence was evident to the Higher Learning Commission peer review team. One quote from the team that was categorized as a strength was: "The college benefits from charismatic effective leadership and a strong administrative team" (Higher Learning Commission Final Report, 2003, p. 4). From faculty comments and the peer reviewers' comments, the strength was demonstrated by the way that leadership led the college through the accreditation process. Furthermore, the final report indicated that, "[Name Deleted] has a comprehensive planning process that involves the entire college community" (Higher Learning Commission Final Report, 2003, p. 4). This may be a testament to the amount of social interaction that is clear to the Higher Learning Commission peer review team.

Another aspect of the learning through social interaction theme is the comments that the faculty members were too busy for the “countless, countless meetings.” One faculty member elaborated:

The number of meetings about accreditation that we had to start going to was just . . . if I remember correctly, it was just huge the amount of time we spent in meetings with my class load and the kind of classes that I teach, I am in the lab a lot. I am in here, well, outside of class, preparing equipment, maintaining equipment, making sure things are ready for the next class so it just seemed like day after day after day, assessment . . . I am sorry . . . accreditation, accreditation, accreditation.

The Higher Learning Commission peer review team agreed and commented about the faculty workload in its final report:

Moreover, with all of the extra-curricular demands placed on faculty at [Name Deleted], there are, in all likelihood, better uses of their time than washing glassware, doing routine laboratory set-ups, and cleaning up after students when they are finished with their labs. The College might consider, for example, providing the science faculty with work-study students. This would not only free-up faculty time to attend to more appropriate concerns. (Higher Learning Commission, 2003, pg. 12)

The peer review team detected the faculty’s workload and saw a need for the college to decrease mundane tasks relegated to faculty so that faculty could focus on “more appropriate concerns.” “More appropriate concerns” could be defined as many things; one possibility is interactions associated with accreditation like assessment duties and planning activities.

The faculty members’ comments show that administrators were the dominant facilitators and main source of information during the process, though faculty members commented that their colleagues were a major source of information as well. Meetings were the main venue used to give out information about the accreditation process, and one faculty member vaguely remembered email being used for this same purpose.

Furthermore, faculty explained that the most effective and valuable learning that they received came from fellow faculty members teaching them about the process. This question led to the emergence of another aspect of this theme: the faculty's preference to learn about the accreditation process from other faculty members rather than administrators, thus the desire for collegiality and collaboration theme. The Higher Learning Commissions' final report (2003) agreed that faculty time was monopolized by mundane tasks, which the faculty stories also mentioned. Faculty discussed that too much time was being dedicated to the accreditation meetings while they had so many other tasks to complete. The final report noted that faculty time could have been better spent on "more appropriate concerns." One of the "more appropriate concerns" may have been accreditation related activities.

Data Analysis

Conflicting Data

What is interesting to note is that two themes generated from the faculty stories were not supported or addressed in the final report written by the Higher Learning Commission peer review team. These themes are faculty feeling "disconcerted and disoriented" and "unknown and unfamiliar." As demonstrated in faculty quotes, faculty felt that they were not to "screw up" anything during the process. The faculty also said that they felt like they were to "make a good showing" during the process. Faculty feeling disconnected, detached, and unfamiliar with their role and the value of the process could have been construed as "screwing up" or not making "a good showing" during the process. Therefore, faculty may not have expressed these feelings to the Higher Learning Commission peer review team. It appears that the faculty did a good job of concealing

negative feelings and severed connection from the relevance because there is no mention of these in the final Higher Learning Commission report.

Data Overlap

During data analysis it was evident that some themes overlapped, which signaled that some association between themes. A very important association was detected between the first theme, faculty feeling befuddled and confused and the last theme, faculty desire for collegiality and collaboration. The overlapping of these themes and further data analysis show that the underlying issue with faculty and how they make meaning of the accreditation process is the lack of learning during the social interactions designed for learning about the process. The other three themes that were illuminated during data analysis all go back to the first and last themes. The lack of information seems to be a product of the way the faculty learned about the process. These two themes are the cause for the negative feelings that faculty feel, the severed connection from the value of the process, and the view that faculty have a clearly ambiguous role in the process.

Other examples of themes overlapping exist. The first and second themes produced some of the same comments such as: “Faculty don’t like to not know”; “If someone would just tell me what they want, I could do it”; “It seems that the administrators knew everything, and we knew nothing”; and “I was frustrated because I didn’t know what to do.” The lack of knowledge and accompanying feelings of befuddlement and bewilderment can be seen as the catalyst for some of the disconcerted and disorienting feelings that were described by faculty members. In the same way, the befuddlement and bewilderment theme and the disconnected and detachment theme overlapped. Faculty experiences revealed that their ignorance about the accreditation

process may have resulted in feeling cut off from or not understanding the relevance of the process. Simultaneously, faculty members were not able to determine their role in the process, thus, the unknown and unfamiliar role theme. Furthermore, the second and fifth themes overlapped. It appears that many of the disconcerting and disorienting feelings were brought about by the dominantly facilitated social interactions taking place between administrators and faculty while learning was supposed to be taking place in the “countless meetings” that faculty described. Based on faculty responses, these meetings were “a waste of time” and taught them little about the process. What faculty did learn about the experience, by their own admission, was from “other faculty members.” Faculty walked away from the meetings with ideas such as: they would lose their jobs if they “screwed up;” besides for the sake of course transferability and another “hoop to jump through” the accreditation process was not valuable; and their role was limited to assessment because some of them were “not asked to do anything else.”

Connections to Prior Research and Theory

As stated in Chapter 2, social constructivism holds that people make meaning of the world in which they live and work based on their environment and culture, and interactions with those in their environment and culture. Culture is best seen as the source of human behavior (Crotty, 1998, p. 54). In other words, Crotty suggests the shared beliefs and practices of a group dictate that group’s behavior. With this theory:

Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences-meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple The goal ... is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied. (Creswell, 2009, p. 8)

This theory is supported in this study and demonstrates that faculty members made meaning of the accreditation process based on social constructs, e.g., social interaction with other people in the higher education environment and norms of the environment itself. It also showed that the faculty in this study learned most when they were engaged in activities that included social interaction with and led by their peers. The faculty members' stories give an idea of which interactions and norms within the higher education environment shaped the way that they made meaning of the accreditation process as individuals and as a group. The social constructivist theory holds that two people looking at the same thing never see it the same way. We each hold a distinctive view of reality that is shaped by our experiences (Kim, 2001). The faculty members' stories relayed in this study elucidate their version of reality and the social constructs that influenced the making of this reality during the accreditation process.

