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The purpose of this study was to examine higher education administrators’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) as compared to the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA). The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), a commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Internal and external constituents pressure institutions of higher education to continuously account for and examine their processes, goals, and outcomes. Accreditation allows institutions to address their constituents by conducting self-assessments and receiving critical peer evaluations through non-governmental agencies. These self-assessments and peer evaluations enable institutions to better understand and communicate institutional objectives and processes while continually engaging in institutional strategic planning. NCA member institutions currently holding an accredited status following AQIP and institutions following PEAQ were surveyed to determine comparisons between the processes, stakeholder involvement, effect on strategic planning, effect on academic quality, and outcomes. As of August 28, 2008, the total number of AQIP and PEAQ institutions accredited within the NCA through the
HLC was confirmed by Lil Nakutis, Information Management Coordinator at the HLC to be 190 AQIP and 819 PEAQ. The 190 AQIP institutions represented all the traditional classifications of higher education institutions with varying enrollments comparable to the PEAQ accredited institutions in the NCA. There are currently several hundred PEAQ accredited member institutions of the NCA. Of the PEAQ institutions, a stratified random sample of 190 institutions was selected. The survey sample was comprised of college or university presidents or other higher education administrators who either oversaw or were directly affiliated with the accreditation process at the AQIP and the PEAQ institutions. The letter of consent asked these institutional leaders to participate or to forward the survey link onto the individual on their campus that could best respond to the survey questions. A web-based survey was developed to gauge the participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the accreditation processes as it pertains to stakeholder involvement, continuous quality improvement of institutional operations and programs, and impact on institutional strategic planning. Descriptive statistics were run to compare means and standard deviations. A $t$-test was run to determine if there were statistically significant differences between administrators’ perceptions of the AQIP processes and impact on continuous quality improvement as compared to those processes and impacts of PEAQ. While no statistically significant differences existed between administrators’ perceptions, the results provided evidence that administrators at institutions within the NCA do perceive the overall regional accreditation process on their campus to be effective regardless of the type of accreditation used by their institution.
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Jamie, you never cease to amaze me. Your love of life and family are inspiring. Being your sister is one of the greatest gifts this life has ever given me. To my step-brother, Mark and step-sister, Melissa, thank you as well for completing our family. Thank you to the rest of my family and friends for all their encouragement throughout the years. I truly appreciate your words of motivation and support. You believed in me and I will always be grateful for that. Thank you to my wonderful colleagues at Hiram College. I am so grateful for your support and patience and of course all the encouragement and inspiration you have given me on this journey.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are multifarious organizations of change that affect how society views educational reform, research, and funding. Institutions are held accountable by the public and have a social responsibility to deliver quality programs and services. Baker (2002) discusses how public confidence in higher education institutions’ ability to “…authenticate the achievement of results” has decreased over the years. Furthermore, he states, that “judgments relating to quality were formed by intuitive perceptions of institutional reputation and resources rather than from explicit evidence of achievement of intentions and implied outcomes” (Baker, 2002, p. 1). Baker (2002) describes the public system of accountability as a lack of public confidence and a shift in the value of higher education. He claims that the value of higher education has shifted from a social model to an economic resource model (2002). The benefits of higher education, he states, have changed from benefiting individuals directly and society indirectly, to economic benefits where greater value is placed on whether or not higher education has an immediate and direct return on investment (p. 3). The public is seeking this immediate return on investments, thus the public focus on results and outcomes is what is driving greater systems of accountability in higher education. These systems of accountability must exist in order to establish credible evidence between institutional goals and outcomes. Are institutions of higher education providing the types of education and services they say they are offering to the public? What role, if any, should the federal government play in the accreditation of colleges and universities?
Furthermore, higher education has become more accessible through on-line degree granting institutions and accelerated evening and weekend educational programs directed toward non-traditional students and therefore, more competitive for recruiting students and hiring faculty. As Judith Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) explains, “…institutions are being asked to lift the veil…” and provide more information about their operations, resources, and finances (Eaton, 2004, p. 1). What sets many institutions apart from one another is the institutional mission and credibility within the higher education community. Yet, as Eaton points out, “The worth of higher education is determined less and less through the professional judgments made by the academic community” (Eaton, 2010, p. 2). An institutional accreditation process can help institutions achieve credibility through self-studies and peer reviews.

According to Eaton (2003) accreditation has four key roles to serve in the United States. These four roles are to (a) sustain and enhance higher education’s quality, (b) maintain the academic values of higher education, (c) serve as a buffer against politicizing of higher education, and (d) serve the public’s interest and need (p. 1). These four key roles confirm the responsibility institutions of higher education have to society and represent the strong connection between higher learning, outcomes, and accountability.

State or federal government bodies do not require institutional assessment; rather it is a voluntary and self-regulating process (Barker and Smith, 1998; Eaton, 2001; Thomas and Smith, 1998). Additionally, accreditation provides institutions with an
evaluation of educational quality, allows external review through consultants or peer institutions, and internal review through the institutional stakeholders (Barker and Smith, 1998). Quality of educational programs and services may be defined differently per institution. Baker (2002) argues that it is difficult to outline a set of universally accepted criteria for quality in education because there is lack of a universal definition or measurement for quality in higher education. Institutions pride themselves on the uniqueness of their academic programs and services.

Regardless, an institution can assess programs and services through an institutional self-study and external evaluations. As Eaton (2001) explains, institutional accreditation is based on the mission of an institution. The mission drives the institutional self-study. Institutions utilize a self-study to evaluate whether or not they are achieving their goals as determined by their mission.

There are several stakeholders affected by the process of institutional accreditation. Eaton (2001) mentions three primary constituents to whom accreditation must answer, (a) higher education community, (b) students and the public, and (c) government (p. 40). Higher education institutions have a responsibility to explain all processes involved in an institutional accreditation to the stakeholders. Each member of an institution’s community should have an opportunity to express desired goals and provide feedback on current institutional planning initiatives. This sharing of information can help an institution receive accurate and appropriate information from key campus constituents.
Higher education institutions are organizations of continual change and as such can utilize a system of assessment to create more consistent measures focused on accountability and credibility. The increase in on-line degree granting institutions and accelerated programs forces universities to pay extra attention to educational demands and reforms. These alternative arrangements for obtaining educational credentials create competition for traditional higher education institutions. Institutional accreditation can provide universities with the framework to be agile, involved, and focused on outcomes. Moreover, institutional accreditation offers a measurable approach to assessing continual quality improvement.

**Problem Statement**

Societal and economic demands on higher education are increasing. Higher education institutions are pressured by internal and external stakeholders to continually assess institutional goals, processes, and outcomes while striving to maintain standards and objectives set forth by their mission statements and strategic plans. An institution’s vision and ability to strategically plan depend greatly on accountability measures and outcomes. Higher education institutions can use accountability measures to assess their performance and assist with evaluating academic program and student learning outcomes. Higher education’s ability to plan and adapt to change will depend on how well institutions can continuously improve to meet internal and external performance measures. Standards of performance are recommended by both the federal government and regional accrediting bodies. Regional accreditation agencies have existed in the United States for decades with few attempts to analyze best practices for assessment.
The Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) provides processes for institutions to continually assess, measure, and improve their objectives and outcomes throughout their infrastructure. A literature analysis exposed only one study, completed in 2007 that sought to determine the level of satisfaction of higher education administrators at AQIP institutions. Additionally, the study sought to better understand the administrators’ experience with AQIP and their expectations of AQIP’s effect on future institutional performance (Spangehl, et. al., 2007). This study focused solely on AQIP institutions without a comparative analysis of the NCA’s PEAQ institutions. AQIP has been in existence since 1999 and has yet to undergo a formal comparative review of its processes with those of PEAQ.

A study about college and university administrators’ perceptions of AQIP is necessary because studying how administrators perceive AQIP on their campuses can help administrators, faculty, and staff at institutions of higher education better understand the nature of continuous quality improvement throughout their institutions. Furthermore, a study conducted at this time can assist the AQIP institutions with assessing the AQIP processes and procedures as compared with the PEAQ processes and procedures for best institutional practices. Finally, this study can provide feedback to assist the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) with reviewing AQIP’s processes, documents, and accreditation quality standards for best practice.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to compare higher education administrators’ perceptions of the accreditation process differentiated by administrators at AQIP and PEAQ institutions to determine if there are significant differences between their perceptions of the processes. Furthermore, based on the perceptions of higher education administrators within the NCA this study seeks to determine if either type of accreditation processes is more effective at involving stakeholders with institutional decision-making, utilizing data to focus on outcomes, and enabling administrators to plan better strategically.

Research Questions

1. Are there differences in the perceptions of the accreditation process between those higher education administrators using AQIP and those using PEAQ?
2. Are there differences in the level of expectations of assessment and data driven decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ as perceived by higher education administrators?
3. Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of involvement of internal stakeholders in shared decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ?
4. Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of influence accreditation type has on the quality of institutional operations and programs?
5. Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions between the AQIP standards of accreditation and PEAQ standards when it comes to ability to plan better strategically?

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms, as defined by the researcher, are used throughout the study.

Accreditation – a process of external quality review used by higher education to assess an institution’s processes, objectives, infrastructures, resources, and outcomes to ensure continuous quality improvement and demonstrate accountability

Assessment- an internal examination of current processes, objectives, infrastructures, resources, and outcomes to determine institutional effectiveness and improvements

Perceptions- higher education administrators’ observations and interpretations about the effectiveness of the accreditation process
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accreditation in the United States

Unlike many other educational systems in foreign countries, the postsecondary educational institutions in the United States do not have a Federal Ministry of Education or other type of centralized body that has sole authoritative control over the creation or management of higher education institutions (U.S. Department of Education website, 2011). The United States accreditation process is not managed by one central organization or by the federal government, but rather overseen by private, nonprofit organizations and occurs in 50 states and 97 countries (Eaton, 2009). Although, United States accreditation is voluntary and not government operated, the process over time has become conjunctive with federal and state government funds and thus mandatory for many postsecondary institutions in the United States seeking to provide state and federal financial assistance to students. Because of this significant responsibility and impact on educational affordability and overall accountability of institutional resources and programs, some type of agency needed to exist to oversee the coordination and practice of accreditation in the United States. Thus, for more than fifty years a nongovernmental coordinating agency for accreditation has existed in the United States (U.S. Department of Education website, 2011).

In 1974 the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) was created by the merging of the National Commission on Accreditation, founded in 1949, and the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education. The COPA was
formed to “…foster and facilitate the role of accrediting agencies in promoting and ensuring the quality and diversity of American postsecondary education” (U.S. Department of Education website, 2011). This agency’s Committee on Recognition coordinated and reviewed existing or proposed accrediting agencies until 1993.

In 1994 the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) was established. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s website, the purpose of this organization was to fulfill the role of the quickly dissolving COPA organization. It was the intent of the CORPA to serve until a new national organization could be constructed to carry out the mission and goals of national accreditation oversight. This new organization was created in April 1997 and was named the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). CHEA is the current nongovernmental entity that oversees accrediting bodies in the United States (U.S. Department of Education website, 2011).

Furthermore, CHEA and the United States Department of Education (USDE) have the responsibility to review the quality and effectiveness of United States accrediting organizations. More specifically, CHEA’s standards for recognizing an institution are that the institution should work to:

1. Advance academic quality
2. Demonstrate accountability
3. Encourage, where appropriate, self-scrutiny and planning for change and needed improvement
4. Employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision making
5. Demonstrate ongoing review of accreditation practice

6. Possess sufficient resources (CHEA, Profile of Accreditation, CHEA website, October 2008).

According to Eaton (2011) in *An Overview of U.S. Accreditation*, “Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities, and programs assure quality to students and the public” (p. 1). Accreditation works to assure and improve the quality of academic programs and assessment initiatives in higher education through processes of self-study, peer review, and site visits all conducted over varying cycles of time. All of these processes involve internal and external assessments and seek to provide some measure of accountability to the public.

Additionally, Eaton states that the roles of accreditation within the United States are to 1.) assure quality; 2.) provide access to federal and state funds; 3.) provide private sector confidence; and 4.) ease the transfer credit process (2009, p. 3). Accreditation in the United States is more than a century old and according to Eaton (2009), has remained sustainable due to a set of core academic values and beliefs. These academic values and beliefs stem from an institution’s mission, autonomy, and leadership. As Eaton (2009) discusses, higher education and society both “…thrive on decentralization and diversity of institutional purpose and mission” whereby higher education institutions are the authority on all matters academic (p. 81).

While a sustainable set of values has existed over time, accrediting bodies in the United States have faced many challenges and crossroads that have forced continuous
assessment of accreditation processes and overall purpose. Alstete (2007) lists increased accountability and competition, shifting demographics, stressed financial resources, and changing technology as some of the major challenges accrediting bodies are forced to manage. Additionally, over the course of the last several years the federal government has increased its demands of accountability on institutions of higher education.

In 2005, the United States Department of Education’s Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, chartered a commission to study and analyze current goals in higher education to better assess the future of higher education and how best to prepare graduates (Dept. of Education website, n.d.). Spellings’ stance was that colleges and universities needed to provide more measureable data so the public could make better comparisons between institutions (Lederman, 2008).

Moreover, a review of the American higher education system led the Spellings Commission in 2006 to call for more transparency with student data, specifically comparable, comprehensive student data across institutions as well as higher measures of accountability from the American accreditation bodies (Spellings Commission, 2006). Additionally, commission members claimed there was a lack of reliable ways to document and assess student learning, thus calling on institutions of higher education to communicate more clearly their goals and outcomes to the public. The Commission stated that many policy and public decisions about higher education were based on inputs rather than outputs. The Commission stressed a greater need for American accrediting bodies to focus on making learning outcomes data and accreditation reviews more accessible (Spellings Commission, 2006).
According to Robert C. Dickeson (n.d.), a higher education consultant to the Spellings Commission, accreditation in the United States serves two major purposes: institutional purposes and public purposes (p. 2). Dickeson (n.d.) contends that institutional purpose has always overruled public purpose and that the current United States system of accreditation is not meeting the public’s critical need for information. Dickeson calls for a reform of the current accreditation system and strategies through the formation of a new organization, The National Accreditation Foundation. This foundation would serve to eliminate transparency and open up dialogue between institutions and the public about accreditation results, improving accountability and quality standards (Dickeson, p. 7).

Additionally, as Jeffrey Alstete (2004) states in *Accreditation matters: Achieving academic recognition and renewal*, effective leadership plays a key role in institutions being able to “engage in the process of developing accreditation strategies, putting the vision into reality, and continually reminding the internal and external participants of what has been achieved and what the future can hold” (p. 97). Thus, it would appear that the responsibility of engagement with internal and external participants about the accreditation process would fall largely on college and university presidents. It is their role as institutional leader to engage all institutional constituents, including faculty, students, the general public and even members of their board of trustees. In addition, presidents must continually reinforce the institutional mission and vision as it relates to institutional accreditation standards.
Moreover, the accreditation process and preparation for site visits can seem like a very onerous task. College and university presidents carry the burden of overseeing the totality of the accreditation review and responding to accreditation reviewers. However, as Robert Oden (2009), former President of two private liberal arts colleges describes in referring to his experiences with the accreditation process, it is how the higher education leaders (e.g. college presidents) frame the process that will dictate its true opportunities and benefits (p. 45). Oden (2009) views the accreditation process as an opportunity for members of the institution to learn more about an institution, forcing tough questions to be answered, while allowing for an atmosphere of cooperation and critical review of all parts of the institution (p. 38).

The need for effective leadership in the accreditation process was confirmed at a joint meeting in the summer of 2008 between the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) and CHEA. As leaders in the commitment to quality in higher education, governing boards sought a more active and engaged role in the accreditation process. Therefore, these two organizations created a joint advisory statement with suggestions about how governing boards could serve a more participatory role in the accreditation process (CHEA website, 2009).

Furthermore, the United States Department of Education (USDE) recognizes the need for federal policy to ensure accreditation standards are being met by national, regional, and specialized organizations. The USDE publishes a Review of Standards for accrediting organizations to follow to ensure accountability and integrity in the accrediting process (USDE website, 2011). Moreover, the USDE established the
Accrediting Agency Evaluation Unit to perform the following roles in regards to U.S. accreditation:

1. Conduct a continuous review of standards, policies, procedures, and issues in the area of the Department of Education's interests and responsibilities relative to accreditation;

2. Administer the process whereby accrediting agencies and State approval agencies secure initial and renewed recognition by the Secretary of Education;

3. Serving as the Department's liaison with accrediting agencies and State approval agencies;

4. Providing consultative services to institutions, associations, state agencies, other federal agencies, and Congress regarding accreditation;

5. Interpreting and disseminating policy relative to accreditation issues in the case of all appropriate programs administered by the Department of Education;

6. Conducting and stimulating appropriate research; and

7. Providing support for the Secretary's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity. (U.S. Department of Education website, 2011).