Comparison of Findings to Existing Literature

One of the biggest issues that was discussed in the existing literature related to faculty and the accreditation process was that of the role of faculty in the process. As stated by studies by AAUP (2008), CHEA (2010), Palomba and Banta (1999), and Nichols (1995), faculty members must have a clearly defined role in the accreditation process, one in which faculty are considered experts and are relied upon for all matters related to academic curriculum and student learning. However, all the participants in this study articulated their lack of awareness of their role or limited knowledge about the role of faculty in the accreditation process. Faculty members from the study who were able to identify a role, identified it as assessment. "Besides the assessment part, I don't necessarily remember if there was any other role," was the response given by one

participant when asked about her role in the accreditation process. Another participant exclaimed, “What other role does the faculty have in it besides the assessment piece? I have no clue... really I don’t.” Other faculty members mentioned, “doing some work on the master syllabi” and “typing up some report, but I don’t know if that was for the accreditors or the administrators.” These quotes show some alignment between what faculty saw as their role and the role that has been defined by AAUP, CHEA, Palomba and Banta, and Nichols.

Nichols (1995) said faculty “[bought] in” to accreditation when they had “substantial roles” in the process because they felt “empowered” when they were asked to make decisions about academic assessment and academic curriculum. The theme of unfamiliar and unidentified role of the faculty highlighted that the faculty in this study were engaged in assessment-related activities and some curriculum issues such as syllabi and general education outcome revisions. However, one participant commented on the fact that faculty were asked for input during a meeting but never saw that input being utilized. She described the experience, “We wrote our ideas on huge sticky notes and put them on the walls, but I’m not sure anybody ever used the information.” This may have been why there was no sense of “empowerment” mentioned by the faculty members in this study.

When analyzing how faculty were affected by the accreditation process, Brase’s (1964) study showed that curriculum changes came about as a result of the process, my study did not find this. However, from the Higher Learning Commission’s final report (2003), it is evident that one of the results of the process was what the Commission considered a good assessment plan and other valuable products like student learning

outcomes for programs and general education outcomes for the college. These could be interpreted as results of the process, although to be clear, these were not mentioned by faculty interviewed for this study.

Another valuable insight was two of the faculty's perceptions that jobs were on the line if they "screwed up." Though this perception was not reported by all the participants in this study, Fisk and Duryea (1977) did report an increase in unionization in a college following the accreditation process. Perhaps faculty would not have felt a need to unionize unless they felt that there was some threat to their job stability after the process. My study indicated that at least two faculty members felt this same way. This eludes to an unspoken threat that faculty from both my study and Fisk and Duryea's perceived.

The most compelling consistency comes from the literature by Procopio (2010), Schilling and Schilling (1998), and Palomba and Banta (1999). Procopio (2010) stated:

For accreditation to have what is termed intrinsic value (i.e., value beyond the accrediting agency's stamp of approval and access to federal student loans and grants), college accreditation leaders are told they must overcome the perception of faculty and staff that accreditation is simply a pro forma hoop through which they must jump every five to ten years. (para. 7)

There is no wonder that faculty perceive the accreditation process differently when Procopio (2010) further states that "It is probable that leaders of an accreditation effort receive more information, are more highly involved, and are, in fact, in supervisory roles more than their non-committee counterparts," and "Least satisfied [with the process] are the two groups reporting active and minimal involvement" (para. 27). The study reports that the minimally involved group is faculty. Procopio (2010) goes on to say that those who are "minimally involved" in the accreditation process commonly experience

“frustration.” Furthermore, “the additional meetings in reality and/or in perception do not strike personnel as affording everyone the opportunity to be included in discussions, to tap creative potential, to result in decisions being enacted, or to be time well spent”

(Procopio, 2010, para. 28). One of the most relevant findings in this research article is:

Faculty need a voice in crafting what they perceive to be a healthy climate, effective information flow, useful meetings, and appropriate levels of involvement. . . These findings seem to indicate that very high-end involvement yields some satisfaction with the organizational culture, but simply being asked to participate (actively or minimally) in the [accreditation] process by those who lead drives up frustration. (Procopio, 2010, para. 30)

Schilling and Schilling (1998) wrote that faculty expressed disdain for assessment, one of their main roles in the accreditation process. Faculty members see it as just one more command for accountability (Schilling & Schilling, 1998; Procopio, 2010). The contempt that faculty feel towards assessment was also attributed to faculty members feeling “overburdened” with yet another responsibility on already “full plates.” Schilling and Schilling (1998) further stated that faculty members are still uncertain about assessment and this leads to some of their resistance. Another study suggested that to counteract faculty perceptions and resistance to accreditation, “encourage teamwork and team building through brainstorming, dialogue and discussion, and joint projects” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, pp. 65–66); and “to set clear and defined roles in the assessment process” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 53).

My study indicates that the way faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process is a great predictor of the faculty’s perspectives on the experience. Comments from participants of my study agree that they experienced the “frustration” that was discussed in the literature, and this frustration came from lack of knowledge which was highlighted in the aforementioned literature as well. Faculty in my study did

feel like accreditation was just a “hoop to jump through” which shows that they were disconnected from the value of the process which was also found in the literature. One faculty member from my study explained that she felt like “Administrators knew everything, and faculty knew nothing.” Faculty in my study felt that the meetings to learn about accreditation were “a waste of time” as did the participants in Procopio’s (2010) study. Furthermore, faculty members in this study saw their main (and in some cases, only) role in the accreditation process as that of assessing student learning. This has been confirmed by the literature. The literature also confirms that faculty members still do not know much about the assessment piece as it relates to accreditation, and this brings about some resistance that was not mentioned among the participants of my study. Finally, participants of this study preferred to learn from other colleagues and would have liked more delineation as to what their role in the process was. Palomba and Banta’s (1999) work confirms that learning from colleagues and defining faculty roles are ways to decrease employee resistance to accreditation efforts and change faculty perceptions about the process.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This study contributes to the existing literature on the accreditation process by identifying how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. Moreover, this study presents the complex relationship between faculty and those who are responsible for teaching them about the accreditation process. By developing a broader understanding of issues surrounding how faculty make meaning of the accreditation process, higher education institutions and accreditation agencies can better prepare

themselves to prepare faculty for accreditation processes in a way that is just as beneficial and meaningful to faculty bodies as it is to the institution as a whole.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I analyzed the interview transcriptions and documents from the Higher Learning Commission. I introduced and explained the themes that were garnered from the research study. The themes were used as headings. Findings that emerged from the themes indicate that the participants have similar perspectives on the accreditation process. Three of the themes that surfaced from the data were supported by the Higher Learning Commission's comments. The faculty feeling befuddled and bewildered from the absence of collegiality and collaboration that faculty desired from social interactions during the process was the foundation upon which every other theme was formed. The themes of faculty feeling disconcerted and disoriented, disconnected and detached, and unknown and unfamiliar contributed to a distinct representation of the accreditation process from the faculty's point of view. Ultimately, one idea about the research question, how do faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process, materializes from this data. Faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process based upon their ignorance about the process which they felt was a product of the dominant facilitation that took place during social interactions that they had with administrators of the college during the accreditation process. By and large, the data collected for this study and the existing body of literature discussed in chapter 2 bear close resemblance, though some disparities exist.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The institution studied for this research underwent its first regional accreditation process in 1995. The initial candidacy status was awarded by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools during this time. The Director of Institutional Effectiveness at OCC once told faculty members at OCC that despite the horror that is associated with the accreditation process, the institution must endure it to have courses that are transferable to other institutions and to receive Title IV funding. The institution can't function without either. The institution was given the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools stamp of approval in November 2003 when it was awarded 10 years accreditation with no faults.

Having experienced the accreditation process at OCC in 2003, this research was of particular personal interest to me. Because I had been a part of this institution and experienced the phenomenon with the participants, I already had a rapport with the participants from the onset of the research. This resulted in an open dialogue between researcher and participants.

My initial thought was that this research study on how faculty make meaning of the accreditation process would add a different perspective to the literature that already exists on accreditation, the perspective of faculty members from a community college. The data collected for this study does highlight the faculty perspective.

The theoretical framework in this research study was social constructivism. This theory proposes that “individuals hold a variety of views in relation to a situation and there is a focus on understanding these multiple meanings” (Roux & Barry, 2009, p. 4).

The individual and the learning that takes place as a result of the social context are at the heart of social constructivism. In short, social constructivism says that reality is created only when people interact. Through this interaction, people create their own subjective meanings. Furthermore, social constructivists believe that the most effective learning occurs when people engage in social interaction (Kim, 2001). As social constructivism relates to this study, faculty members have different views of the accreditation process. These views were untapped until the faculty members of the study began to go through the accreditation process. These views were shaped by the social constructs that the faculty members were a part of: higher education environment, meetings with administrators, and peer-to-peer interaction. These social constructs contributed to how the faculty members made meaning of the accreditation process and illuminated the types of social interaction that work best when faculty are experiencing accreditation. The study found that the faculty members preferred interaction in smaller groups with other faculty members, and it was in these social interactions that faculty reported the most learning.

Through gathering, transcribing, and analyzing information during the data collection process, five themes became significant. Faculty feeling:

1. befuddled and bewildered;
2. disconcerted and disoriented;
3. disconnected and detached;
4. unfamiliar and unidentified; and
5. the desire for collegiality and collaboration.

Further analysis of the data showed that a combination of the first and last themes generated themes 2, 3, and 4. The faculty stories revealed that had faculty been informed about the process by those whom they felt most comfortable and were most familiar in settings where they did not feel threatened, they would have gained more knowledge about the process. The large group social interactions that were led by administrators did not result in the knowledge gain that faculty needed to feel informed about the process. For this reason, faculty felt disconcerted and disoriented during the accreditation process, disconnected and detached from the value of the process, and unfamiliar and unidentified in the process. In this chapter, I will present the possible implications of this research on accreditation processes, accreditation agencies, higher education institutions, higher education administrators and faculty bodies, and an emerging support of the social constructivism theory. From here, problems can be resolved, amicable compromises reached, and more positive changes in the process can be made to enhance faculty members' perspectives that relate to the accreditation experience. This chapter will conclude with recommendations for further study.

Recommendations

Higher Education Institutions

This study produced findings that illustrate how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. This study suggests that the meanings made by faculty members seem to be negative. The negativity stems from the lack of knowledge that came out of the social interactions that took place to teach faculty about the accreditation process. From this information, it is recommended that higher education institutions take a new route to teaching faculty about the accreditation process. The recommendations

include using peers to teach other peers about the process rather than utilizing a “top down” teaching approach. The “top down” approach made the faculty in this study afraid to ask the questions that may have given them the knowledge they needed to make the process better for them. Also, I recommend conducting smaller meetings so that there is more one-on-one interaction. Though this is a common teaching method in higher education classrooms, it was not utilized to teach the faculty at OCC about the accreditation process.

If higher education hopes to get the faculty buy-in that is needed to make accreditation as meaningful as it should be, the process must be presented to faculty well and in non-threatening environments that are conducive to their learning. Higher education must look at faculty bodies as adult learners when it comes to informing them about the process. The right amount of challenge and support must be present to help students learn, and it is no different with faculty who are learning about the accreditation process. For many faculty members, the process is a new one. Higher education must approach faculty with the process like it is new to them and utilize the faculty to whom the accreditation process is not new to teach their colleagues. If higher education institutions take this recommendation, they stand to gain an entire employee population that is well-versed in accreditation rather than a select few administrators who are not likely to stay with the institution forever.

Faculty

Since the literature from Chapter 2 and the data collected for this study both suggest that more faculty involvement in the accreditation process is needed, I am recommending that faculty teaching in higher education institutions avail themselves of

the training provided by accreditation associations. Accrediting bodies are made up of administrators and faculty members from higher education institutions. Therefore, these agencies are in a great position to train other faculty for the accreditation process. The process to receive training to be a peer consultant-evaluator for the agencies is simple. Faculty members must apply to the accrediting agency of which its institution is a member to get the necessary training. From here, faculty members can return to their institutions armed with the knowledge needed to train other faculty. In this, faculty members receive the training that this study implies is most beneficial to them when learning about the accreditation process. But again, this calls for higher education faculty bodies to seek the training they need to better prepare their colleagues for accreditation.

Assessment Coordinators

The term “assessment coordinators” refers to those staff members on a college campus who are responsible for coordinating assessment efforts. These study findings expose a potential gap in the dissemination of assessment information. The study participants responded consistently with comments that illustrate their lack of knowledge about assessment. These comments are cause for concern because they demonstrate that faculty members may not be equipped with the knowledge they need to perform assessment, which is very important to student learning. Perhaps, the person in the role of assessment coordinator needs to have a more active role in helping faculty to understand assessment, which has been described as one of faculty members’ major roles in the accreditation process. If faculty members understand one of their primary roles better, this may go a long way in redefining how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process.