Additionally, due to the many types of accreditors in the U.S., CHEA and the USDE must maintain great oversight over the quality and standards relative to each type. There are four types of U.S. accrediting organizations:

1. Regional accreditors. Accredit public and private, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting, two- and four-year institutions.

2. National faith-related accreditors. Accredit religiously affiliated and
3. *National career-related accreditors.* Accredit mainly for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, both degree and non-degree.

4. *Programmatic accreditors.* Accredit specific programs, professions and freestanding schools, e.g., law, medicine, engineering and health professions (Eaton, 2009).

Within the four types of accrediting organizations there exist approximately 80 that accredit institutions or programs, six of which are regional accrediting bodies (Eaton, 2009; Kretovics 2009).

Toward the end of the 1800’s postsecondary institutions began participating in what Alstete (2004) called the first generation of academic accreditation in the United States. This movement to accredit colleges and universities stemmed from what Eaton named as the first role of accreditation, to assure quality. More and more types of colleges and universities began to emerge and were being more heavily scrutinized about having some measure of accountability over quality of curriculum and overall institutional policies and procedures in higher education.

Since its inception, United States accreditation has grown into a complex system that, as Schray (n.d.) states, “…is designed to assure quality in higher education and be the gatekeeper for access to federal and state funding” (p. 2).

**History of Regional Accreditation in the United States**

The system of accreditation began more than a century ago in the late 1800s with similar goals as today, quality assurance and public accountability (Ewell, 2008). At that
time, there were several types of institutions providing varying types of curricula. The U.S. system of accreditation was in many ways co-evolving with the system of U.S. higher education (Ewell, 2008). Aside from the traditional liberal arts colleges and some newer universities emerging with a more strict German approach to research, there were also normal schools, junior colleges, professional schools, trade-based schools, and faith based schools (Burris and Leef, 2002; Ewell 2008). The groups that formed the first regional accrediting bodies agreed that some type of non-governmental oversight needed to exist to help define what a college was, both to the academy and to the public (Burris and Leef, 2002).

The first regional accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) was founded in 1885 as a response to a public call for stronger collegiate standards within institutions of postsecondary education. Soon thereafter came the creation of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) in 1887, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in 1895, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC) in 1917, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in 1962 (Alstete, 2007; Ewell, 2008).

Professional and other types of programmatic accrediting associations were also developing during the end of the 19th century. As Ewell (2008) states, professionals in the fields of medicine, law, and engineering wanted an avenue through which they could engage in varying means of professional development, but they were not yet intent on recognition or quality reviews, unlike the founders of the regional accrediting bodies.
This creation of standards for specialized programs began with the formation of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1847 (Alstete, 2007). As Alstete (2007) points out, this development of standards within the medical field demonstrated how feasible and effective this type of monitoring could be within the larger scope of U.S. higher education (pp. 12-13).

Institutional accreditation has existed since the early 1900s (Spangehl, 2004; Barker and Smith, 1998). In 1909, the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (NCA) created the early standards used to accredit colleges and universities (Barker and Smith, 1998; Alstete, 2007). Thousands of higher education institutions since then have practiced some form of institutional quality review through a process of accreditation. According the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), more than 7,000 institutions and more than 19,000 programs in the United States are accredited by more than 100 organizations acknowledged by the United States Department of Education or by CHEA (CHEA website, n.d.). Additionally, U.S. regional accrediting bodies accredit over a hundred institutions outside the United States (Alstete, 2007).

In the United States there are six regional accrediting bodies responsible for accrediting the thousands of various institutions of higher education: the Middle States Association of College and Schools Commission on Higher Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on
Colleges, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Eaton, 2001, p. 40). These accrediting bodies provide standards of quality assessment for public, private, four-year, two-year, research universities, and technical higher education institutions in the United States.

While both regional and programmatic accreditation seek to assess quality, regional accreditation seeks to assess not just the quality of any specific program or educational field, but the quality of all facets of an institution based on how that institution defines itself through its mission and vision statements. As Lubinescu, Ratcliff, and Gaffney (2001) state, regional accreditation affords institutions opportunities for dialogue with regional accrediting bodies to improve human and financial resources, academic programs and services and measures of accountability.

These same opportunities for dialogue continue today. In 2010, Sylvia Manning, President of The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association testified in front of the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor and espoused these same initiatives. Dr. Manning stated, “Regional accreditation assesses the quality of a college or university to ensure that its academic offerings are appropriate and rigorous, that its practices have integrity, and that its business operations are robust. It looks at the entirety of the institution….” She continues her statement, “Accreditation is an act of judgment based upon articulated standards or criteria that expressly allow for, even require, judgment.” It is this judgment, she contends, that allows accreditation adaptability in an ever changing environment (HLC website, n.d.).
While accreditation in many ways is an act of judgment, its fundamental purpose is to assure quality. As Dr. Manning (HLC website, n.d.) points out, “…quality is not immutable and it does not stand still.” Standards, regardless of programmatic changes or lack of resources, must remain intact. This is especially true for those institutions that receive Title IV funds and are held accountable not only for quality of programs, but also held financially accountable. These institutions, while not governed by the federal government are regulated by the federal government. This connection forces an even greater level of accountability for institutions of higher education (HLC website, n.d.).

Furthermore, it was the 1952 Higher Education Act that established a federal link to systems of higher education through the accreditation process. The Act created stronger measures for accountability and quality assurance by requiring any postsecondary institution receiving federal student aid to be regionally accredited (Leef & Burris, 2002). In addition, the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 provided a larger pool of federal funds to institutions for student financial assistance, thus creating an even greater need for oversight by the federal government (Ewell, 2009, p. 11). This monetary link between postsecondary institutions and the federal government led to greater interest by the federal government in educational outcomes and academic program accountability. As Ewell, 2009 states, “One simple reason for the growing federal role in higher education quality assurance is money” (p. 11). As the federal government strengthened its connection to higher education through the disbursement of student financial aid, other avenues for oversight were created. Judith Eaton (2011) explains in *Federalizing Accreditation: A Quandary For Higher Education*, how the federal
government has some legal or regulatory oversight with regard to defining the credit hour at institutions of higher education, requiring institutions to have a policy on criteria for transferable credits, requiring institutions track student identity in distance learning programs, and requiring institutions to monitor enrollment growth (Eaton, 2011, p. 1). Each of these areas contribute to the public’s demand for more transparent measurable student learning outcomes.

Higher education faced increasing criticisms during the 1990s when the cost of education rose and student learning became a stronger priority to the federal government (Dill and Massy, 1996). The question for institutions of higher education was whether the accreditation process could provide the assurance and accountability students, parents, taxpayers, and the federal government demanded. During this time, regional accrediting bodies in the United States were reviewing alternative forms of accreditation (e.g. TQM and other value criteria and quality criteria models).

Additionally, many of the regional accrediting bodies have embarked upon reviews, surveys, or other initiatives to assess and promote educational quality at the postsecondary level. In 1996, the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges (MSASC) issued the Framework for Outcomes Assessment aimed at reviewing student outcomes to assess quality of teaching and learning. In 1998-1999 the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) surveyed higher education chief executive officers to assess whether current standards for accreditation were effective for their institutions. Furthermore, in 1999 the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) through the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) launched a new program, the
Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), aimed at creating a campus culture of systematic and continuous improvement (Lubinescu et al., 2001). This alternative program of accreditation focuses on quality improvement principles and processes aimed at creating more systematic goal setting and utilizing peer reviews and data to assess outcomes (HLC website, 2007).

Accountability

Assessment

Colleges and universities have always focused on fostering student learning, creating institutional goals, and evaluating the quality of education. However, in the mid 1980’s the higher education community as well as the public sought more focused means of assessing learning and defining a quality education (Palomba and Banta, 1999). In 1988, William Bennett, U.S. Secretary of Education, proposed regional accrediting bodies incorporate criteria for institutional student learning outcomes assessment into their accrediting criteria (Lubinescu, Ratcliff, Gaffney, 2001, p.14). According to Lubinescu, et.al. (2001) in the next few years that followed Bennett’s proposal, accrediting bodies began to issue …“new guidelines for accreditation that included student outcomes assessment.” (p. 14). Furthermore, more focused educational assessment initiatives have increased within the past several decades.

Additionally, the higher education community recognized the need to be credible not only to internal, but also external stakeholders. In addition to being credible, colleges and universities were being held accountable for their use of resources and expected educational results. Measurable outcomes were important not only for program and
curriculum reviews, but also for strategic planning and the allocation of institutional resources.

Furthermore, higher education administrators recognized that assessment is defined differently depending on the type of academic programs, student body, and institutional goals. However, most agreed the focus of assessment is student learning and development (Palomba and Banta, 1999). Ewell (2005) states that the most common definition of assessment in national higher education discourse is “a program of locally designed and operated evaluation research intended to determine the effects of a college or university on its students, centered on learning outcomes, and engaged in principally for the purpose of improving teaching and learning” (p. 105). Wehlburg (2006) expands upon this definition by arguing that institutional assessment is not solely for the purpose of accountability, but rather, “…to discover how well students are reaching the goals of the institution and to modify the methods for attaining these goals when students fall short” (p. 155). However the discussions on student learning often focus on teaching and institutional resource accountability. Wergin (2005) contends that faculty credentials and institutional resources were not enough to guarantee quality student learning. Additional measures needed to be taken to ensure higher education was addressing societal concerns regarding the quality of a higher education. Critical reflection and evaluation about institutional learning goals needed to occur.

As assessment measures grew on campuses, they became more purposeful and aligned with institutional missions and goals. Campus-wide assessment measures also became more congruent with institutional accreditation processes. This allowed greater
involvement by faculty and staff with the institution’s self-study and overall collection of data and review of assessment measures. While the higher education community was increasing its involvement in the assessment and accreditation processes, Wergin (2005) argues that critics of accreditation claimed the peer review process was a way to keep the public from scrutinizing the academy. Conducting internal assessments on academic programs and curriculum was not enough to satisfy students’, taxpayers’, and the federal government’s need for accountability.

Like other authors writing on the topic of assessment, Palomba and Banta (1999) offer an additional definition of assessment focusing on student learning, “Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (p. 4).

Moreover, these authors describe six assessment essentials that should be incorporated into any institution’s assessment initiative:

1. agree on goals and objectives for learning
2. design and implement a thoughtful approach to assessment planning
3. involve individuals from on and off campus
4. select or design and implement data collection approaches
5. examine, share, and act on assessment findings
6. regularly reexamine the assessment process (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 4).

Each of these offers ways in which higher education administrators can continuously plan in a collaborative effort toward quality improvements for student learning and development.
Total Quality Management

The phrase, total quality management (TQM), is a management practice that originated decades ago overseas in the business sector. TQM focuses on processes that continually improve quality. Specifically, as Parker and Slaughter (1994) explain, management-driven TQM programs “tend to emphasize elimination of ‘variation’, prefer easily quantifiable outcomes, decrease employee control over working conditions and increase management control, and imply that employee needs are illegitimate and even antithetical to the institution’s overall goals.” (p. 1). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the concern over the quality and cost of U.S. education has led many in the education sector to begin discussions about the principles of TQM and whether these quality-related initiatives are applicable to education (Karathanos, 1999, p. 1). As Karathanos (1999) explains, educational institutions over the years, have been implementing fragmented quality initiatives, but nothing that has permeated throughout all institutional processes or programs.

However, there is a continuing debate over whether or not higher education should implement business quality practices into the managing of higher education institutions. There are critics on both sides of this debate. The disagreement generally lies with how one side defines educational outcomes and customers. Scrabec (2000) claims that the inability of educational institutions to define the term ‘customer’ is a main reason TQM efforts fail on campuses. Scrabec continues to argue that the customer-driven model, TQM, as used by business, does not fit with education (2000). Instead, he recommends a total quality education (TQE) model where the components such as
student satisfaction, teaching audits, and program assessment are incorporated into the total quality efforts (Scrabec, 2000, p. 298). In the TQE model proposed by Scrabec, students are not customers but recipients and society, industry, and parents are the beneficiaries—the ones actually benefiting from a quality education (2000). Thus, Scrabec explains, “the driving force for a total quality education model is meeting the specifications of those who benefit (beneficiaries), while focusing on the recipient.” (2000, p. 2).

Parker and Slaughter (1994) further discuss the debate over whether the TQM model fits higher education institutions. They point out that all fields are different, each with its own characteristics, problems, and debates (p. 5). Thus, the definition of the term customer means something different depending on the context and type of organization. Furthermore, Parker and Slaughter argue TQM programs do not focus enough on results, prefer quantifiable data, often ignoring important qualitative discoveries, and reduce employees’ control over processes (1994). Focusing on process rather than results is central to the TQM method. Furthermore, improvement is based upon looking at inputs and breaking down the process in a controlled manner (Parker and Slaughter, 1994, p. 8).

Edler (2003) claims that business values are replacing educational values and that the quality improvement methods (e.g. TQM, ISO, Baldrige Award, CQI, and Six Sigma) are defining what quality should mean in higher education (p. 1). Edler argues against the implementation of TQM philosophies into higher education institutions because he asserts they weaken the teaching-learning process (2003, p. 2). Moreover, Edler argues
that the HLC’s endorsement of AQIP is another step toward adopting TQM philosophies and incorporating business-like measures and definitions of quality (2003).

Yet, many CEOs of large corporations (i.e. American Express Company, Ford Motor Company, IBM Corporation, Motorola, Procter & Gamble Company, and Xerox Corporation) have argued that higher education has a responsibility to learn, teach, and practice total quality management (Robinson, Poling, Akers, Galvin, Artzt, and Allaire, 1991). These business leaders argue for business and higher education to work together in order to remain competitive in a global society. Moreover, they urge institutions to reevaluate their business curricula and ensure that faculty are teaching an appropriate amount of quality-related course content (Robinson, et al., 1991). These corporate leaders are responding to industries’, employers’, and taxpayers’ increasing calls for stronger accountability measures in education and to greater global technological and economic demands.

TQM values people: employees and customers, quality: of products and of services, and outputs: results. However, the underlying attraction of TQM to institutions of higher education lies with the emphasis on processes and control over processes. Many higher education critics of TQM view this type of management as control over decision-making and people, but according to Sherr and Lozier (n.d.), TQM is really about statistical control and discovering a way to develop more stable and predictable processes.

Bamford (n.d.) suggests that organizations interested in implementing a TQM approach need to understand which concepts and techniques of TQM will fit with the
organization and ultimately will work, taking into consideration the employees and type of organization.

Furthermore, Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) believe that any quality effort, TQM included, must be permeated throughout the entire institution in order for it to be successful. They offer six phases an institution can use to instill quality into the mindset of its stakeholders: (a) start-up/understanding the vision, (b) awareness and education, (c) selecting performance targets, (d) reinforcing implementation, (e) liberating employees, and (f) measuring and monitoring ongoing performance (p. 506). These phases only touch on some of the efforts needed for an institution to understand and implement a quality movement. An institutional self-assessment and discussions about shared decision-making and institutional culture need to be addressed before any type of continuous quality improvement model can be implemented.

**The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award**

Organizations have different means by which they assess processes and programs. Karathanos (1999) asserts that the most common means to assess educational programs is through accreditation. Yet, he states most assessment processes rely primarily on inputs (i.e., entering student test scores), and are not performed often enough. Assessment in this manner, Karathanos states, is not effective at promoting quality and continuous improvement (pp. 232-233). Thus, in order to improve quality there is a need for greater focus on results.

One national system framework for the total quality movement is the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. President Ronald Reagan signed the Malcolm
Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act into law on August 20, 1987. The Baldrige Act is named after Malcolm Baldrige, Secretary of Commerce for the United States Department of Commerce from 1981-1987 (“National Institute”, n.d.). The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) was created to encourage quality within the business sector and is given annually by the President of the United States to a U.S. company, education, or health care organization that demonstrates excellence and quality achievement (Hersey, et al., 1996; “National Institute”, n.d.). The ability for education and health care organizations to receive the Baldrige Award became possible in 1999. Moreover, in October 2004, President George W. Bush signed legislation that allowed non-profit and government organizations to be eligible to receive the Baldrige Award (“National Institute”, n.d.). According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the applicants for the award are judged on seven areas: (a) leadership; (b) strategic planning; (c) customer and market focus; (d) measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; (e) human resource focus; (f) process management; and (g) results. The Department of Commerce and the American Society administer the Award for Quality Control (Parker and Slaughter, 1994).

Over the years, many states and educational organizations have created quality improvement programs modeled after the Baldrige standards (HLC website, 2011; The Alliance for Performance Excellence, 2011). However, Dill and Massy (1996) assert that in addition to state and educational models, the United States needs to examine mechanisms of assessment developed by foreign educational systems to assure quality in higher education (p. 16). Specifically, these authors suggest that institutions of higher
education in the U.S. should focus on quality assessments of teaching and learning to
gauge internal performance and academic audits to promote external accountability (p.
8). Moreover, they discuss the three approaches to quality assurance used by the
International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE):
(a) accreditation, (b) assessment, and (c) academic audit (Dill and Massy, 1996). The
HLC is a member of the INQAAHE and does conduct institutional assessments followed
up by formal accreditation decisions ("International Network", n.d.).

Moreover, in the mid-1990s, the Baldrige business criteria were adapted to fit the
needs of K-12 education in the United States. In 1998, the Baldrige Office created the
1998 Education Criteria for Performance Excellence consisting of eleven core values
and concepts to represent the educational criteria for school improvement and
effectiveness:

1. Learning-centered education
2. Leadership
3. Continuous improvement and organization learning
4. Valuing faculty and staff
5. Internal and external partnership development
6. Design quality educational offerings and prevent impediments in the learning
   process
7. Management by fact-utilizing information, data, analysis
8. Long-range view of the future
9. Public responsibility and citizenship
10. Fast response-to the customer

11. Results orientation (Karathanos, 1999, p. 235)

Institutions of higher education worked with K-12 schools and districts to create the education criteria. Higher education was beginning to experiment with alternative accreditation processes. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools began examining the Baldrige criteria, seeking alternative processes for accreditation that embraced the continuous quality initiative (Karathanos, 1999). More specifically, the Higher Learning Commission of the NCA created an alternative type of accreditation, the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) drawing largely on the Baldrige model of quality processes and focusing on systems to continually review quality initiatives (Wolff, 2005, p. 92).

Recently, the HLC began working with the Alliance for Performance Excellence to … “offer AQIP institutions a means for better aligning their work for accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) with their other quality efforts” (HLC website, 2011). The HLC created a pilot program, the AQIP Systems Appraisal-Baldrige Option, to better serve experienced AQIP institutions by allowing them to use … “a state or national Baldrige-type award application and review to replace portions of a traditional AQIP Systems Portfolio Appraisal” (HLC website, 2011). This allowed greater flexibility and less redundancy for institutions following both models. This option provides a way for AQIP institutions to better align their Systems Portfolio with their Baldrige application (HLC website, 2011). This option, currently in a pilot status,
demonstrates the HLC’s continuous efforts to assist institutions with quality improvement efforts.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), Higher Learning Commission (HLC): AQIP and PEAQ

Currently, the NCA accredits colleges, universities, and other institutions in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, the Navajo Nation, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (“Higher Learning”, n.d.).

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) within the NCA began accrediting colleges and universities in 1913 (HLC website, 2007) and currently provides two types of accreditation programs by which an institution within the NCA can participate: the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) and the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ). The majority of institutions in the NCA follow the PEAQ accreditation process and review schedule. PEAQ accreditation has been the standard for NCA institutions for years and is thus considered the traditional type of accreditation, while AQIP, an alternative type focusing on continuous quality improvement, has been in existence for only ten years.

Creation of AQIP. According to Wolff (2005) the 1990s were a challenging time for accrediting bodies as they faced more questions from policymakers, members of the public, and the academic community about their effectiveness to accredit institutions of higher education (p. 86). In response to this growing concern over the ability for accrediting bodies to be effective the Pew Charitable Trusts began funding major grants
to some of the U.S. regional accrediting bodies (i.e., the Senior College Commission of WASC and the Higher Learning Commission of the NCA) (Wolff, 2005, p. 90).

During this time, the HLC was experiencing increased enthusiasm from member institutions for continuous improvement initiatives and was allowing some institutions to use state quality award applications, like Baldrige, as self-study experiments (Spangehl, 2004, p. 181). In 1999, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) received a three-year, $1.5 million grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to create this alternative accrediting system based on continuous quality improvement: AQIP. AQIP was not created to … “substitute a set of output indices for the input requirements”… but instead was modeled after … “Baldrige’s approach of delineating organizational subsystems’ groups of processes that strive for related goals, and asking institutions to identify their own performance measure within each of these subsystems.” (Spangehl, 2004, p. 180).

In 2000, the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) began enlisting institutions. According to Stephen Spangehl, Vice President for Accreditation Relations and former Director of AQIP, many of the institutions that joined AQIP early on were already instituting some form of quality approach to assessment on their campuses (2004). The first institutions to join AQIP viewed this process as a more cost-effective and systematic method of ensuring institutional improvements on a continual basis.

However, after institutions began applying to join AQIP, an AQIP Advisory Council, AQIP staff, the American Society for Quality (ASQ), and the Continuous
Quality Improvement Network (CQIN) continued to create and refine the core components utilized by AQIP. The ASQ, created in 1946, is a global network of experts and authorities on quality. Since 1991, the ASQ has been the administrator of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Program Excellence Award (ASQ website, 2011). Additionally, the CQIN was created in 1991 with members from higher education institutions, corporations associated with higher education, and non-profit organizations all working to support continuous quality initiatives (CQIN website, 2012). Both of these organizations contributed too much of the early dialogue with AQIP’s Advisory Council regarding the creation of AQIP’s core components (Rozumalski, 2002).

The final products of the AQIP Advisory Council, ASQ, and CQIN became the Participation Request and AQIP Application Process, the Strategy Forum, the Annual Update, and the Systems Portfolio and Appraisal. Yet, the groups still needed to determine institutional self-study processes that institutions needed to compare their processes with the AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance (Rozumalski, 2002).

A university’s mission, strategic goals, self-study, and action projects direct the accreditation process (Rozumalski, 2002; Spangehl, 2004). Thus, the importance of determining the institutional self-study process is paramount for an institution’s ongoing quality initiatives. Moreover, institutions need to conduct a quality-based self-assessment before enrolling in AQIP to understand past performance measures to ensure successful future planning. Universities operate under different fiscal timelines as well as under
different core characteristics of quality. Moreover, higher education institutions are accustomed to accepting internal determinants of quality (Baker, 2002). AQIP allows institutions to create a learning-centered environment through internal and external processes of review that create a system of quality improvement.

Furthermore, unlike PEAQ, AQIP requires institutions to incorporate continuous review of institutional programs and services through Action Projects and Strategy Forums. These processes allow institutions to focus their improvement efforts on specific goals and to receive critical feedback from peers.

**AQIP and PEAQ: Similarities and differences.** There are many similarities as well as differences between the two types of accreditation within the NCA. The AQIP and PEAQ accreditation types evaluate institutions for reaccreditation based on the same five Criteria for Accreditation: (1) mission and integrity, (2) preparing for the future, (3) student learning and effective teaching, (4) acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge, and (5) engagement and service. These criteria require institutional operations and vision to be consistent with the mission (HLC website, 2011).

Furthermore, each of the five Criteria for Accreditation has three elements: (1) Criterion Statement—necessary attributes of an institution accredited by the Commission (2) Core Components—how an institution will support the criterion statement and (3) Examples of Evidence—illustrate the types of evidence an institution might present in addressing a Core Component. The HLC keeps the criterion general so each institution can focus on its own particular purposes and initiatives (HLC website, 2011).
While the criteria for reaffirming an institution’s accreditation are the same within the PEAQ and AQIP programs, it is the processes, cycles, and overall scope and structure of these two types of accreditation that differ. It is these differences that define how higher education institutions and administrators collect and utilize data for purposes of accountability and goal setting.

Institutions using either type of accreditation are required to follow specific evaluation processes to determine reaccreditation status.

According to the HLC, AQIP utilizes a four-step evaluation process that focuses on continuous review and quality improvement.

1. The institution during a seven year period engages in all AQIP processes, including Strategy Forums, Annual Updates, Systems Portfolio Appraisals, and a Quality Checkup Visit, culminating in reaffirmation of accreditation.

2. An AQIP Review Panel examines the collective history of the organization’s interaction with AQIP and the Commission (i.e., reports of the various processes and activities, organizational indicators, current Systems Portfolio) to determine whether this evidence demonstrates compliance with the Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation. The Panel may seek and obtain additional information before making its recommendation.

3. A decision-making body takes action on the Panel’s recommendation regarding both reaffirmation of accreditation and continuing AQIP participation.
4. In certain circumstances, the Board of Trustees takes the final action (HLC website 2011).

Alternatively, the PEAQ program utilizes a five-step evaluation that focuses on an institutional self-study process and evaluation by a team of peer reviewers. According to the HLC, the PEAQ program utilizes a five-step evaluation process.

1. The institution engages in a self-study process for approximately two years and prepares a report of its findings in accordance with Commission expectations.
2. The Commission sends an evaluation team of Consultant-Evaluators to conduct a comprehensive visit for continued accreditation and to write a report containing the team’s recommendations.
3. The documents relating to the comprehensive visit are reviewed by a Readers Panel or, in some situations, a Review Committee.
4. A decision-making body takes action on the Readers Panel’s recommendation.
5. In certain circumstances, the Board of Trustees takes the final action (HLC website, 2011).

In addition to the differing steps to evaluate an institution for reaccreditation, as stated above, AQIP and PEAQ also differ in regards to overall processes and cycles for reaffirming an institution’s accreditation. According to the HLC, “Collectively, AQIP’s procedures encompass the same ends as traditional PEAQ self-study processes and team visits. However, there is no easy one-to-one equivalence between AQIP’s array of procedures and PEAQ’s self-study and on-site evaluation.” (HLC website, 2011).
Furthermore, AQIP’s Reaffirmation of Accreditation involves a review of a much broader array of evidence that the institution has collected over a longer period of time (HLC website, 2011). In order to better understand the scope of differences between AQIP and PEAQ types of accreditation, an in depth review of AQIP’s accreditation cycle is discussed.

**AQIP’s cycle.** The assessment cycle of AQIP is different from the NCA’s PEAQ accreditation cycle because AQIP’s primary goal is continuous quality improvement. AQIP designed processes for institutions to continually monitor and remain flexible with institutional change, such as requiring institutions to submit Annual Updates, which outline an institution’s progress, challenges, or discoveries made on each of the institution’s Action Projects. AQIP is an assessment process that reviews an institution’s past measures of operation and accountability in order to allow an institution to create a more focused objective self-evaluation and review of overall institutional quality.

In order for an institution within the HLC to participate in AQIP, it must have undergone two formal comprehensive accreditation reviews and have a conversation with Stephen Spangehl, Vice President for Accreditation Relations and former Director of AQIP, to discuss all aspects of the AQIP process. The purpose of the conversation is to ensure that AQIP will meet the needs and fit the assessment culture of a particular institution. Institutions can then complete the HLC’s AQIP application. Once an institution has been approved by the HLC to participate in AQIP, the institution will participate in AQIP’s three distinct cycles (see Appendix F). These three cycles occur
simultaneously, and according to the HLC, “each cycle has a different duration and sequence of distinctive processes.” (HLC website, 2007). The three cycles are differentiated as Action, a one year cycle involving the ongoing creation of Action Projects; Strategy, a four year cycle involving the creation of the Systems Portfolio, a Systems Appraisal, and participation in a Strategy Forum; and Accreditation, a seven-year cycle resulting in a Quality Checkup and decision on Reaffirmation of Accreditation for the institution (HLC website, 2007).

AQIP’s cycle of reaccreditation includes the following components:

*Application to participate in AQIP*

*Strategy Forums*

Strategy Forums are designed to bring together teams of employees from varying institutions to support, facilitate, and provide feedback on each institution’s Action Projects. AQIP has two types of Strategy Forums each held twice a year, Strategies for Action (for new institutions) and Creating the Climate for Continuous Learning (for experienced AQIP institutions) (HLC website, 2011).

*Action Projects*

Action projects are specific projects an institution develops that will drive its mission toward total quality improvement (“Academic Quality”, n.d.). An institution must always have at least three action projects underway with each action project focused on quality improvement. The goal of the action projects is to allow the institution to work on
a few pressing institutional issues while engaging faculty and staff as well as accumulating resources and data for the larger Systems Portfolio (HLC website, 2011).

**Annual Updates**

The Annual Update is a report detailing an institution’s progress on each of its Action Projects. These are posted electronically to the HLC’s Action Project Directory for reviews by the HLC. The Annual Update should include progress made on each Action Project, any challenges encountered by the institution while creating the Action Projects, and any successes or discoveries made by the institution (HLC website, 2011).

**Systems Portfolio**

The Systems Portfolio is an institutional overview containing specific information on each of AQIP’s nine Categories. The institutional overview should provide specific information about an institution’s strengths, ambitions, distinctions, and advantages, as well as the challenges, competition and conflicts it faces (HLC website, 2011).

**Systems Appraisal**

This AQIP component serves as the basis for institutions to determine future action projects. The Systems Appraisal asks institutions to understand their overall systems for maintaining quality. The Systems Appraisal is a process through which institutions receive professional feedback on their Systems Portfolio from a team of educators and others experienced with continuous quality systems. The Systems Appraisal Feedback Report includes three components: a Critical Characteristics Analysis, which shows the institution how the team understood its distinctive mission, context, and goals; Category
Feedback on each of the nine AQIP Categories, identifying what the team sees as the institution’s strengths and opportunities for improvement; and a Strategic and Accreditation Issues Analysis, in which the team identifies what it views as the highest strategic priorities for the institution’s future. In addition, the team will provide the institution with a potentially publishable Appraisal Summary that captures the team’s appraisal of the institution’s developmental maturity on each of the nine AQIP Categories. (HLC website, 2011).

Quality Checkup Visits

The Quality Checkup Visit is an onsite visit that encompasses the following components:

- Systems Portfolio clarification and verification
- Systems Appraisal follow-up
- Organizational quality commitment
- Accreditation issues follow-up
- Commission relationship review
- Federal compliance review-for institutions that must comply with Title IV requirements. These institutions will supply, among other documents required to prove responsibility under the Title IV, the visit evaluators with any financial or compliance audits or reviews. (HLC website, 2011).
Reaffirmation of Accreditation

AQIP institutions’ Reaffirmation of Accreditation occurs every seven years. HLC describes the Reaffirmation of Accreditation as the culmination of all the other AQIP components.

A four-year cycle begins after an institution’s formal application process is accepted and an institutional self-assessment is completed. Next, after an institution is accepted members of the institution must attend an external Strategy Forum where institutions within the NCA seeking to participate in AQIP have the opportunity to review each other’s Action Projects and collaborate on ideas to improve and implement future Action Projects. Three years after the external Strategy Forum, institutions are asked to respond to AQIP’s nine Categories through submission of a Systems Appraisal (“Academic Quality”, n.d.).

Additionally, every year an institution must complete an Annual Update & Systems Portfolio Maintenance. Furthermore, an institution must also complete a Strategy Forum & Systems Appraisal every fourth year and a Reaffirmation of Accreditation every seventh year (“Academic Quality,” n.d.).

AQIP’s principles of high performance institutions. The basis of the AQIP process rests on ten principles common to many higher education institutions practicing a systematic approach to continuous quality improvement. Each of the Principles of High Performance Institutions incorporates all stakeholders of an institution and represents the essential mission of quality driven management and improvement through accreditation
processes and activities. The Principles of High Performance Institutions are focus, involvement, leadership, learning, people, collaboration, agility, foresight, information, and integrity (See Appendix G).

AQIP is mission driven and outcomes based which is reflected upon within each of the Principles. These Principles represent key characteristics higher education in general strives to possess and maintain. Furthermore, AQIP’s Principles are permeated throughout the organization’s nine Categories for examining key processes.