Accrediting Agencies

The data suggest there is a need for more faculty-trainers for the accreditation process if faculty members are going to be well-versed in accreditation matters. This calls for accreditation agencies themselves to begin a more aggressive campaign to bring faculty into accreditation process training. Though the training is always made available to faculty by the accrediting agencies, this information is mostly known by higher education administrators; therefore, they are the ones who take advantage of the training opportunities. This means they are the only ones on a campus qualified to teach others about the process. But since the data shows the most meaningful learning occurs when faculty teach faculty, faculty need to be at the training seminars. Accrediting agencies need to make the training schedules as convenient for faculty as possible, not barring training on the individual campuses and virtual training sessions. Having attended the training myself, I know it is possible and feel that it would be just as effective as the face-to-face training that is now available.

Theory

The social constructivism theory used for the framework of this study has three components. Kim (2001) explains social constructivism and its assumptions:

Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of instruction that are rooted in the perspectives of social constructivists, it is important to know the premises that underlie them.

Reality: Social constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (as cited in Kim, 2001). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist prior to its social invention.

Knowledge: To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (as cited in Kim, 2001). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

Learning: Social constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviors that are shaped by external forces (as cited in Kim, 2001). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

In relation to this study, social constructivism's assumptions propose that faculty members construct meaning of the accreditation process as they interact with each other, the accrediting agents, the institution's administration, and all other persons who are included in this process. This meaning of reality is not constructed until the phenomenon takes place. Prior to this experience, there was no basis for constructing this meaning because there was no shared experience of the accreditation process upon which the faculty members could build meaning. As the process took place, faculty members constructed meaning in their environment through the meetings, conversations, and all other social activities that they engage in with all parties involved in the process.

This study clearly demonstrates a very important component of the theory that helps to explain the way in which knowledge is constructed. This component relates to the interaction that takes place during knowledge construction. As mentioned previously, the theory states that "meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities" (Kim, 2001). According to the data collected in this study, meaningful learning occurred when faculty were engaged in social activities such as small group discussions and one-on-one discussions with those whom they felt most comfortable and most familiar with, other faculty members. Faculty comments illustrate the discomfort they felt when interacting with administrators. This was demonstrated in faculty quotes such as:

You and I both know it; when you are trying to teach somebody something and they put up that fear block that they are only learning a small percent. So when Dr. [Name Deleted] was sharing with us I had that block up there. I was afraid any minute she was going to ask a question that I couldn't answer, but when I would go to other faculty and ask what she meant, they would say this is what she

meant. They would kind of break it down into laymen's terms that I could understand, then I could go and do what I needed to do. Other faculty provided a relaxation, a confidence.

Another faculty comment that was shared expressed a desire for peer-to-peer social interactions when learning about the accreditation process:

If I were doing it, I probably would have gotten faculty from each department and sat down with them and explained exactly what I wanted each department to do and then let them go back and talk to the adjuncts or talk to whoever is in their department and let them know one on one exactly what is expected. That way I would feel like it was more saturation of everyone here instead of these people dictating to us something that we didn't really grasp what it was that they wanted us to do but that is the way I would handle it.

This shows that not all social interaction results in meaningful learning. The social constructivism theory and the study data suggest that the type of social activity—big group meeting, one-on-one conversations—and those involved in the interaction are determining factors as to whether meaningful learning occurs.

Not only is this idea important to faculty and the accreditation process, but it could also have major implications to other learning situations. For example, learning in the classroom could be more meaningful if peers were teaching peers. The “block” described by one of the faculty comments may not exist if peers are learning from other peers with whom they are more comfortable, can identify with, and who may “speak the same language” as they do. Three faculty participants in this study mentioned being afraid to ask questions of the administrators for fear of appearing ignorant. Another mentioned that one administrator was “talking over my head” in the meeting where learning about the accreditation process was supposed to be taking place. These comments imply that humans do learn through social interaction but also that it is only in certain social settings and with people they are most comfortable with does the learning

become more meaningful. Therefore, when it is imperative that learning reach its optimal potential, it is important to train people who are not in administrative positions to teach others in smaller group settings where people do not feel fearful or intimidated, which can happen when a person is learning from their superiors.

Future Research

A research study on the effectiveness of the accreditation process on higher education could benefit existing literature. A study of this kind could reveal the need to revamp the process and alleviate weaknesses. The participants in this research study were all from a community college. A future research opportunity that studies the perceptions of faculty members from other types of higher education institutions would provide even more insight. Although this study specifically caters to the faculty population at a community college, future research opportunities abound with different populations at higher education institutions such as administrators, staff, and students. Also, an institution-specific longitudinal research study that investigates the effects of the accreditation process on an institution would be valuable. Beginning with a sample of administrators, faculty, and staff at an institution prior to the accreditation process, a researcher could follow this group from directly before the accreditation experience to directly before preparations for the next accreditation experience, examining their behaviors and how they were affected after the experience. Another interesting study would be to research the perceptions of administrators of the accreditation experience. Perhaps their input would illuminate a relationship between faculty members' responses to the accreditation process and their own responses to the accreditation process.

As staff members were not engaged in this research study, a future research opportunity should involve the input of staff members who are participants in the accreditation process as well. This may provide a more accurate description of how employees college-wide make meaning of the accreditation process.

Another furtherance of this research study involves the development of the assessment of student learning. It may be advantageous to study the development of assessment in relation to accreditation policies and standards. A study measuring faculty learning during different social interactions led by different groups (e.g., superiors and peers) may also produce valuable theoretical findings. Finally, the application of adult learning theories such as experiential learning theory and transformational learning theory may benefit the body of literature that already exists. Since the basis of adult learning theories is the life experience that adults bring to the learning situation, studying more of these experiences and how they affect learning may shed more light on how to prepare adult faculty members for one of the most important higher education mandates, the accreditation process. A look at transformational learning theory could enlighten the extent to which adult faculty members' are transformed from what they learn during the accreditation process.

Conclusions

Though regional accrediting agencies had been around since the 40s, it was not until 1952 that each of them established a division that governed higher education. The faculty role in accreditation has been firmly established by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), both of which are highly influential organizations within higher education.

AAUP and CHEA both believe that faculty should be heavily involved in the accreditation process and related activities such as the self-study to ensure that the faculty voice is heard throughout the process. Although the accreditation process is necessary, faculty stories about the accreditation experience speak volumes in terms of how they make meaning of the experience. Lack of information gathered during the social interactions designed to educate faculty about the process prevent faculty from viewing the experience as a positive one.

In summary, the primary intention of this research study was to understand how faculty members make meaning of the accreditation process. The participants seemed to derive their meaning of the process from how much they learned through the social interactions during the process. Each participant conveyed a lack of knowledge about the accreditation process which stemmed from the social interactions that took place between them and administrators. From here, faculty relayed stories that illuminated negative feelings about the process, a severed connection from the value/and or relevance of the process, and limited faculty roles. Each also expressed a desire to learn about the accreditation process from other faculty members in non-threatening social settings such as small group meetings. The participants believe that they will reach optimal levels of learning about the accreditation process when they receive the information from colleagues with whom they feel most comfortable. This discovery seemingly supports one of the essential components of the social constructivism theory that grounded this study. Not all social interaction results in meaningful learning. The study data suggest that the type of social activity—e.g., big group meeting, one-on-one conversations—and those involved in the interactions are determining factors as to whether meaningful

learning occurs. For meaningful learning to occur, it is important for faculty members to learn from their peers rather than administrators and in smaller group settings where faculty do not feel fearful or intimidated when they are learning about the accreditation process.

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Appendix A

First Interview Questions

Begin time: Date : Location:

Attendees:

End time:

1. Tell me about your experience with the accreditation process.
2. Describe how you fit into the accreditation process.
3. Describe how you responded to accreditation activities, e.g. meetings, reports, question and answer sessions, meeting presenters.
4. Describe the best and worst parts of the accreditation experience.
5. Are there any additional comments that you would like to make regarding your lived experience of the accreditation process?

Appendix B

Second interview questions

Begin time: Date : Location:

Attendees:

End time:

1. Describe your thoughts about the accreditation experience.
2. Explain your role in the accreditation process. How would you describe your reaction to accreditation efforts?
3. What, if anything, would you change about the experience if you could?
4. Are there any additional comments that you would like to make regarding your lived experience of the accreditation process?

Appendix C

Third Interview Questions

Begin time: Date : Location:

Attendees:

End time:

From a past interview I was not clear about ...Can you please clarify this statement or further explain this statement...

Would you like to add any information?

Appendix D

First Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about the faculty group experience with the accreditation process.
2. As a faculty group, how would you describe the work put forth for the accreditation process?
3. Describe the relevance of the accreditation process.
4. Explain, as a group, your overall opinion of the process.
5. Is there anything else you would like to add that relates to the faculty experience?

Appendix E

Second Focus Group Questions

1. Describe the accreditation process in terms of what the faculty experienced, felt, and understood.
2. Give me some examples of the type of behaviors that faculty members demonstrated during the experience.
3. Explain the faculty members' level of participation and commitment to the process.
4. Give me some examples of the type of behaviors that faculty members demonstrated during the experience to show their level of participation and commitment to the process.
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix F

Higher Learning Commission Final Report

ADVANCEMENT SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

[Name and Location Deleted]

November 17 – 19, 2003

FOR

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

Dr. Charlotte J. Lee, Senior Executive for Education and Organizational Development,
Association of Community College Trustees, Washington, DC 20036

Dr. Susan A. Deege, Director of Career and Advising Services, John Wood Community
College, Quincy, IL 62305

Dr. Josephine Reed-Taylor, Senior Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs,
Minneapolis Community and Technical College, Minneapolis, MN 55403

Dr. William Tammone, Dean of Academic Services, Montcalm Community College,
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ADVANCEMENT SECTION

I. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE INSTITUTION

Though a relatively new institution, Mid-South Community College has a clear and pervasive sense of its mission, the community it serves, and the needs of its students. This clarity of mission and vision has been translated into an impressive level of program and facility development over the last decade.

The team identified numerous strengths at MSCC. These include:

- MSCC has a comprehensive planning process that involves the entire college community.
- The College's physical plant is attractive and supportive of effective teaching and learning.
- The technology infrastructure at MSCC is excellent.
- The Board of Trustees is made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds who bring a wealth of community information and support to the College.
- The College benefits from charismatic executive leadership and a strong administrative team.
- MSCC provides comprehensive student support services through its TRIO programs and Special Support Services.
- The "one stop shop" in the Learning Success Center is highly utilized. Students expressed that staff are well-informed and able to provide them with needed support and direction.
- The faculty have made great progress in the assessment of student academic achievement and are using assessment data to inform the planning and budgeting processes as well as to improve student learning.

- College staff are committed to student success.
- The community regards the College as a key to providing a trained local workforce and attracting new industry to Crittenden County.
- Staff and faculty service contributes to the institution's effectiveness.
- Adult education, literacy, and GED classes meet a crucial educational need of the community. The expansion of outreach sites will contribute to the College's ability to meet this community need.
- The College has aggressively and successfully procured external funding to help meet student and community needs.
- The College Foundation has begun a sound program of giving and investing.
- Despite limited resources, the college has, through sound fiscal management and decision-making, positioned the institution for the future.
- In an effort to support a new and rapidly growing institution, the administration has prioritized and allocated resources to meet two critical needs: space in which to conduct educational and learning activities and sufficient staff to provide the services required by the community.

These and many other strengths will serve the College well as it matures and rises to meet the challenges of the future.

II. CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM

A. Continued Progress Toward Greater Diversity

The College has implemented efforts to attract faculty, administrators, and staff of color. It has advertised its openings in media that are focused on persons of color and

has hired employees that began at the College as students. While these efforts have produced modest increases in personnel of color, the team encourages the College to make diversity among its personnel a top priority. We encourage the College to examine ways it could extend its “grow your own” philosophy by exploring a mentor program of graduates of color interested in working in higher education. The College could also send notices of position openings to the caucuses in the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of Higher Education, and Hispanics in Higher Education as well as the universities with graduate programs in education that are part of the Historic Black Colleges and Universities.

B. Academic Advising Program

The academic advising processes were rated less than satisfactory by students and personnel at Mid-South Community College. The College recently had a faculty member volunteer to coordinate the faculty academic advising program. This program serves students beyond their initial enrollment in college where they receive excellent assistance from the Learning Success Center or Educational Opportunity Center counselors.