AQIP’s Categories. AQIP outlines nine Categories institutions need to incorporate into their overall goal setting and institutional planning. These Categories serve as guidelines for AQIP institutions to assess processes, goals, and outcomes. AQIP institutions use these nine Categories to assist with data driven decision-making. Each of the Categories must be addressed in an institution’s Action Projects and Systems Portfolio.

The nine Categories were designed to assist AQIP with delivering its mission of total quality improvement to the higher education community. Institutions use the Categories to assist with developing Action Plans and overall measures of accountability across their campuses. Moreover, the Categories assist the HLC with shifting the approach of accreditation from general compliance issues to more in depth institutional concerns concentrated on learning, performance, and improvement (Spangehl, 2004). Each of the Categories deals with a group of related processes and allows institutions to analyze, understand, and examine
opportunities for improving the processes. AQIP is comprised of the following nine Categories:

1. Helping students learn
2. Accomplishing other distinctive objectives
3. Understanding students and other stakeholders
4. Valuing people
5. Leading and communicating
6. Supporting institutional operations
7. Measuring effectiveness
8. Planning continuous improvement
9. Building collaborative relationships (See Appendix H) (HLC website, 2011).

Each of these Categories reaffirms that AQIP is an institutional and not individual process. AQIP includes data and feedback from all university constituents. As Spangehl (2004) states, AQIP emphasizes how well institutions meet the long-term needs of students and stakeholders. Moreover, AQIP emphasizes performance and the overall improvement of the processes that affect an institution’s performance (p. 180).

While institutions of higher education typically operate under similar values and toward similar institutional goals, AQIP understands that not all institutions measure quality the same. Thus, AQIP encourages institutions to conduct peer reviews to maintain focus on the above Categories within their Action Plans (Spangehl, 2004). The
nine Categories help institutions focus on what is unique about their particular campus, to not only examine, but also use the data collected to make improvements.

**Criticism of AQIP.** Critics of the regional accreditation process discuss the lack of focus accreditation processes have on teaching and learning (Dill and Massy, 1996; Edler, 2003). Other authors discuss accrediting agencies’ lack of a clear definition of quality (Scrabec, 2000; Baker, 2002). Furthermore, while accrediting bodies were examining institutions’ infrastructures, resources, and processes there was not until recently a call for institutions to document intended outcomes as a way to determine effectiveness in achieving goals (Baker, 2002, p. 4).

Edler (2003) claims that AQIP weakens the teaching-learning process, sets up an expectation of possible quid pro quo by possibly offering re-accreditation for an institution to provide data on the cost of accreditation, and does not practice shared governance. Additionally, Edler states that AQIP’s nine quality criteria have little focus on the teaching-learning process and offer no means for shared governance in decision-making between faculty, staff, and administrators (2003).

However, AQIP’s basis for the nine Categories is a continual review of institutional processes. The nine Categories require institutions to analyze and explore solutions to various processes across all facets of the institution. It is through the ongoing and multiple Action Projects and thus the Systems Portfolios that institutions can collectively work to collect data and provide evidence of satisfying each of the nine Categories (HLC website, 2011). AQIP’s focused processes allow institutions great
flexibility and creativity while ensuring federal compliance and public accountability. Furthermore, the HLC’s Criteria for Accreditation require AQIP and PEAQ institutions to provide evidence of Core Components that allow institutions to focus on specific data as it relates to the Criteria for Accreditation statements while remaining independent in mission and vision (HLC website, 2011). As stated on the HLC website, the Criteria for Accreditation… “are intentionally general so that accreditation decisions focus on the particulars of each institution, rather than on trying to make it fit a pre-established mold. The widely different purposes and scopes of colleges and universities demand criteria that are broad enough to encompass diversity and support innovation, but clear enough to ensure acceptable quality.” (HLC website, 2011).

Recently, the HLC has expanded upon its quality improvement accreditation model with the creation of the Pathways model for continued accreditation. Three cohorts of institutions are currently participating in Pathways which began in 2009.

**The Future of the HLC: Pathways**

Most recently, the HLC has proposed a newer model of accreditation, Pathways, that will “…enhance value, sustain rigor and diminish burden” (HLC website, 2010, p. 1). The Pathways model is broken down into the Open Pathway and the Standard Pathway models. According to HLC’s President, Sylvia Manning, the Open Pathway model for continued accreditation “…proposes to separate the continued accreditation process as currently carried out through PEAQ into two components: the Assurance Process and the Improvement Process” (HLC website, 2010, p. 3). The Pathways model
is largely in response to criticisms that regional accreditation is not rigorous or transparent enough (Lederman, 2009). As Manning states, the Pathway model’s “…most distinctive feature is that it would clearly separate “compliance” from “improvement” (Lederman, 2009, p.1). The compliance piece would come from more frequent reviews of institutions’ portfolios of data and materials while as the same time allowing institutions greater flexibility in selecting which institutional projects they would like to focus on for the improvement part of the accreditation process and review (Lederman, 2009). The HLC Pathways Construction Project: A Proposed New Model for Continued Accreditation offers more detailed information on the goals and implementation of the Pathways model and can be found on the HLC website.

Summary

Debate by the Spellings Commission on overall accreditation standards and processes ignited an increase in the dialogue on student learning outcomes. Lederman’s commentary, Margaret Spellings, Where Are You?, offers institutional perspective on the availability and usability of student learning outcomes (2008). As the Spellings Commission and other members of the federal government insist colleges and universities are not providing results on student learning, institutions of higher education are continually presenting examples of how data is used and measured across academic programs (Lederman, 2008). In his piece, Lederman describes one administrator’s angst with state and national governments’ demands for accountability. He writes about the frustrations of Stephane E. Booth, Associate Provost for Academic Quality and
Improvement at Kent State University. Booth stresses the need for institutions to be able to mesh together external demands for accountability of performance while maintaining effective practices and internal educational goals (Lederman, 2008).

This need to interconnect issues of federal compliance for Title IV institutions with quality improvement initiatives is front and center with the HLC. As Sylvia Manning states, “We want to make accreditation so valuable to institutions that they would do it without Title IV” (Lederman, 2009).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter III reviews the research design, discusses the sampling characteristics and procedures, the web-based survey instrument used to collect the data for this study including validity and reliability of the instrument, a brief overview about web-based surveys, data collection procedures, the data analyzed, and limitations and assumptions of the study.

This study investigated higher education administrators’ perceptions of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), as compared to the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ). College Presidents, Chancellors, and Chief Executive Officers from 190 AQIP and 190 PEAQ institutions within the NCA were surveyed to determine their perceptions about the type of accreditation standards followed by their institutions. A web-based survey was designed to assist with measuring the participants’ perceptions of the NCA’s two types of accreditation, AQIP and PEAQ, and to determine differences with the two types as they pertain to the overall accreditation processes, assessment and data driven decision-making, internal stakeholder involvement, quality of institutional operations and programs, and strategic planning.

Research Design

This study uses a comparative research design. The independent variable in this study is type of accreditation within the NCA. The independent variable, type of
accreditation, has two levels: AQIP and PEAQ. The dependent variable is higher education administrators’ perceptions of the type of accreditation on their campuses as measured by a web-based survey. The total number of accredited AQIP institutions (as of August 28, 2008) were selected to use in this study (N = 190). Of the AQIP institutions that were selected, 152 were public and 38 were private NFP institutions. Of the institutions selected for the study, 61 were four year, 55 were two year technical or other type of two year institution other than community colleges, and 74 were community colleges (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Breakdown of Surveyed AQIP Institutions by Institutional Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public College or University</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private College or University</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 year</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 year</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, due to the large population of PEAQ institutions that exists within NCA, a stratified random sample of 190 institutions was selected from the total population of PEAQ accredited institutions following the NCA standards. The PEAQ sample included 150 public and 40 private NFP institutions. Of those institutions, 73 were 4 year, 50 were
two year technical or other type of two year institution other than community colleges, and 67 were community colleges (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Breakdown of Surveyed PEAQ Institutions by Institutional Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public College or University</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private College or University</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 year</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 year</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample Characteristics**

Participants in the study included Presidents, Chancellors, or CEOs (hereafter all referred to as Presidents), Directors of Institutional Research, Accreditation Liaisons, or some other Director or Dean position. The participants represented technical, community, other two-year and four-year colleges and universities with varying enrollments from fewer than 1,000 students to more than 25,000 students. Additionally, participants represented single and multi-campus institutions as well as public and private NFP colleges and universities.
Sampling Procedure

The number of all AQIP and PEAQ accredited institutions, 190 and 819 respectively, as of August 28, 2008, was obtained from by Lil Nakutis, Information Management Coordinator at the HLC. A list of the 190 AQIP institutions was then obtained from the HLC’s website. Additionally, a list of all institutions currently accredited by the NCA and following the PEAQ process was obtained from the Higher Learning Commission’s website and a stratified random sample of 190 institutions was selected from all states whose institutions are accredited by the NCA.

The names, titles, and e-mail addresses were then obtained for each President at the 190 AQIP and 190 PEAQ institutions from their individual institutional websites. The survey link and letter of consent were e-mailed to the 380 college presidents. Each participant was then asked to either complete the web-survey or forward on the e-mail consent with the web-survey link to the individual at his or her campus who could best complete the survey. Thus, the responses were generated by individuals with varying titles and responsibilities.

Instrumentation

This study measured higher education administrators’ perceptions of the AQIP process as compared to the PEAQ accreditation processes through a web-based survey (see Appendix A). This survey was hosted by Washington State University through the Skylight Matrix on-line survey system. The survey consisted of 25 content questions and participants were asked to mark their responses according to the following Likert scale:
strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The survey also contained additional questions pertaining to demographic information.

**Reliability and Validity**

Threats to validity were controlled because the entire population of NFP AQIP institutions was surveyed and there was no pre-test or maturation. An extensive literature review was conducted on the AQIP accreditation type as well as on web-based survey research. The validity of the web-based survey instrument was determined through content and face validity. Furthermore, to ensure validity of the instrument Dr. Mark Kretovics, Dr. Martha Merrill, and Dr. Paul Gaston, all with extensive backgrounds and experience in the fields of accreditation and assessment, were consulted and provided feedback on the web survey design. In particular, Dr. Kretovics has extensive experience not only with assessment in higher education, but also with accreditation review and membership specifically with AQIP through the HLC. He has conducted AQIP site visits and served as an AQIP reviewer and university Systems Portfolio reviewer. Additionally, Dr. Gaston and Dr. Merrill also have extensive experience and backgrounds in U.S. and foreign accreditation. Finally, Dr. Stephen Spangehl, Vice President for Accreditation Relations and former Director of AQIP, at the Higher Learning Commission, was also a source of information for development of the survey. Furthermore, a factor analysis was run to analyze the survey’s construct validity.

The survey instrument’s reliability and internal consistency were measured by the Cronbach Alpha model. Instrument reliability is measured and expressed in the decimal range of .00 to 1.00, the reliability coefficient, with the higher the coefficient, the higher
the reliability of the instrument (Hittleman, & Simon, 2002). According to Nunnally & Bernstein (1994) survey reliability is deemed acceptable at a coefficient of .7 or higher. Overall, the *Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of NCACS Accreditation* survey reliability was reported to be acceptable for this population, $\alpha = .876$ (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Cronbach Alpha for Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of NCACS Accreditation survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>N of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach</td>
<td>.876</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items</td>
<td>.891</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Web-Based Survey Research**

Over the course of the last two decades, the increased number of computer and internet users has changed the way researchers can disseminate and collect information. Hoonakker & Carayon, (2009), describe how in the mid-1990s, the introduction of HTML created a very interactive internet environment (p. 349). The internet makes it possible to reach large numbers of participants. This increase in the number of participants who can be reached can improve the external validity of a study by being able to generalize results to larger groups of respondents (Eaton and Struthers, 2002). In addition to reaching large populations, web-based surveys have other advantages. They allow researchers to easily contact participants who are in distant locations or who may be otherwise difficult to contact through more traditional means such as telephone or mail
(Wright, 2005). Furthermore, Wright (2005) and Hoonakker & Carayon (2009) point out that the time and cost saved by conducting web-based surveys is a major convenience to researchers because data collection is automated and using electronic versus paper data collections saves costs associated with mailing surveys.

Along with the advantages to conducting web surveys there exist certain disadvantages. Coverage error, sampling error, nonresponse error, and measurement error are some of the disadvantages to conducting web-based surveys. However, as Hoonakker & Carayon (2009) point out, these errors also occur with paper or mail based surveys. Some more specific web-based survey disadvantages can include issues with computer security and computer illiteracy (Hoonakker & Carayon, 2009). Infrequency of computer usage by web-based survey participants as well as certain technical limitations may also be viewed as disadvantages to web-based surveys (Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, & Vehovar, 2006).

Furthermore, Manfreda, et.al. (2006) discuss reasons for differences in response rates between web-based surveys and other survey methods. These authors point out that low web-based survey response could be caused by participants’ concerns with security and privacy. Additionally, web-based surveys administered through e-mail may be more likely to be forgotten than those hard copy surveys that are mailed and remain more visible or they may end up as spam and result in deletion (Manfreda, et. al., 2006).

Surveys can vary depending on the type of study. Surveys can include questionnaires, inventories, checklists, and scales. Studies comprised of data from scales, like a web-based survey, result in discrete measurements whereby the data is quantified
using a Likert-type scale (Hittleman & Simon, 2002). According to Hoonakker & Carayon (2009) there are four methods for conducting online surveys:

1. Survey questionnaire embedded in an e-mail message.
2. Survey questionnaire attached as a text document (e.g., Microsoft Word document) to an e-mail message.
3. Survey questionnaire attached as a self-executing (.EXE) program to an e-mail message.
4. Web-based surveys are (physically) placed on the Web, primarily on a server. Participants are provided with a link to the Web site and are asked to fill out the survey and submit the data. The data are then stored on the server. (p. 350).

The most common types of web-based studies are those that are nonexperimental studies. Participants in these studies are generally asked to respond to a series of questions and indicate their agreement by clicking on responses (e.g. where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree). Information obtained in these types of studies is usually used to compare or examine relationships between the variables (Eaton and Struthers, 2002). Additionally, Eaton and Struthers point out that this type of data collection is able to provide more anonymity for participants and may improve response rates (2002).

**Data Collection Procedures**

AQIP and PEAQ NFP institutions were selected based on their accreditation type and status within the NCA. Once the institutions were identified, college presidents’ contact information was obtained from each institution’s website. In some instances, phone calls were made to certain institutions to collect presidential contact information.
Once all contact information was obtained, participants were e-mailed a consent to participate letter (see Appendix B) detailing the research to be conducted and listing the website containing the survey. Participants were notified through the consent to participate letter that their participation was voluntary and that their responses were confidential. The initial e-mail explaining the survey and asking for participation was sent on February 21, 2011. They were asked to complete the web-based survey within two and half weeks from receipt of their e-mail. After the first week and half, on March 3, 2011, a follow up e-mail was sent to participants as a reminder to complete the survey. At the end of the second week it was discovered that there was an error within the online survey instrument. The end date was erroneously set before the actual end date of the survey. Therefore, on March 8, 2011, an additional e-mail was sent to participants apologizing for the error, asking them to complete the survey, and giving a new extended deadline of another week and half. A final e-mail was sent on March 17, 2011 thanking the participants for their time and reminding them of the final deadline. The survey closed on March 19, 2011. The Skylight Matrix on-line survey system tracked the number of surveys received. The data were analyzed using SPSS.

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of this research was to determine higher education administrators’ perceptions about their institutions’ type of accreditation within the NCA. This study attempted to identify differences in perceptions of type of accreditation based on the following five areas: overall accreditation processes, assessment and decision-making, stakeholder involvement, quality of programs and operations, and strategic planning. The
web-based survey was designed by the researcher to determine if significant differences existed.

**Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

This study is based on the researcher’s hypothesis that administrators will perceive significant differences between the AQIP and PEAQ standards and processes based on the researcher’s five research questions. Therefore, in order to test this hypothesis a $t$-test was used to analyze the data. Furthermore, a confirmatory factor analysis was run to analyze the structure model of the survey. A confirmatory factor analysis is a statistical procedure based on a deductive approach to analyzing data. As Meyers, Gamst, and Guarino (2006) state,

> Within this strategy, the factors and variables that are held to represent them are postulated at the beginning of the procedure rather than emerging from the analysis. The statistical procedure is then performed to determine how well this hypothesized theoretical structure fits the empirical data. (p. 539)

Furthermore, confirmatory factor analysis allows a researcher to hypothesize a particular factor structure that he or she believes underlies the measured variables in the study (Meyers, et. al., 2006, p. 540). As Meyers et. al. (2006) explains, this analysis will then allow the researcher to see how the variables fit together as well as the quality of the fit (e.g., the structure coefficients) (p. 540).