The challenge for Mid-South is to develop an institutionalized comprehensive program with trained advisors that provide more than registration services to students. An ongoing training program could update faculty and counselors on major and program requirements, career exploration and decision-making techniques, transfer options for students and other elements to successfully advise students. The College is well aware of the need to find additional resources and incentives to develop a responsive and inclusive faculty advising program.

C. Board Policy

The Board of Trustees may wish to consider the next evolution of its board policy from a reiteration of state code to a statement of what the board values (i.e. what the board expects the institution to achieve) and the parameters within which the President may

work. Such a revision of board policy could contribute to three critical governance processes: First, the maintenance of the values and beliefs which created the college despite potential turnover in board membership; second, the definition of outcomes expected of the College and the establishment of those criteria to be used by the board to determine the success of the CEO; and third, the retention of executive leadership through the creation of acceptable boundaries for performance and the subsequent ability to provide positive, supportive, and, if necessary, corrective feedback to the President in the future.

D. Institutional Outcomes

The Board may want to consider establishing by board policy, the institutional outcomes the community expects from the College. Such a codification of outcomes or ends policies would help create increased focus within the institution on those outcomes through the comprehensive planning processes of the College and assure that the synergy already created by the internal planning processes of the staff is maintained and enhanced.

E. Enhancing Existing Services

The administration has demonstrated significant caution in the development and maintenance of its fund balance and, by so doing, has minimized the institution's risk of losing core services currently funded through external sources. However, as the primary facilities needs of the institution are met, the administration may wish to consider enhancing existing services with a modest infusion of institutional funds despite the on-going existence of external funding.

F. Continuous Quality Improvement

It would appear that many "quality" processes are in place within the organization. If the leadership team is supportive of continuous quality improvement as a way of working, the College may wish to consider AQIP as a supportive process not only for

internal operations and improvements but also for on-going attention to the maintenance of accreditation.

G. General Education

According to the *NCA Handbook of Accreditation*, "General education is "general" in several clearly identifiable ways: it is not directly related to a student's formal technical, vocational, or professional preparation; [and] it is a part of every student's course of study, regardless of his or her area of emphasis . . . [No matter] how an institution of higher education defines its goals for general education, it will be able to show that it has thoughtfully considered and clearly articulated the purposes and content of the general education it provides to its students" [2nd ed., pp. 23-24]. Mid-South has recently revised its outcomes (goals) for general education. Given the limited general education requirements for some of the applied programs, it is not clear to the team how students in all of the institution's occupational degree programs could meet all of the publicly-stated goals for general education listed in the College Catalog. It is not clear, for example, how students in the Business Technology program could meet the goal involving science ("Acquire a fundamental knowledge of the political, social, scientific, and cultural behavior of mankind . . .") when students in that program are not required to take a science course in order to graduate.

The team recommends that the College either (a) revise its list of general education outcomes (goals) so that they really can be attained by all MSCC graduates, or (b) revise its program curricula so that students in *all* degree programs at MSCC truly have an opportunity to acquire these skills and thus attain these goals.

The team also recommends that, for each of its degree programs, the College develop a table or grid that clearly indicates exactly which general education outcomes can be acquired in which courses.

H. Lab Assistants

The team recommends that the College search for ways to provide lab assistants for the science faculty. It could be argued that although the faculty at MSCC are not extraordinarily well-paid as instructors (by national standards, that is), they are exorbitantly well-paid as dishwashers. Moreover, with all of the extra-curricular demands placed on faculty at MSCC, there are, in all likelihood, better uses of their time than washing glassware, doing routine laboratory set-ups, and cleaning up after students when they are finished with their labs. The College might consider, for example, providing the science faculty with work-study students. This would not only free-up faculty time to attend to more appropriate concerns (such as assessment), it could also provide students in the sciences and health occupations with valuable work experience.

I. Community Education and Workforce Development

Although credit programs, community education classes, and workforce training target different populations, coordinated efforts among all departments should be a priority to maximize the effect of marketing dollars. The new marketing director recognizes the need for standardized messages and is appropriately considering a more visual logo. The newsprint flyers that go out twice a year are attractive and cost effective; some consideration might be given to visually highlighting the community education classes in some way to distinguish them from credit classes, and appeal to a different segment of potential participants. The thoughtful development and marketing of non credit community classes is a logical way to get new individuals on campus and make them aware of the institution and its impressive facilities. The self study addressed the high cancellation rate, and methods such as focus groups or community surveys might assist the college in determining the most attractive topics and courses.

Special event activities also offer an opportunity to “match” community demographics and interests. A concentrated effort to identify unique African-American and “delta culture” activities could serve the College well in terms of media exposure.

J. AAS Degrees and Certificate Programs

The placement of the career and technical programs under the business and community outreach dean is an appropriate move; however, care must be given to ensure the inclusion of the career and technical programs in the institution-wide assessment of student learning and institutional effectiveness measurements. These assessment and accreditation-oriented activities and processes might be most closely aligned with the transfer programs.

III. RECOGNITION OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PROGRESS, AND/OR PRACTICES

- MSCC has, despite limited funding from the state, developed a center of learning for Crittenden County.
- The MSCC Foundation has done an outstanding job of developing gifts and grants on behalf of the College.
- Despite some concern over the potential duplication of effort and lack of understanding on the part of faculty and staff, the internal planning processes of the college are extremely well defined and focused.

ASSURANCE SECTION

REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT

TO

[Name and Location Deleted]
November 17 – 19, 2003

FOR

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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ASSURANCE SECTION

I. CONTEXT AND NATURE OF VISIT

A. Purpose of Visit:

The purpose of this visit was to conduct a comprehensive evaluation for continued accreditation at the associate's degree level.

B. Institutional Context:

Mid-South Community College (MSCC) is a public, open-access, two-year comprehensive community college in West Memphis, AR. It primarily serves students in Crittenden County, in the Mississippi River Delta region of eastern Arkansas. MSCC currently offers four associate degree programs and six certificate programs as well as developmental education, adult education, and community education courses. In addition, the College hosts upper-division and graduate courses offered by Arkansas State University, the University of Central Arkansas, and the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville.

The institution now known as Mid-South Community College began operation in 1979 as a vocational technical school. The state of Arkansas converted it into a community college (supported in part by a local millage) in the early 1990s. In the fall of 1993, the College had an enrollment of only 139 students. Ten years later, in the fall of 2003, headcount had increased to 1159 (626 FTE). The student body, like the local population, is divided almost equally between black and white. Women outnumber men nearly two to one, and the average age is 27. MSCC currently employs 29 full-time instructors, 63 adjuncts, and 68 full-time staff.

The college campus has grown over the past ten years to accommodate the increased enrollment. The most recent addition is the stunningly-beautiful 64,000-square-foot Reynolds Center, which houses, among other things, a handsome 12,000 square foot library, an award-winning state-of-the-art distance learning / technology-enhanced classroom, the college bookstore, a small café, and office space for student support services, admissions, and finance.

Though Memphis, Tennessee is located just across the Mississippi River, Crittenden County, Arkansas is largely rural, with a population of just over 50,000. Like much of the Mississippi Delta, the county continues to struggle with poverty and low levels of educational attainment. Over a quarter of the county residents live below the poverty level and more than 30% of the residents 25 or older have no high school diploma.

Mid-South Community College submitted its initial Preliminary Information Form to the NCA Commission on Institutions of Higher Education in 1992 and was granted Candidacy Status in February, 1995. A comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation took place in November, 1998. The visiting team's recommendation for initial accreditation with the next comprehensive evaluation scheduled for 2003-2004 was formally accepted by the Commission in March, 1999.

C. Unique Aspects of Visit:

None.

D. Sites or Branch Campuses Visited:

None.

E. Distance Education Reviewed:

The team discussed the College's distance learning offerings with the Executive Vice President, the Media Consultant, and the Director of Instructional Technology.

Although Mid-South currently offers many "web-enhanced" courses (i.e., face-to-face courses supported by course web sites), it is offering only a small number of courses entirely over the Internet. Three credit courses were offered online in fall, 2003; six were on the schedule for spring, 2004. The College is currently using Blackboard as its online course management system.

Arkansas State University – Jonesboro provides compressed video courses for third- and fourth-year business, education, and nursing students on the Mid-South campus. MSCC students may also enroll in compressed video courses in agriculture delivered by the University of Arkansas system. To date, however, interest has been minimal.

F. Interactions with Institutional Constituencies:

Board of Trustees

Director, Arkansas Department of Higher Education

Executive Director, Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges

Associate Vice Chancellor for Government Relations, University of Arkansas –

Fort Smith

Board of Education Coordinating Board Member

President

Executive Vice President

Vice President for Computer Information Systems
Vice President for Finance and Administration
Vice President for Learning Support
Dean of Instruction
Dean of Business and Community Outreach
Registrar
Director of Advancement
Director of Business and Community Outreach
Director of Educational Opportunity Center and Enrollment Management
Director of Learning Success Center and Adult Education
Director of Library
Learning Center Director
Instructional Technology Director
Marketing Director
Physical Plant Director
Financial Aid Director
YouthBuild Director
YouthBuild Counselor
Youth Program Coordinator
Youth Program Administrator
TRIO Director
TRIO Counselors
Evening Academic Coordinator
Career Services Coordinator
College Now Coordinator

Continuing Education Coordinator
Business and Industry Services Coordinator
Employment and Training Coordinator
Events/Scheduling Coordinator
Literacy Coordinator
Planning/Accreditation Coordinator
Publicity Coordinator
Program Coordinators
EOC Counselors
Business Manager
Materials Manager
Media Consultant
Systems and Network Technician
Assessment Committee
Curriculum Committee
Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Committee
Faculty (open meeting with approximately 20 instructors)
Professional Staff (open meeting)
Support Staff (open meeting)
Students (open meeting)
Community Members (open meeting)

G. Principal Documents, Materials, and Web Pages Reviewed:

1. Mid-South Community College 2002-2003 Self-Study
2. Mid-South Community College Self-Study Report Update
3. Mid-South Community College Web Site (<http://www.msc.c.c.ar.us>)
4. Mid-South Community College Plan for Assessing Student Academic Achievement
5. Assessment of Student Learning Reports
6. Financial Audits
7. Mid-South 2003-2004 College Catalog
8. Mid-South Fall Schedule of Classes
9. Sampling of faculty transcripts
10. All documents pertaining to the GIRs and numerous other documents on file in the Resource Room
11. Employee Surveys
12. Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Surveys
13. Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory
14. Noel-Levitz Consulting Report
15. Student Complaint Files
16. Alumni Surveys
17. Graduation Surveys
18. Registration Surveys
19. High School Personnel Survey
20. Local Employer Survey
21. Advising and Registration Manual
22. MSCC Student Policies
23. Learning Success Center Annual Productivity Review

II. COMMITMENT TO PEER REVIEW

A. Comprehensiveness of the Self-Study Process:

The self-study coordinators did a fine job of involving a wide-range of the institution's stakeholders in the planning, information-gathering, and writing processes. The self-study itself was clearly-written, thorough, and well-documented.

B. Integrity of the Self-Study Report:

The team believes that the self-study is a reasonably accurate picture of the Institution at the time it was written. Because the College used the self-study process to identify, not just strengths, but opportunities for institutional improvement, everyone involved regarded the process as a valuable exercise.

C. Capacity to Address Previously Identified Challenges:

The team considers the response of the institution to previously identified challenges to be adequate.

D. Notification of Evaluation Visit and Solicitation of Third-Party Comment:

Requirements were fulfilled.

Comment: The Commission received several third-party comments regarding Mid-South Community College. All but one were very supportive. The team discussed the unsupportive letter with senior administrators.

III. COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

The team reviewed the required Title IV compliance areas and the student complaint information.

Comment: The procedures for handling complaints are well organized and include documenting each step from the initial complaint to follow-through and disposition of the issues raised by the complaint. The students expressed a clear understanding of the complaint procedures.

IV. AFFIRMATION OF the GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

BASED ON THE SELF-STUDY REVIEW AND OTHER DOCUMENTATION, THE TEAM CONFIRMS THAT THE INSTITUTION CONTINUES TO MEET EACH OF THE TWENTY-FOUR GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS.