Thus, a confirmatory factor analysis was run to analyze the researcher’s pre-identified factor model based on the following five factors: PROCESS, ASSESSMENT, INVOLVEMENT, PROGRAMS, and STRATEGIC PLAN. As previously stated, these
five factors were derived from the web-based survey’s 25 Likert scale content questions aimed at identifying differences in higher education administrators’ perceptions depending on whether their institution participated in AQIP or PEAQ. See Table 4 for the breakdown of reliability statistics for the above five factors.

Table 4

*Cronbach Alpha for Confirmatory Factorial Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Statement of Factor</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>N of items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROCESS</td>
<td>.537</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>.720</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INVOLVEMENT</td>
<td>.565</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRAMS</td>
<td>.423</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRATEGIC PLAN</td>
<td>.831</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, an independent samples *t*-test and descriptive statistics were run to examine each of the five factors.

Factor one, identified as PROCESS, related to research question one, *Are there differences in the perceptions of the accreditation process between those higher education administrators using AQIP and those using PEAQ?* This research question was correlated to the following five survey questions: 1, 8, 16, 20 and 21 (see Appendix A).

Factor two, identified as ASSESSMENT, related to research question two, *Are there differences in the level of expectations of assessment and data driven decision-
making between AQIP and PEAQ as perceived by higher education administrators? This research question was correlated to the following five survey questions: 5, 10, 12, 19, and 22 (see Appendix A).

Factor three, identified as INVOLVEMENT, related to research question three, *Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of involvement of internal stakeholders in shared decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ?* This research question was correlated to the following five survey questions: 3, 14, 15, 17, and 25 (see Appendix A).

Factor four, identified as PROGRAMS, related to research question four, *Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of influence accreditation type has on the quality of institutional operations and programs?* This research question was correlated to the following five survey questions: 4, 6, 7, 13, and 23 (see Appendix A).

Factor five, identified as STRATEGIC PLAN, related to research question five, *Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions between the AQIP standards of accreditation and PEAQ standards when it comes to ability to plan better strategically?* This research question was correlated to the following five survey questions: 2, 9, 11, 18, and 24 (see Appendix A).

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are discussed further in Chapter IV.
Limitations of the Study

Some threats to internal validity that may exist in this study could be due to higher education administrators’ attitudes regarding the time spent collecting and preparing documents associated with the accreditation processes on their particular campus. Administrators’ experience level in working with accreditation could be another threat to internal validity. Another threat to internal validity could be administrators’ skill level and ability to use computers and the internet since the survey was web-based.

Another limitation to this study could be that since AQIP has existed only since 1999 very few institutions within the NCA may know enough detailed and historical information about AQIP’s processes and criteria to make educated responses to the survey. In addition, institutions following AQIP were at different stages within the AQIP review processes. Thus, they could have limited answers to the web-based survey questions due to years of experience operating under AQIP standards.

Additionally, the decision not to administer a pilot test of the web-survey, Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of NCACS, could be seen as a limitation. However, it was decided not to administer a pilot test because the entire population of AQIP institutions (as of August 2008) was used in the research study. This was a small group of institutions and using data from any of the AQIP institutions in a pilot test would have resulted in removal of certain institutions from the larger research study.

Furthermore, the study is limited geographically to colleges and universities within the NCA region of the United States. Thus, generalizations about the results can
be made only about institutions within the NCA and within no other regional accrediting body.

**Summary**

This study uses a comparative research design consisting of five research questions analyzed through an independent samples $t$-test. Sample characteristics as well as sampling procedure were discussed. A web-based survey was administered to determine college and university administrators’ perceptions about type of accreditation: AQIP or PEAQ. Additionally, an independent samples $t$-test and descriptive statistics were run to examine each of the five factors. Finally, instrument reliability and content validity were discussed as well as limitations to the study.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter IV includes demographic information for both AQIP and PEAQ participants as well as reliability analysis. This study was a comparative research design, therefore, much of the examination of results and discussion focuses on differences based on higher education administrators’ perceptions of two types of accreditation offered through the NCA: AQIP and PEAQ. Differences in perception were examined through analysis of a t-test. This analysis was conducted to determine if differences existed between perceptions of types of accreditation based on the following five research questions:

1. Are there differences in the perceptions of the accreditation process between those higher education administrators using AQIP and those using PEAQ?
2. Are there differences in the level of expectations of assessment and data driven decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ as perceived by higher education administrators?
3. Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of involvement of internal stakeholders in shared decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ?
4. Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of influence accreditation type has on the quality of institutional operations and programs?
5. Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions between the AQIP standards of accreditation and PEAQ standards when it comes to ability to plan better strategically?

Finally, a synopsis of responses to the survey’s open ended question, *If an AQIP institution, any reservations about continuing with AQIP?* is discussed. The findings related to the five research questions are discussed below.

**Research Study**

**Demographics**

A letter of consent with a description of the research study was e-mailed to 190 Presidents at institutions following the AQIP type of accreditation and e-mailed to 190 Presidents at institutions following the PEAQ type of accreditation. (see Appendix B). A total of 380 Presidents were surveyed. According to the web-survey instrument’s on-line tracking system, there were 155 participants who viewed and began the survey. However, 98 surveys were deemed valid and useable. Therefore, the overall survey response rate was 26%. Of the 190 AQIP institutional Presidents surveyed, 59 administrators completed the survey, giving an overall AQIP institutional response rate of 31%. Additionally, 39 of the 190 PEAQ institutional administrators completed the survey, giving an overall PEAQ institutional response rate of 20%.

**Surveyed institutional type.** Survey respondents were asked to identify what type of accreditation process their institution follows with the NCA. Of the 98 responses, 59 (60%) identified their institution as following AQIP and 39 (40%) identified their
institution as following PEAQ. A breakdown of accreditation type is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

*Breakdown of Survey Respondents by Accreditation Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQIP</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEAQ</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, the survey asked respondents to identify which of the types of institution listed on the survey best represented their type of institution. Participants were asked to identify institutional type based on the following selections: public or private; 4 year, 2 year, technical college, community college, or research university; and whether the institution type was a single or multi-campus. The type of classification for the AQIP and PEAQ colleges and universities selected to survey was obtained from the Higher Learning Commission’s website.

The AQIP institutions selected to complete the survey consisted of 152 (80%) public and 38 (20%) private NFP institutions. Additionally, the listing of institutions was broken down by whether or not the institutions identified as a four year, two year (included technical and other career oriented types of institutions, except community colleges) or a community college through their institutional website. Of the 190
institutions selected, 61 (32%) identified as four year, 55 (29%) as two year, and 74 (39%) as community college institutions.

Refer to Table 1 in Chapter III for a breakdown of surveyed AQIP institutions by institutional type.

The PEAQ institutions were selected for the study by means of a stratified random sample and the resulting group included 150 (79%) public and 40 (21%) private NFP institutions. Additionally, of the PEAQ institutions selected for the study, there were 73 (38.4%) four year, 50 (26.3%) two year, and 67 (35.3%) community college institutions as identified through each institution’s website. Table 2 in Chapter III displays institutional type for surveyed PEAQ institutions.

**AQIP respondents’ institutional type.** Survey respondents were asked to identify their institutional type as part of the demographic data collected. In order for the researcher to better understand survey responses by institutional type it was decided to allow respondents to choose multiple institutional types to better capture each institution’s demographic identity. Thus, the response rate for the survey question, “*What type of institution do you best represent? Please check all that apply.*” is much higher than the actual number of participants surveyed. This explains the variance in the percentages in Tables 6 and 7 for both AQIP and PEAQ institutions.

Of the 190 accredited AQIP institutions that were asked to participate in the survey, responses were provided by 59 of them. This yielded a 31% response rate. Almost half of the AQIP respondents identified their institution as a public college or university. Public institutions made up 28 (47.5%) of the AQIP respondents’ institutions.
Private institutions made up 12 (20.3%) of the AQIP respondents’ institutions and 19 (32.2%) respondents did not mark public or private as an identifier of their institutional type. Additionally, of the 59 AQIP respondents, 17 (28.8%) respondents represented four year institutions, 34 (57.6%) represented two year, and 8 (13.6%) did not respond as to whether or not their institution was best identified as a four or two year college or university. Of the 34 respondents who identified two year college or university as an institutional type, 25 (74%) of the 34 institutions also choose community college as another type to best describe their institution. Furthermore, of the 59 AQIP respondents, only 5 (8%) choose just community college to identify their institutional type.

In addition to choosing whether or not institution type was best represented by public or private and four or two year, respondents were also able to break down their institutional type further by choosing whether they identified their institution as a community college, technical college, or research university. Of the 59 AQIP respondents, 28 (47.5%) identified their institution as a community college, 7 (12%) as a technical college, no one identified their institution as a research institution and 1 (1.6%) respondent choose the selection ‘other’ to best describe his or her institutional type.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to identify their institution type as a multi-campus or single-campus. Of the 59 AQIP respondents, 18 (31%) identified their college or university as an institution with multiple campuses while 13 (22%) identified as a single campus institution. There were 28 (47%) who did not respond to this question. The demographic breakdown by respondents’ institutional type for those accredited and following AQIP accreditation is available in Table 6.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public College or University</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private College or University</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 year</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 year</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical College</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research University</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Respondents were asked to identify what type of institution on the survey best represented their institutional type and to check all that apply. Thus, several respondents choose multiple responses making the overall response rate higher than the actual number of respondents.

**PEAQ respondents’ institutional type.** Of the 190 PEAQ institutional leaders that were contacted to participate in the survey, 39 responded to the survey questions. Survey questions 27 through 36 asked respondents to identify what type of institution best represented their institutional type and to choose all types that apply. Of the 39 PEAQ respondents, 15 (38.5%) identified their institution as a public college or university, 6 (15.4%) identified their institution as a private NFP, and 18 (46.1%) did not choose to identify their institution as either a public or private institution. Additionally, 35 PEAQ respondents choose to identify as a four or two year institution. Of the 35 that
did identify under this category, 12 (30.8%) choose to identify as a four year, 23 (59%) as a two year, while 4 (10.2%) respondents did not choose four or two year as an institutional type to identify their institution.

Additionally, 17 (44%) of the 39 PEAQ respondents also identified their institution as a community college, while only 1 (2.6%) described their campus as a technical college. None of the 39 PEAQ respondents described their institution as a research university and only 1 (2.6%) respondent described his or her institutional type as other. The demographic breakdown by respondents’ institutional type for those accredited and following PEAQ accreditation is available in Table 7.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakdown of PEAQ Respondent Institutions by Institutional Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public College or University</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private College or University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 year</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 year</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research University</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Respondents were asked to identify what type of institution on the survey best represented their institutional type and to check all that apply. Thus, several respondents choose multiple responses making the overall response rate higher than the actual number of respondents.
Institutional size. Furthermore, respondents were asked for additional demographic information about their institutional size for the researcher to better gauge the magnitude of an accreditation process on their campuses. Of the 59 AQIP respondents and the 39 PEAQ respondents, the majority of both groups’ institutions’ enrollments were within the 1,000 to 4,999 and the 5,000 to 9,999 size ranges. A small number of institutions within both groups of respondents had enrollments fewer than 1,000 or greater than 10,000. See Table 8 for the breakdown of AQIP and PEAQ respondents by enrollment.

Table 8

Breakdown of AQIP and PEAQ Respondents by Institutional Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQIP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer than 1,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 to 4,999</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000 to 9,999</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 to 14,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,000 to 25,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,001 +</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEAQ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer than 1,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 to 4,999</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000 to 9,999</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 to 14,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,000 to 25,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,001 +</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Institutional academic calendar. Respondents from AQIP and PEAQ institutions were also asked to identify what type of academic calendar system best represented the one in use at the respondent’s institution. Of the AQIP respondents, the overwhelming majority said their institutions followed the semester calendar system, 57 (96.6%), with only 2 (3.4%) of the institutions following a quarter calendar system and no institutions following a trimester calendar system.

The findings were similar to those from respondents from PEAQ institutions. The majority of PEAQ institutional calendar systems were also semester, 33 (84.6%) with only 3 (7.7%) following a quarter calendar system, 1 (2.6%) following a trimester calendar system and 2 (5.1%) respondents not describing their institutions’ calendar type. Table 9 provides the breakdown by academic calendar type for AQIP and PEAQ respondents.

Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, data from the web-based survey was analyzed through independent sample $t$-tests and descriptive statistics to assist the researcher in answering the five research questions. The data in Table 10 summarize the group means and standard deviations for the confirmatory factor analysis model’s five factors. Group means ranged in score from 8.39 to 11.1, indicating that the higher the mean score, the greater the level of importance administrators within the independent variables placed on questions within that factor. Additionally, Table 11 summarizes means and standard deviations for the 25 web-based survey questions as they relate to each of the five factors.
### Table 9

*Breakdown of AQIP and PEAQ respondents by academic calendar type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQIP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimester</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEAQ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarter</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimester</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, percentages for the 25 survey questions are broken down according to the Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree (see Table 12).

*Are there differences in the perceptions of the accreditation process between those higher education administrators using AQIP and those using PEAQ?*

To determine whether or not higher education administrators perceived any differences in overall processes, an independent sample *t*-test and descriptive statistics were calculated to determine if AQIP and PEAQ higher education administrators’ perceptions differed. The *t*-test failed to reveal a statistically significant difference
between the mean score of AQIP higher education administrators \((M = 10.19, s = 2.39)\) and PEAQ higher education administrators \((M = 11.10, s = 2.51)\) on perceptions of the overall accreditation processes, \(t(96) = -1.957, p = .053, \alpha = .05\).

Thus, when it comes to overall processes involved with obtaining and securing accreditation, administrators at PEAQ institutions rated questions associated with this factor higher than AQIP institutions \((M = 11.10\) and \(M = 10.19\), respectively). While these results are not statistically significant, they are significant when discussing quality initiatives and outcomes. AQIP is an alternative type of accreditation with processes that focus on continuous, systematic quality improvement as opposed to PEAQ’s more traditional processes. Yet, these findings seem to suggest that AQIP college and university administrators did not observe more meaningful differences in the overall processes to obtain accreditation than from their PEAQ counterparts.

This finding appears to support the notion that continuous initiatives on the part of institutions to examine and analyze performance and processes may have a significant impact in how administrators perceive the overall AQIP processes and steps as compared to PEAQ.

**Are there differences in the level of expectations of assessment and data driven decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ as perceived by higher education administrators?**

To determine if differences existed in assessment expectations and data driven decision-making, an independent sample \(t\)-test and descriptive statistics were calculated to determine if a difference in perception between AQIP and PEAQ higher education
administrators existed. The t-test failed to reveal a statistically significant difference between the mean score of AQIP administrators ($M = 9.44, s = 2.86$) and PEAQ administrators ($M = 10.38, s = 2.96$) on perceptions of the overall accreditation processes, $t(96) = -1.577, p = .118, \alpha = .05$.

Research question two displayed similar findings to research question one. PEAQ administrators placed a higher level of importance on expectations of assessment and how these expectations drive institutions to make decisions about data than AQIP administrators ($M = 10.38$ and $M = 9.44$, respectively). These results seem to support the notion that perhaps PEAQ institutions have a greater expectation for how data is used on their campuses to make decisions. Moreover, it appears there is a slight difference in how expectations of assessment and its impact on institutional decision-making exist between users of the two types of accreditation.

While no statistically significant results appeared in relation to this research question, AQIP’s nine Categories for improving academic quality suggest a higher level of campus constituent involvement with collecting, managing, analyzing, and using data for institutional assessment and decision-making processes. Specifically, Category 7, Measuring Effectiveness, “…examines how your organization collects, analyzes, distributes, and uses data, information, and knowledge to manage itself and to drive performance improvement.” (HLC website, 2011). This category requires AQIP institutions to continually measure how effective their institutions are at utilizing data.

Moreover, Category 7 encourages institutions to look holistically at systems and processes to ensure comprehensive data analysis as it pertains to overall institutional
performance (HLC website, 2011). This continual review of systems and processes in relation to data and outcomes is important because the types of assessment instruments and methods as well as assessment purpose can change over time.