V. FULFILLMENT OF THE CRITERIA

A. CRITERION ONE

The institution demonstrates that it has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:
 - a. MSCC's mission, vision and goals statements are appropriate for a public, open access, two-year institution.
 - b. The purposes of Mid-South Community College are clearly articulated in the catalog and other college publications and are understood by the students.
 - c. MSCC has a comprehensive planning process that involves the entire college community.
2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:
3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

B. CRITERION TWO

The institution demonstrates that it has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:

- a. The physical plant is exceptionally attractive as well as supportive of effective teaching and learning.
- b. The College's operating procedures are clearly defined.
- c. The technology infrastructure is excellent: The College has seventeen computer labs; all classrooms are equipped with computers and LCD projectors and are wired for internet access; and all student workspaces in the library are designed to accommodate laptop computers and provide Internet access.
- d. The Board of Trustees consists of individuals from diverse backgrounds who bring a wealth of community information to the College.
- e. The College benefits from charismatic executive leadership and a strong administrative team.
- f. MSCC provides comprehensive student support services through its TRIO programs and Special Support Services.
- g. The "one stop shop" in the Learning Success Center is highly utilized. Students expressed that staff are well-informed and able to provide them with needed support and direction.
- h. The library has very good electronic and resources.
- i. Full-time faculty have the appropriate preparation for the courses they teach.
- j. The science labs are of exceptional quality.
- k. The College has maximized limited resources to accomplish its purposes.
- l. The financial aid office has easily understood application procedures and it responds quickly to inform students of grant, scholarship and work-study awards.

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

- a. Mid-South Community College is committed to diversity among its faculty, staff, and administration. Though the College has made some progress in this area, the team urges MSCC to make diversity among its personnel a continuing priority for the future.

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

C. CRITERION THREE

The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:

- a. MSCC is developing an outstanding online faculty development program to prepare instructors to design and teach online courses.
- b. MSCC faculty do an excellent job of working with their advisory committees to insure the currency and relevancy of their occupational programs.
- c. The director of the library is doing an excellent job of partnering with local school and community libraries.
- d. MSCC is offering programs appropriate to an institution of higher education.
- e. The faculty have made great progress in the assessment of student academic achievement and are using assessment data to inform the planning and budgeting processes as well as improve student learning.

- f. Because of placement testing, students are being enrolled in courses where they can succeed.
- g. Transcripts follow commonly accepted practices and accurately reflect student learning.
- h. Faculty and staff are dedicated to student success.
- i. The community regards the College as a key to providing a trained local workforce and attracting new industry to Crittenden County.
- j. Staff and faculty service contributes to the institution's effectiveness.
- k. The development of online and hybrid (online/face-to-face) courses is providing additional learning options for students.
- l. Adult education, literacy, and GED classes meet a crucial educational need in the community. The expansion of outreach sites will contribute to the College's ability to meet this need.
- m. Through its Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Committee, the College has a broad-based commitment to the monitoring of institutional effectiveness.
- n. Faculty and staff benefit greatly from the institution's commitment to supporting professional development.

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

- a. Because of the limited general education requirements for the Associate of Applied Science programs, it is not clear to the team how students in all of the institution's occupational degree programs could meet all of the newly-articulated General Education Objectives.
- b. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the faculty have developed a new set of general education objectives and a new process for assessing whether or not students are meeting those objectives. The College must closely monitor the effectiveness of this new assessment process.
- c. Academic advising has been noted as an area of concern by both MSCC staff and students. A comprehensive program of academic advising, including ongoing training for faculty, needs to be implemented in order to better serve MSCC students.

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

D.

CRITERION FOUR

The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:

- a. The College has developed a comprehensive planning process which is grounded in the Mission and Goals approved by the Board of Trustees.
- b. The College has aggressively procured external funding to meet student and community needs.
- c. The College Foundation has begun a sound program of giving and investing.
- d. In an effort to support a new and rapidly growing institution, the administration has prioritized and allocated resources to meet two critical needs: space in which to conduct educational and learning activities and sufficient staff to provide the services required by the community.
- e. Despite limited resources, the administration has, through sound fiscal management and decision-making, positioned the institution well for meeting the challenges of the future.

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

- a. The linkages between the Strategic Planning, Operational Planning and Productivity Reporting processes need to be clarified in order to minimize loss of focus within the institution.
- b. The College's heavy dependence on external funding requires continuous monitoring so that the loss of core services based on sudden shifts in state funding or external support does not occur.
- c. Current Board policies are merely a reiteration of state code. They should also include a statement of institutional values and a

statement identifying the parameters within which the President may work.

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

D. CRITERION FIVE

The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.

Salient Evidence of Fulfillment of Criterion

1. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion is met:

- a. In the true spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the physical plant goes beyond minimum requirements.
- b. The College's catalog, student handbook, and other publications are up-to-date, clear, and accurate.
- c. The College's website is informative, easily navigated, and accessible for students.
- d. MSCC has well-documented policies and procedures for the resolution of internal disputes for both students and staff.
- e. Policies and practices are consistent with its mission related to equity of treatment, non-discrimination, affirmative action, and other means of enhancing access to education and the building of a diverse educational community.
- f. The recent addition of a marketing director has contributed to the consistency and coordination of institutional publications and advertisements.
- g. Processes are in place for monitoring the fulfillment of grant requirements (fiscal and reporting).

2. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion needs institutional attention:

3. Evidence that demonstrates the criterion requires institutional attention and Commission follow-up:

Recommendation of the Team

Pattern of evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

VI. ACCREDITATION RELATIONSHIP:

A. CONTINUED ACCREDITATION

Next Comprehensive Visit: 2013-2014.

Rationale: The institutional culture at Mid-South Community College is marked by a strong commitment to helping students learn, grow, and achieve their goals. After reviewing the self-study and other documents as well as conducting extensive interviews with students, faculty, and staff, the team concludes that MSCC continues to meet all 24 General Institutional Requirements and the five Criteria for Accreditation. After taking into account the College's governance, leadership, resources, and ongoing commitment to serving the people of Crittenden County, the team believes that a ten-year cycle is warranted.

B. DEFINERS OF RELATIONSHIP

1. Degree Level: Associate's

Retain original wording

2. Ownership: Public

Retain original wording

3. Stipulations: None

Retain original wording

4. New Degree Sites: Commission approval required.

Retain original wording

C. **COMMISSION FOLLOW-UP**

None.

To: Topeka S. Williams
Leadership

From: Chair, Institutional Review Board
for the Protection of Human Subjects
Administration 315

Subject: Research to Explore the Relationship Between the Accreditation
Process and Faculty Academic Life (E09-266)

Approval Date: June 8, 2009

This is to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has designated the above referenced protocol as exempt from the full federal regulations. This project was reviewed in accordance with all applicable statutes and regulations as well as ethical principles.

When the project is finished or terminated, please complete the attached Notice of Completion and send to the Board in Administration 315.

Approval for this protocol does not expire. However, any change to the protocol must be reviewed and approved by the board prior to implementing the change.