As Trudy Banta (2011) discusses in a recent publication of the journal *Assessment UPdate: Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education*, the current focus on accountability may be impacting how academia uses and reports assessment data. Is there an expectation for campuses to focus their assessment initiatives on outcomes or on accountability measures? In her editor’s note, Banta (2011) encourages colleges and universities to use assessment as a way to guide improvements in higher education rather than as a mechanism to compare the “…relative quality of institutions…” (p. 8). Category 7 provides guidance for AQIP institutions in how to do just that - measure effectiveness of programs, operations, and resources, to name a few, to improve overall institutional performance.

*Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of involvement of internal stakeholders in shared decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ?*

To determine if higher education administrators’ perceptions of differences of the level of involvement internal stakeholders have in shared decision-making, an independent sample *t*-test and descriptive statistics were calculated to determine if AQIP and PEAQ administrators’ perceptions differed. The *t*-test failed to reveal a statistically significant difference between the mean score of AQIP administrators (*M* = 10.58, *s* = 2.55) and PEAQ administrators (*M* = 10.10, *s* = 2.31) on perceptions of the level of
involvement internal stakeholders have in shared decision-making, \( t(96) = .934, p = .353, \alpha = .05 \).

Thus, it appears when it comes to internal stakeholders’ level of involvement with decision-making as it relates to the accreditation process, there is a very slight difference between administrators’ perceptions at institutions following AQIP and those following PEAQ. Based on the mean scores, the level of involvement is only slightly greater at AQIP institutions \( (M = 10.58) \) than at PEAQ institutions \( (M = 10.10) \). These findings are surprising given the fact that the AQIP processes and involvement are more continuous and appear to utilize more constituents across campus than PEAQ processes.

These results, while not statistically significant, are meaningful and do support AQIP’s Categories for improvement. AQIP’s nine Categories for institutions to utilize in providing evidence to show continued improvement toward accreditation status include a category about understanding stakeholders’ needs, a category about valuing people, and a category about leading and communicating with stakeholders. These categories represent a strong commitment to include internal stakeholders in the decisions that help shape the overall direction of an institution.

AQIP’s Category 3: Understanding Students’ and other Stakeholders’ Needs, focuses on how institutions actively work toward understanding the needs of their students and stakeholders (HLC website, 2011). This category allows institutions to systematically think about the level of involvement of all stakeholders. Furthermore, Category 3 asks institutions to think about stakeholder satisfaction and relationship
building in regard to current processes, assessment of those processes, and ways to improve (HLC website, 2011).

In addition, Category 4: Valuing People, specifically focuses on internal stakeholders. This category asks institutions to examine faculty, staff, and administrator development (HLC website, 2011). While Category 4 focuses on the training and development of institutional employees, it also implies a high level of involvement in assessing and collecting feedback from employees, which is vital to fostering a culture of shared decision-making.

Finally, Category 5, Leading and Communicating, asks institutions to examine how leadership and communication networks guide their institutions in future planning, making decisions, and communicating decisions to stakeholders (HLC website, 2011). This category addresses the need for institutions to analyze how data is used in decision-making processes, what types of networks or teams are used to make decisions, as well as how communication occurs between stakeholders on campus (HLC website, 2011).

Each of these categories expounds upon AQIP’s focus on systematic and continual review of processes and performance results to ensure quality and utilize shared-decision making throughout an institution.

*Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of influence accreditation type has on the quality of institutional operations and programs?*

To determine if there were differences in higher education administrators’ perceptions about the quality of institutional operations and programs based on accreditation type, an independent sample *t*-test and descriptive statistics were calculated.
to determine if the perceptions of administrators at AQIP and PEAQ institutions differed. The \( t \)-test failed to reveal a statistically significant difference between the mean score of AQIP administrators (\( M = 10.44, s = 2.11 \)) and PEAQ administrators (\( M = 11.15, s = 2.80 \)) on the impact accreditation type has on quality of institutional operations and programs, \( t(96) = -1.434, p = .155, \alpha = .05 \). These findings seem to indicate that PEAQ administrators, more so than AQIP administrators, feel their accreditation type has some impact on the quality of their operations and programs (\( M = 11.15 \) and \( M = 10.44 \), respectively). The five survey questions related to this research question generated PEAQ respondents’ highest overall mean score.

Based on the findings for this research question, it seems that both AQIP and PEAQ administrators feel accreditation processes have an impact on the quality of their institutions’ operations and programs. Furthermore, AQIP’s Category 6, Supporting Institutional Operations defines for AQIP institutions processes that may better enable them to address ways to improve operations and programs on their campuses (HLC website, 2011). Category 6 encourages institutions to examine student support services as well as support services for faculty and staff. Moreover, Category 6 helps administrators better address issues with communication and management of these operations. As with the other categories, Category 6 also recommends that institutions take on a continuous, systematic approach in assessing operation and programmatic goals (HLC website, 2011).
**Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions between the AQIP standards of accreditation and PEAQ standards when it comes to ability to plan better strategically?**

To determine if higher education administrators perceive differences in ability to plan better strategically based on accreditation type an independent sample *t*-test and descriptive statistics were calculated to determine if AQIP and PEAQ administrators’ perceptions differed on ability to plan strategically. The *t*-test failed to reveal a statistically significant difference between the mean number of AQIP administrators (\(M = 8.39, s = 2.75\)) and PEAQ administrators (\(M = 9.33, s = 2.97\)) on ability to plan better strategically, \(t(96) = -1.611, p = .110, \alpha = .05\).

Questions related to this research question generated the lowest mean scores for both AQIP and PEAQ respondents (\(M = 8.39\) and \(M = 9.33\), respectively). The results of this analysis appear to indicate that AQIP processes do not enable AQIP institutions to plan better strategically than PEAQ institutions. Even though these results were not statistically significant, continuous planning is fundamental to the AQIP processes. Moreover, Category 8, Planning Continuous Improvement, “…examines your organization’s planning processes and how your strategies and action plans help you achieve your mission and vision” (HLC website, 2011). This category assists institutions with short and long term planning as well as with coordinating planning processes and defining objectives and measures.

In addition to the goals outlined in Category 8, AQIP assists institutions with planning through use of its Action Projects. These Action Projects allow institutions to
focus on goals while continually planning for the future. In 2002, the HLC created an Action Project Directory in an effort to promote transparency among institutions. This directory allows institutions to share goals and strategies within the AQIP community. In January 2010, the HLC revised its Action Project Directory design to allow more flexibility for institutions. The goal of the Directory is to ensure institutions are actively working on two or three improvements projects and thus are serious about maintaining reaccreditation status through AQIP (HLC website, 2011).

Table 10 provides the breakdown of the independent samples t-test analysis.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AQIP</th>
<th>PEAQ</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROCESS</td>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>-1.96</td>
<td>.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>9.44</td>
<td>10.38</td>
<td>-1.58</td>
<td>.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INVOLVEMENT</td>
<td>10.58</td>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>.934</td>
<td>.353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRAMS</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>11.15</td>
<td>-1.434</td>
<td>.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRATEGIC PLAN</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>-1.611</td>
<td>.110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AQIP Institutions’ Open Ended Responses

Higher education administrators were asked to respond to the question, *If an AQIP institution, any reservations about continuing with AQIP?* The purpose of this survey question was to better gauge satisfaction levels of those administrators whose institutions were following AQIP accreditation standards. Of the 59 AQIP respondents,
Table 11

*Web-Survey Questions’ Mean Scores by Factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AQIP $M$</th>
<th>AQIP $SD$</th>
<th>PEAQ $M$</th>
<th>PEAQ $SD$</th>
<th>COMBINED $M$</th>
<th>COMBINED $SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FACTOR PROCESS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.766</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.801</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.728</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>.647</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.695</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.987</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>.906</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>.930</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ASSESSMENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>.984</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.904</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q10</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.665</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>.926</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>.801</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.639</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>1.76</td>
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<td>.672</td>
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<td>.695</td>
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<td>.697</td>
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<td>.853</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>.806</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.859</td>
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48 (81.4%) responded as having no reservations about continuing with AQIP, while
11(18.6%) respondents did have some reservations. Of those respondents that did not
have any reservations about continuing with AQIP, several stated that the AQIP process
was more meaningful to their institutions’ operations. Additionally, several respondents
favored the continual focus on quality. To the above question on any reservations to
continuing, one respondent answered, “None at all. Very effective and assists with the
focus on quality and data informed decision making. We are building a culture focused
on data and evidence and that has been excellent for us in these tough economic times.”
Another respondent commented that AQIP “…allows us to identify our own strengths
and weaknesses; it encourages data-informed decision making; and it allows us to
identify our own areas most needing improvement.”

Alternatively, of those respondents who commented they did have concerns about
AQIP, two responded that AQIP processes take up too much time and one respondent
had concerns about whether AQIP would have “…continued support from the HLC and
acceptance by the Department of Ed and value by CHEA.”

Overall, the comments made by AQIP respondents were positive. Most
respondents favored the AQIP stance toward continuous quality improvement as well as
the ability to utilize collected data on a continual basis and in a meaningful way.

Summary

Chapter IV provided additional demographic information and analyzed the
findings of a t-test as well as open-ended survey responses. The findings, while not
statistically significant did reveal that overall PEAQ respondents’ group mean scores on
four of the five research questions posed were higher than the scores of AQIP
respondents. This seems to indicate a higher level of satisfaction with accreditation
processes among PEAQ respondents than among AQIP respondents based on
administrators’ perceptions. However, the majority of respondents to the web-based
survey seem satisfied with the type of accreditation used by their institution.
Additionally, the findings suggest both AQIP and PEAQ respondents are satisfied with
the overall processes involved with their type of accreditation.

Chapter V discusses observations, limitations to the research study, and
implications for future research.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides discussion about the research questions analyzed in Chapters III and IV. Additionally, limitations of the research study are presented. Finally, implications for the field of higher education and for future research on regional accreditation, specifically within the Higher Learning Commission are discussed.

Observations

This research study was conducted to determine if higher education administrators perceived significant differences in the effectiveness of the type of accreditation used by their institutions within the NCA. The results from this research study provided evidence that administrators at institutions within the NCA do perceive the overall regional accreditation process on their campus to be effective regardless of the type of accreditation used by their institution. Moreover, data analysis revealed that neither higher education administrators at institutions using AQIP nor those at institutions using PEAQ perceived the type of accreditation used to be more effective than the one not used in terms of overall accreditation processes, level of expectations of assessment and data driven decision making, level of involvement of internal stakeholders and shared decision making, level of influence accreditation type has on the quality of institutional operations and programs, and ability to plan better strategically. These results seem to indicate that neither AQIP nor PEAQ has an advantage for institutions when it comes to overall management, accountability, or improvement of programs and resources.
AQIP promotes a non-traditional practice of reaccreditation by focusing on quality management principles through a systematic approach to thinking about processes and how data is used. This alternative approach to evaluating institutions for reaccreditation differs from the more traditional PEAQ process by offering institutions an ongoing approach to reviewing and analyzing their processes and performance results as well as a greater emphasis on outcomes (HLC website, 2011). Therefore, the researcher expected to find that higher education administrators would perceive AQIP processes to be more effective at supporting overall institutional planning, how decisions were made, impact on programs and resources and involvement of internal stakeholders. Furthermore, it was expected that administrators would perceive AQIP as a more focused and involved approach to regional accreditation than PEAQ.

**Perceptions of the Overall Accreditation Process Between AQIP and PEAQ.**

Research Question One, *Are there differences in the perceptions of the accreditation process between those higher education administrators using AQIP and those using PEAQ?* sought to help the researcher better understand how administrators viewed the overall processes and procedures associated with each type of accreditation. Over the course of the last several years regional accrediting bodies have been under strict scrutiny of their standards and processes for reaccreditation. As a response to this, the PEW Charitable Trusts provided funds to a few organizations to explore alternative reform efforts to closely examine accreditation practices (Wolff, 2005). The HLC was one organization that received such funds and as a result created the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). The goal of AQIP was to assist institutions with shifting
the focus solely from inputs and processes to also include learning outcomes (Wolff, 2005, p. 91). This new way of thinking and new focus on assessment efforts and the results of institutional processes and systems contribute to the idea that institutions following the AQIP approach would find this type of accreditation to be more beneficial to their overall institutional operations and programs.

However, based on survey responses, the researcher discovered there were no significant differences in administrators’ perceptions of how the overall accreditation process on their campus impacts institutional operations or functions, regardless of accreditation type. This finding suggests that overall, administrators have a high level of satisfaction with the type of accreditation utilized by their institution. This is confirmed by responses to the survey question, My institution’s accreditation process adequately meets the needs of my institution. Of all respondents, 43% selected “strongly agree” as their response with another 44% of respondents selecting “agree.” Moreover, only 4% of all respondents selected “disagree” to this question. Thus, the overwhelming majority of AQIP and PEAQ respondents believe their type of accreditation is meeting the needs of their respective institution (see Table 12).

Additionally, 88% of respondents believed their accreditation process met the objectives of their institutional mission (see Table 12). These findings indicate that accreditation processes overall within the NCA are meeting the majority of the needs of institutional administrators and that perhaps the shift in focus from inputs to outputs is taking root within both AQIP and PEAQ institutions.
Level of Expectations of Assessment and Data Driven Decision-Making

Research Question Two, *Are there differences in the level of expectations of assessment and data driven decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ as perceived by higher education administrators?* was aimed at helping the researcher better understanding how assessment is used on campuses as well as how data impacts decision-making. No statistically significant results were found for research Question Two, although it is important to note that 89% of respondents believe their type of accreditation allowed their institution to focus on student learning outcomes. Furthermore, 69% of respondents believe their type of accreditation provided them with the tools to measure quality effectively (see Table 12). This finding suggests that both AQIP and PEAQ institutions place great value on quality assessment and outcomes. The current pressure from the federal government and other external stakeholders could be an indicator of the need for institutions to put a greater focus on learning outcomes. The current dialogue and commentaries on regional accreditation and student learning outcomes data suggest a greater need for accountability by accrediting bodies to satisfy the intense inquest from the federal government. As Judith Eaton states, “Primarily driven by the quest for greater accountability, the government has focused on “federalizing” accreditation…” (Eaton, 2011, p. 1). Eaton (2011) defines federalizing as the “growth of requirements in federal law that accreditors must meet as condition of being recognized by the federal government, especially in the academic area.” (p. 1). This effort to put more regulatory standards on accrediting bodies increases the need for
institutions of higher education to provide more information about student learning outcomes.

This focus on the federalizing of accreditation was the topic in a recent commentary by Robert Zemsky, Professor of Education and Chairman of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania and former committee member of the Spellings Commission. Professor Zemsky offers an interesting insight into what he calls the Commission’s, and more specifically, Commission Chairman, Charles Miller’s, Plan B. It is this Plan B, the federalization of the accreditation process that Zemsky hints was always part of the Commission’s agenda (Zemsky, 2011). As Zemsky explains, the Commission did not succeed at requiring “metrics for measuring educational quality”…but instead established… “a standard for determining how much graduates needed to earn to say their educations yielded ‘gainful employment’, and defining the credit hour” (Zemsky, 2011, p. 3). It is this federal rule-making that has recently led the HLC to create The Higher Learning Commission’s Federal Compliance Program: A Guide for Institutions and Evaluation Teams, effective January 2012. (HLC website, 2012).

This document is intended to ensure that member institutions receiving Title IV funds are meeting required federal expectations as well as expectations of their accrediting body (HLC website, 2012). While the results of this research study suggest member institutions of the NCA are focusing on student learning outcomes, it is clear through the report issued by the Spellings Commission and the dialogue that followed within the government and educational arenas that as long as the federal government has
a financial link to higher education, more measurable outcomes of student learning will be required.

**Level of Involvement of Internal Stakeholders in Shared Decision-Making**

Research Question Three, *Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of involvement of internal stakeholders in shared decision-making between AQIP and PEAQ?* sought to help the researcher better understand how institutions involved faculty, staff, and administrators in institutional decision-making. AQIP espouses certain principles and values through its processes and activities that assist institutions of higher education with achieving a systematic approach to continuous quality improvement (HLC website, 2011, AQIP Principles of High Performance Institutions, p. 1). Additionally, AQIP supports involvement and collaboration through its *Principles of High Performance Institutions* (see Appendix G). The principles are as follows:

1. Focus
2. Involvement
3. Leadership
4. Learning
5. People
6. Collaboration
7. Agility
8. Foresight
9. Information
10. Integrity (HLC website, 2011).

These principles serve as the foundation to AQIP’s elements, activities, and procedures; thus it was assumed that the responses to Question Three would reveal more significant results from AQIP respondents on internal stakeholder involvement and shared decision-making than from PEAQ respondents. AQIP’s principle of Involvement focuses on assisting faculty, staff, and administrators with creating a culture of involvement across institutional activities, services, and planning. Additionally, the principle of Collaboration refers to a shared institutional focus (HLC website, 2011).

AQIP offers a more inclusive environment of internal stakeholder involvement and shared decision-making than does PEAQ through its use of Action Projects and Systems Portfolios. These processes demand participation and commitment from faculty, staff, and administrators. The Systems Portfolio in particular, requires a broad and holistic review of all institutional systems whereby internal stakeholder participation and input are crucial. Faculty have firsthand experience with program and course planning and assessment, which can assist the institution with collecting student learning outcomes. Additionally, administrators and staff can provide crucial financial and human resource data to assist with future budgetary and other fiscal decision-making. These principles of involvement and collaboration serve a critical role throughout AQIP’s processes.

PEAQ offers opportunities for involvement and collaboration through its Self-Study process with the Self-Study team serving as a representative of the entire campus community, collecting data over the course of a two-year period. However, as
Wolff, (2005) points out, too often institutions neglect to follow up on the data and evidence of performance they have collected for their ten year review. Alternatively, AQIP’s Action Projects strive to educate and motivate internal stakeholders by allowing ongoing involvement in institutional goal setting with opportunities for frequent follow up on performance indicators (HLC website, 2011). Since these action projects are ongoing initiatives, multiple individuals representing diverse institutional goals can participate. Thus, involvement across institutional programs and departments is paramount.

However, what was discovered through the survey responses was that 89% of administrators at both AQIP and PEAQ institutions believe their accreditation process involved shared decision-making between faculty, staff, and administrators. Additionally, 81% of respondents believe their accreditation process effectively generates communication and decision making between faculty, staff, and administrators (see Table 12). This finding further supports administrators’ perceptions that both AQIP and PEAQ provide methods by which internal stakeholders can effectively participate and share in the accreditation processes and decision-making on their campuses.

**Level of Influence Accreditation Type has on the Quality of Institutional Operations and Programs**

Research Question Four, *Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions as to the level of influence accreditation type has on the quality of institutional operations and programs?* was generated to help the researcher better understand whether or not the type of accreditation had an impact on the quality of institutional operations and
programs. One of the goals of AQIP is to assist institutions with analyzing their systems and processes in an effort to improve performance. This systematic approach to assessment strives to promote a culture of continuous quality improvement (HLC website, 2011). In order for institutions of higher education to improve their operations and programs, systematic evaluations need to exist. Furthermore, data obtained from these evaluations needs to be incorporated into institutional benchmarks for operational and programmatic improvements and initiatives.

While no statistically significant results existed for Question Four, several survey responses indicated that administrators believe their type of accreditation had a positive impact on the quality of their institutional operations and programs. When respondents were asked whether or not the accreditation process their institution follows contributes to continuous improvement within their infrastructure, programs, resources, and outcomes, 87% selected “strongly agree” or “agree” as their response. Additionally, almost 90% of all respondents believe their institutions’ accreditation process focuses on the quality of teaching and learning (see Table 12). This observation is important because it demonstrates a strong commitment by administrators to quality initiatives within the accreditation process, regardless of type of accreditation.

**Ability to Plan Better Strategically**

An institution’s ability to plan strategically is crucial to institutional success and longevity. Institutional planning initiatives are the foundation of AQIP’s core processes as well as of PEAQ’s self-study process. The ability to plan for an institution’s future and to adapt to change is crucial when creating a culture of learning and sustainability.
An institution’s ability to plan is especially important in a time when federal oversight and public accountability are steadily increasing. Research Question Five focused specifically on administrators’ perceptions about the accreditation type’s impact on strategic planning.

While research Question Five, *Are there differences in administrators’ perceptions between the AQIP standards of accreditation and PEAQ standards when it comes to ability to plan better strategically?* did not yield statistically significant results, 93% of all respondents believe their institution’s accreditation process benefited their institution’s ability to strategically plan. Moreover, 92% of respondents believe the outcomes from their accreditation reviews were incorporated into the planning for the next institutional reaccreditation review (see Table 12). This is an important observation because it supports the idea that continuous planning is occurring at campuses within the NCA, regardless of the type of accreditation used by institutions. Furthermore, it suggests that institutions following AQIP and PEAQ processes are utilizing the information and data obtained through their action projects and self-studies, respectively, to assess current practices and work toward operational and programmatic improvement.
Table 12

*Web-Survey Questions Broken Down by Percentages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Missing</th>
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<tr>
<td>Q1 My institution’s accreditation process adequately meets the needs of my institution.</td>
<td>43 (43.88%)</td>
<td>44 (44.90%)</td>
<td>6 (6.12%)</td>
<td>4 (4.08%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (1.02%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2 My institution’s accreditation process benefits the institution’s ability to strategically plan.</td>
<td>42 (42.86%)</td>
<td>49 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (2.04%)</td>
<td>5 (5.10%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q3 My institution’s accreditation Process involves shared decision-making between faculty, staff, and administration.</td>
<td>44 (44.90%)</td>
<td>45 (45.92%)</td>
<td>7 (7.14%)</td>
<td>2 (2.04%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 My institution’s accreditation process is cost effective to operate.</td>
<td>14 (14.28%)</td>
<td>49 (50%)</td>
<td>22 (22.45%)</td>
<td>13 (13.26%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q5 My institution spends enough time preparing documentation and collecting data for our accreditation reviewers.</td>
<td>5 (35.71%)</td>
<td>45 (45.92%)</td>
<td>9 (9.18%)</td>
<td>9 (9.18%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6 The number of contacts my institution has with our accreditation reviewers is sufficient.</td>
<td>24 (24.49%)</td>
<td>56 (57.14%)</td>
<td>9 (9.18%)</td>
<td>7 (7.14%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7 The time required to complete the accreditation documents and collect the data is appropriate.</td>
<td>17 (17.35%)</td>
<td>58 (59.18%)</td>
<td>13 (13.26%)</td>
<td>9 (9.18%)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8 The type of accreditation process used by my institution meets the needs of my institution.</td>
<td>42 (42.86%)</td>
<td>45 (45.92%)</td>
<td>5 (5.10%)</td>
<td>5 (5.10%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (1.02%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9 The outcomes from each accreditation review are incorporated into the planning for the next review.</td>
<td>50 (51.02%)</td>
<td>40 (40.82%)</td>
<td>7 (7.14%)</td>
<td>1 (1.02%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10 My institution spends an adequate amount of time reviewing the feedback and results of our accreditation review.</td>
<td>35 (35.71%)</td>
<td>53 (54.08%)</td>
<td>8 (8.16%)</td>
<td>2 (2.04%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Q11 My institution’s accreditation process meets the objectives of the institution’s mission.</td>
<td>42 (42.86%)</td>
<td>46 (46.94%)</td>
<td>8 (8.16%)</td>
<td>2 (2.04%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q12</td>
<td>My institution is able to provide feedback to NCACS about the accreditation process we follow.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback with the type of accreditation process we follow</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(%24.49%) (40.82%) (28.57%) (5.10%) (1.02%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>There are processes or procedures within the type of accreditation my institution follows that I would change.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Process changes with the type of accreditation process we follow</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(%17.35%) (40.82%) (27.55%) (13.26%) (1.02%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q14</td>
<td>There is resistance from university stakeholders when asked to complete tasks or provide data for our accreditation review.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resistance to tasks or data collection with the type of accreditation process we follow</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%5.10%) (24.49%) (17.35%) (43.88%) (9.18%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15</td>
<td>The university keeps the campus informed about accreditation processes and outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information about accreditation processes and outcomes</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%44.90%) (47.96%) (4.08%) (3.06%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q16</td>
<td>My institution’s accreditation process focuses on quality of teaching and learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on quality of teaching and learning</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(%30.61%) (59.18%) (8.16%) (2.04%)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Q17</td>
<td>The accreditation process followed by my institution effectively generates communication and decision making between faculty, staff, and administrators.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communication and decision making</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(%22.45%) (60.20%) (11.22%) (5.10%) (1.02%)</td>
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<td>Q18</td>
<td>The quality criteria associated with the type of accreditation process my institution follows adequately reflect our mission and vision.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quality criteria</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(%38.77%) (51.02%) (8.16%) (2.04%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q19</td>
<td>The type of accreditation my institution follows allows us to focus on student learning outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on student learning outcomes</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%31.63%) (59.18%) (6.12%) (2.04%) (1.02%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows endures too many changes to procedures and guidelines.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endures too many changes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%7.14%) (10.20%) (28.57%) (51.02%) (3.06%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21</td>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows values the uniqueness of my institution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values uniqueness</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%29.59%) (48.99%) (13.26%) (5.10%) (2.04%) (1.02%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q22</td>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows provides us with the tools to measure quality effectively.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides tools for quality measurement</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%21.43%) (48.99%) (11.22%) (15.31%) (2.04%) (1.02%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q23</td>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows contributes to continuous improvement within our infrastructure, programs, resources, and outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contributions to continuous improvement</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%40.82%) (47.96%) (6.12%) (5.10%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q24</td>
<td>My institution is able to apply the quality criteria associated with the type of accreditation process we follow evenly throughout its strategic planning and goal setting.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applies quality criteria evenly</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%25.51%) (44.00%) (23.47%) (5.10%) (1.02%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q25</td>
<td>Faculty at my institution contribute to the decision making processes involved with our accreditation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty contribution</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(%27.55%) (59.18%) (8.16%) (3.06%) (2.04%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Limitations

Limitations to this research study are also discussed in Chapter III, detailing threats to internal and external validity. As mentioned previously, some threats to internal validity that may exist in this study could be due to higher education administrators’ attitudes regarding the amount of time spent collecting and preparing documents associated with the accreditation processes on their particular campus. An administrator’s experience level in working with accreditation could be another threat to internal validity. Also, an administrator’s skill level with computers and the internet since the survey was web-based, could be a limitation.

Another limitation to this study could be that since AQIP has existed only since 1999 very few institutions within the NCA may know enough detailed and historical information about AQIP’s processes and criteria to make educated responses to the survey. In addition, institutions following AQIP were at different stages within the AQIP review processes. Thus, respondents’ answers to the web-based survey questions may be limited due to years of experience operating under AQIP’s processes. Furthermore, more administrators using AQIP responded than did those using PEAQ. This difference in number of respondents impacts the group means reported for the independent sample $t$-test.

Additionally, the decision not to administer a pilot test of the web-survey, *Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of NCACS*, could be seen as a limitation. However, it was decided not to administer a pilot test because the entire population of AQIP institutions (as of August 2008) was used in the research study. This was a small
group of institutions and using data from any of the AQIP institutions in a pilot test would have resulted in removal of certain institutions from the larger research study.

Furthermore, an error within the end date of the survey system may have resulted in fewer useable surveys. This was an error on the part of the researcher and while this error was remedied, there were several days where the survey instrument was erroneously closed. Even though a follow up e-mail was sent to participants explaining the error, this error may have deterred participants or perhaps limited opportunities for survey completion based on administrators’ schedules and access to the on-line survey.

Finally, the study is limited geographically to colleges and universities within the NCA region of the United States. Thus, generalizations about the results can only be made about institutions within the NCA and no other regional accrediting body.

**Implications for Practice and Future Research**

There has been considerable dialogue within the last few years about regional accrediting bodies and the public’s demand for increased accountability initiatives. Moreover, with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (CHEA website, 2011) and the U.S. Department of Education’s Spellings Commission there has been greater demand for proof that regional accrediting bodies are upholding educational standards. This demand for accountability will only increase in the future of higher education. As more and more colleges and universities compete for dollars, more rigorous standards are being placed on institutions of higher education to demonstrate accountability, using the results of student learning outcomes as evidence. This demand for greater accountability has led to stronger oversight by the federal government in
conjunction with more initiatives from academia to preserve academic standards and freedom. This means that institutions as well as accrediting bodies must be even more adaptable to change. As Sylvia Manning, President of the HLC stated in a report to the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee of Education and Labor,

Accreditation is an act of judgment based upon articulated standards or criteria that expressly allow for, even require, judgment. Because of that, it preserves the ability to adapt to varying circumstances, contexts and environments, to deal with diversity, to tolerate—even to encourage—innovation, and to apply constant pressure for improvement (The Department of Education, 2010).

Dr. Manning’s statement demonstrates the acknowledgement by the HLC of the need for evidence in upholding core principles and standards for reaccrediting an institution, especially as the demands for accountability increase and ways to measure performance (The Department of Education, 2010).

Thus, the future of accreditation in the United States appears to be one where government, in response to students, parents, and taxpayers’ demands and issues of financial accountability over federal funds, will only increase its scrutiny and demands for evidence of quality. Thus, institutions of higher education will be asked more questions about how they are assessing data and using this data to provide results that satisfy social demand. The Spellings Commission has led the way for greater federal oversight on such initiatives as the credit hour definition and greater transparency of accreditation activities and results (The Department of Education, 2010). Wolff (2005) predicted this desire by external stakeholders for more transparency with the
accreditation process. He states, “…to ensure the external understanding and credulity of the process, public information and disclosure about the accrediting process will need to be increased … it will need to do more to demonstrate and document its own accountability as well” (p. 103).

This study can lead to future studies about the impact of regional accreditation on institutional assessment measures and the use of data-driven outcomes. As more alternative accreditation initiatives surface, such as the HLC’s Pathways Project, additional studies on the effectiveness of these processes will need to be conducted.

Furthermore, future research could explore the impact regional accreditation has programs and resources at larger institutions, specifically research universities. The majority of respondents in this study were administrators at institutions with 10,000 or fewer enrolled students. Thus, more research on the effect of innovative systems of accreditation on student learning outcomes at larger not-for-profit institutions in the United States is needed. Finally, this study did not include for-profit institutions. Given that the HLC is the largest accrediting body of for-profit institutions more research is needed in this area.

Summary
The results of this research study were unexpected. The researcher hypothesized that administrators at institutions following the alternative type of accreditation, AQIP, would have perceived AQIP processes to be better at assisting their institution with data driven decision-making, increasing the level of involvement of internal stakeholders, increasing the quality of institutional operations and programs, and assisting institutions
with planning better strategically, more so than administrators using PEAQ. However, the findings did suggest that regardless of the type of accreditation followed by the institutions in this study the overwhelming majority of administrators were satisfied with the accreditation processes on their campus. Additionally, while no statistically significant results emerged from this study it is evident through the survey responses that institutions accredited through the HLC are proactive in their efforts to ensure quality initiatives on their campuses. Moreover, with the federal government calling for greater transparency from accrediting bodies and higher education in general, the need to remain proactive with programmatic and operational assessment and improvement initiatives must continue.

Peter Ewell, a leader in higher education assessment and institutional effectiveness suggests that accreditation processes can serve as a vehicle through which institutions can create meaningful and useful information while maintaining compliance (Ewell, 2009, p. 20). The need still exists for benchmark data and measurable outcomes when it comes to student success. There are many invested in the future of higher education - students, taxpayers, and increasingly, the federal government. The ability to provide measurable data about student learning outcomes is essential to the growth and support of higher education institutions. As Eaton (2011) explains in *Federalizing Accreditation: A Quandary for Higher Education*,

Both the government and the public believe, whether warranted or not, that they do not know enough about the quality of education. Much of this discussion centers on the lack of information about student learning outcomes. This, in turn,
fuels federal efforts and public calls to manage the academy through accreditation. (p. 2)

However, as Ewell (2009) suggests the future must include higher education institutions both creating assessment-for-improvement programs while also providing evidence-based continuous improvement initiatives (p. 20). These efforts along with meaningful and effective dialogue at the federal and state levels can assist institutions of higher education with continuing to provide quality educational programs to meet the changing needs of a complex, results oriented society.

**Afterword**

In 2009 at the HLC’s Annual Conference a new accreditation initiative was introduced by the HLC, The Pathway Models, consisting of the Standard Pathway and the Open Pathway. This new initiative for reaffirmation of accreditation will replace the current PEAQ model. In September 2012 the HLC will begin a three-year process transitioning from the current PEAQ processes to the Standard Pathway and the Open Pathway. The AQIP model will continue to exist and currently, the HLC has no plans to substantially alter the AQIP model (HLC website, 2012).

According to the HLC,

- The Standard Pathway is available to all accredited institutions at any time, unless the institution is on Probation or under a Show-Cause order, when it follows a separate process. Some institutions are limited to the Standard Pathway. The Commission determines such limitation based upon the institution’s present condition and past relationship with the Commission (HLC website, 2012).
Furthermore, institutions participating in the Open Pathway will be determined based
upon the institution’s current condition and former relationship with the HLC (HLC
website 2012). Additionally, the Open Pathway breaks the reaffirmation for accreditation
into two components: the Assurance Process and the Improvement Process (HLC
website, 2012). More information and up to date information regarding the transition
from PEAQ to the Pathways Models can be obtained through the Higher Learning
Commission.
APPENDIX A

HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS’ PERCEPTIONS
OF NCACS ACCREDITATION WEB-BASED SURVEY
APPENDIX A

HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF NCACS ACCREDITATION WEB-BASED SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to study higher education administrators' perceptions of the accreditation process on their campus within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. After each statement please select the response that best represents your perceptions of the accreditation process on your campus.

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My institution's accreditation process adequately meets the needs of my institution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution's accreditation process benefits the institution's ability to strategically plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution's accreditation process involves shared decision-making between faculty, staff, and administration.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution’s accreditation process is cost effective to operate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution spends enough time preparing documentation and collecting data for our accreditation reviewers.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of contacts my institution has with our accreditation reviewers is sufficient.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The time required to complete the accreditation documents and collect the data is appropriate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The type of accreditation process used by my institution meets the needs of my institution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The outcomes from each accreditation review are incorporated into the planning for the next review.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution spends an adequate amount of time reviewing the feedback and results of our accreditation review.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution’s accreditation process meets the objectives of the institution’s mission.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution is able to provide feedback to NCACS about the accreditation process we follow.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>There are processes or procedures within the type of accreditation my institution follows that I would change.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>There is resistance from institutional stakeholders when asked to complete tasks or provide data for our accreditation review.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>The institution keeps the campus informed about accreditation processes and outcomes.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My institution’s accreditation process focuses on quality of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>The accreditation process followed by my institution effectively generates communication and decision making between faculty, staff, and administrators.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>The quality criteria associated with the type of accreditation process my institution follows adequately reflect our mission and vision.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The type of accreditation my institution follows allows us to focus on student learning outcomes.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows undergoes too many changes to procedures and guidelines.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows values the uniqueness of my institution.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows provides us with the tools to measure quality effectively.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The accreditation process my institution follows contributes to continuous improvement within our infrastructure, programs, resources, and outcomes.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>My institution is able to apply the quality criteria associated with the type of accreditation process we follow evenly throughout its strategic planning and goal setting.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at my institution contribute to the decision making processes involved with our accreditation.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

What is your position title?
What type of institution do you best represent? Please check all that apply.
☐ 4 year
☐ 2 year
☐ public
☐ private
☐ technical college
☐ multi-campus
☐ single-campus
☐ community college
☐ research university
☐ other

What is the size of your institution? Please check only one response.
☐ fewer than 1,000 students
☐ 1,000-4,999 students
☐ 5,000-9,999 students
☐ 10,000-14,999 students
☐ 15,000-25,000 students
☐ 25,001 + students

What type of academic calendar best represents your institution? Please check only one response.
☐ semesters
☐ quarters
☐ trimesters
☐ other

What type of accreditation process does your institution follow with the NCACS? Please check only one response.
☐ Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP)
☐ Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ)
If an AQIP institution, how long have you been participating in AQIP?
When was your most recent accreditation review?

If an AQIP institution, any reservations about continuing with AQIP?

If a PEAQ institution, in what year is your next site visit scheduled?

If a PEAQ institution, are you considering the AQIP process?
☐ yes
☐ no
☐ not sure at this time
APPENDIX B

E-MAIL CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
APPENDIX B

E-MAIL CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Subject line: RE: Survey Title: Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) as Compared to the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS)

My name is Jennifer Nobles McDonough. I am a doctoral candidate in the higher education administration program at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

You are being invited to participate in an on-line survey created for the purpose of studying your perceptions of the accreditation process on your campus. This survey is part of my doctoral research study aimed at better understanding how member institutions perceive the accreditation process within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS). You have been selected because of your affiliation with the accreditation process on your campus. Your name and e-mail contact information was obtained from your institution’s website. You are invited to complete the survey and/or forward this survey link to the individual on your campus that can best answer questions pertaining to your institution’s accreditation process. Your completion of the survey will serve as your consent to participate in this study.

This study has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. No deception is involved, and the study involves no more than minimal risk to participants (i.e., the level of risk encountered in daily life). Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to take part involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which participants are otherwise entitled. Furthermore, participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

Completion of the on-line survey typically takes 15 minutes and is strictly anonymous. There are 25 questions aimed at better understanding the accreditation process on your campus as it relates to strategic planning, institutional operations and programs, assessment and data driven decision-making, and stakeholder involvement. A choice of five answers is provided on a likert scale of which you will choose one response. The remaining ten questions ask for demographic information about your institution as well as a few short answer questions.

As this is an anonymous survey, in no case will responses from individual participants be identified. All data collected will be pooled and published in aggregate form only. The Office of Assessment and Innovation at Washington State University administers the on-line survey through their secure survey web tool, Skylight Matrix Survey System.
You can access the survey by clicking on the following link or by typing the following link into your web browser:
http://skylight.wsu.edu/s/f5d8b95d-6fce-437f-a0a3-9f7b165dbf70.srv

Again, completion of this survey serves as your consent. If participants have further questions about this study or their rights, or if they wish to lodge a complaint or concern, they may contact the principal investigator, Jennifer Nobles McDonough at (330) 637-1464; the faculty advisor, Mark Kretovics at (330) 672-0642; or the Kent State IRB at (330) 672-2704.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
Kent, OH
APPENDIX C

E-MAIL CONSENT FOLLOW UP #1

Subject line: RE: Regional Accreditation Survey Reminder

Greetings:

This is just a friendly reminder that if you are interested in participating and have not done so the survey link will remain open until Friday, MARCH 11, 2011.

Thank you to those that have already participated. Your feedback and responses are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
Kent, OH

RE: Survey Title: Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) as Compared to the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS)

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voluntary; refusal to take part involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which participants are otherwise entitled. Furthermore, participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

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http://skylight.wsu.edu/s/f5d8b95d-6fce-437f-a0a3-9f7b165dbf70.srv

Again, completion of this survey serves as your consent. If participants have further questions about this study or their rights, or if they wish to lodge a complaint or concern, they may contact the principal investigator, Jennifer Nobles McDonough at (330) 637-1464; the faculty advisor, Mark Kretovics at (330) 672-0642; or the Kent State IRB at (330) 672-2704.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
Kent, OH
APPENDIX D

E-MAIL CONSENT FOLLOW UP #2
APPENDIX D
E-MAIL CONSENT FOLLOW UP #2

Subject line: RE: Doctoral Study Survey-Error Corrected-Survey Open Until March 19th

Greetings:

There were some issues last week with the survey instrument that resulted in closing the survey for a few days. I apologize for the confusion! I am very grateful to the respondents who brought this to my attention.

The problem has been resolved and thus the survey is open. So, this is another friendly reminder that if you are interested in participating and have not done so the survey link will remain open until Friday, MARCH 19, 2011. I've extended the deadline due to the error last week.

Thank you very much to those that have already participated. I am eager to continue receiving your results and working on my research in this area.

Your feedback and responses are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
Kent, OH

RE: Survey Title: Higher Education Administrators’ Perceptions of the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) as Compared to the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS)

My name is Jennifer Nobles McDonough. I am a doctoral candidate in the higher education administration program at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

You are being invited to participate in an on-line survey created for the purpose of studying your perceptions of the accreditation process on your campus. This survey is part of my doctoral research study aimed at better understanding how member institutions perceive the accreditation process within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS). You have been selected because of your affiliation with the
accreditation process on your campus. Your name and e-mail contact information was obtained from your institution’s website. You are invited to complete the survey and/or forward this survey link to the individual on your campus that can best answer questions pertaining to your institution’s accreditation process. Your completion of the survey will serve as your consent to participate in this study.

This study has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. No deception is involved, and the study involves no more than minimal risk to participants (i.e., the level of risk encountered in daily life). Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to take part involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which participants are otherwise entitled. Furthermore, participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

Completion of the on-line survey typically takes 15 minutes and is strictly anonymous. There are 25 questions aimed at better understanding the accreditation process on your campus as it relates to strategic planning, institutional operations and programs, assessment and data driven decision-making, and stakeholder involvement. A choice of five answers is provided on a likert scale of which you will choose one response. The remaining ten questions ask for demographic information about your institution as well as a few short answer questions.

As this is an anonymous survey, in no case will responses from individual participants be identified. All data collected will be pooled and published in aggregate form only. The Office of Assessment and Innovation at Washington State University administers the on-line survey through their secure survey web tool, Skylight Matrix Survey System. You can access the survey by clicking on the following link or by typing the following link into your web browser:
http://skylight.wsu.edu/s/f5d8b95d-6fce-437f-a0a3-9f7b165dbf70.srv

Again, completion of this survey serves as your consent. If participants have further questions about this study or their rights, or if they wish to lodge a complaint or concern, they may contact the principal investigator, Jennifer Nobles McDonough at (330) 637-1464; the faculty advisor, Mark Kretovics at (330) 672-0642; or the Kent State IRB at (330) 672-2704.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
Kent, OH
APPENDIX E

E-MAIL CONSENT FOLLOW UP #3
APPENDIX E

E-MAIL CONSENT FOLLOW UP #3

Subject line: RE: Final Call for Completion of Doctoral Study Survey: Regional Accreditation

Greetings:

This is the final e-mail I will be sending regarding this study. I wanted to first of all say THANK YOU to the individuals who have already responded this survey. I greatly appreciate the time you took to answer the questions. Secondly, I received many supportive and encouraging e-mails from various College Presidents that were also greatly appreciated!

The survey will remain open until this Saturday, March 19th for anyone who has yet had a chance to respond.

Again, thank you all for putting up with these e-mails and for your interest and responses.

Many wishes for a great Spring and Summer and successful 2011-2012 academic year.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Kent State University

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Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Nobles McDonough
Doctoral Candidate
Kent State University
Kent, OH
APPENDIX F

AQIP CYCLES
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AQIP is a quality improvement program and a quality assurance program for higher education organizations. It operates by involving participating institutions in three distinct cycles that occur simultaneously. Each cycle has a different duration and sequence of distinctive processes.

Action — This one-year cycle drives continuous improvement by having every AQIP college or university tackle three or four Action Projects that it has chosen, committed to completing in a few months or years, and published in AQIP’s on-line Action Project Directory. Organizations can complete Action Projects and begin new ones at any time. Each fall, they provide Action Project Updates to AQIP on the progress of current projects, and AQIP provides written feedback on these reports. Improvements in the processes an institution employs or the performance results it achieves are incorporated into its published Systems Portfolio.

Strategy — This four-year cycle drives improvement by having every AQIP organization create and maintain an up-to-date Systems Portfolio describing key systems and processes the organization uses to achieve its goals and the performance results it obtains from them. A System Appraisal of the Systems Portfolio provides institutions with written, actionable feedback they can use to create strategies and actions that will move them quickly toward achievement of their goals. Participation in a Strategy Forum drives organizations to use this feedback in shaping new strategies, aligning systems, and creating specific Action Projects.

Accreditation — This seven-year cycle quality assurance reviews evidence from both the action cycles and strategy cycles, evidence that demonstrates that an AQIP organization continues to comply with the Higher Learning Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation – and that continuing its participation in AQIP will result in measurable performance improvement. A Quality Checkup visit to the institution a year or two before its Reaffirmation of Accreditation review confirms the improvements it is making as well as the accuracy of the evidence it has provided to AQIP while providing helpful feedback and consultation on specific issues of its choosing.

New AQIP institutions concentrate their first Strategy Forum on selecting initial Action Projects that will launch their quality initiative with energy. Following this first Strategy Forum, they create a Systems Portfolio, and submit it for Systems Appraisal no later than the academic year that occurs ten years after their last PEAQ comprehensive evaluation. To make sure they will have sufficient time to create a Systems Portfolio,
institutions joining AQIP must have had their last comprehensive site visit within the last seven years. This provides three to four years for the challenging task of developing a first **Systems Portfolio**. (HLC website, Academic Quality Improvement Program, 2007).
APPENDIX G

AQIP PRINCIPLES OF HIGH PERFORMANCE INSTITUTIONS
APPENDIX G

AQIP PRINCIPLES OF HIGH PERFORMANCE INSTITUTIONS

Focus. A mission and vision that focus on students' and other stakeholders' needs provide quality-driven higher education organizations with the foundation they need to shape communication systems, organizational and decision-making structures, and planning and improvement processes. An institution earns the trust, confidence, and loyalty of its current and potential students and its other stakeholders — both external and internal, including faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees — by actively developing and regularly employing listening tools essential for gathering and understanding their diverse and distinctive perspectives. The institution interprets and weighs these expressed needs, preferences, hopes, and requirements to frame ongoing communication, discussion, and refinement of a common mission and vision. Faculty, staff, and administrators integrate this shared focus into their individual work goals and decision-making strategies.

Involvement. Broad-based faculty, staff, and administrative involvement encourages better decisions and strengthens individual and group ownership of systems, activities, and initiatives. Individuals understand how what they do affects others within and outside the organization, and appreciate how their work helps further the institution's mission. A culture of involvement draws on the expertise and practical experience of those people closest to a situation and helps leaders across the organization anticipate the complex implications of decisions. Such involvement often helps initiate and implement improvements that better meet student’s and other stakeholders’ needs. A culture of involvement requires ongoing development of people's skills in making fact-based decisions, working with diverse groups, resolving conflicts, and using quality-based tools to build consensus.

Leadership. Leaders and leadership systems that support a quality culture consistently model those values and behaviors that communicate to all constituents a clear and compelling vision of the future. Leaders have a responsibility to make sure that everyone understands and values the institution's mission, goals, and directions — and uses this understanding to inform individual work goals and decision-making strategies. Leadership must work to help students and other stakeholders share this understanding as well. Further, leadership must ensure that an institution's systems and processes align with its mission and vision, making certain that the necessary resources — people,
policies, funds, facilities, equipment, supplies, time, energy, and other assets — are allocated and used to support the overall mission and vision.

**Learning.** A learning-centered environment allows an institution dedicated to quality to develop everyone's potential talents by centering attention on learning — for students, for faculty and staff, and for the institution itself. By always seeking more effective ways to enhance student achievement through careful design and evaluation of programs, courses, and learning environments, both the institution and its employees demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to organizational and personal learning as the route to continuous improvement. Seeing itself as a set of systems that can always improve through measurement, assessment of results, and feedback, the institution designs practical means for gauging its students' and its own progress toward clearly identified objectives. Conscious of costs and waste — whether human or fiscal — leadership champions careful design and rigorous evaluation to prevent problems before they occur, and enables the institution to continuously strengthen its programs, pedagogy, personnel, and processes.

**People.** Respect for people and the willingness to invest in them leads the quality-driven institution to prize and support the systematic development of its individual faculty, staff, and administrators. Recognizing that fully developing and using its people’s abilities strengthens its most valuable resource, it consciously invests in all its people as leaders and learners through ongoing education, training, and opportunities for continuing development. Leadership encourages individuals to take responsibility in crafting and following through on professional and personal growth plans aimed at acquiring, practicing, and using new skills and knowledge to better serve students and other stakeholders. It nourishes a sense of responsibility and ownership in which all individuals understand how their role contributes to the measurable success of the institution and how they can become engaged as full participants in its improvement processes.

**Collaboration.** Collaboration and a shared institutional focus promote support for a common mission. A quality-driven institutions encourages active collaboration among and within different internal departments and operational areas, and, externally, between the institution and other institutions or organizations. It removes internal barriers to collaboration, such as the constraints individuals often experience within a hierarchical chain of command or when they find themselves working for a sub-unit rather than the larger organization. The institution provides its faculty, staff, and administrators with the training and resources successful collaboration demands,
rewarding effective cooperation and celebrating model collaborative efforts with internal or external partners.

**Agility.** Agility, flexibility, and responsiveness to changing needs and conditions allow high performance institutions to transform themselves. Traditionally colleges and universities have enjoyed more reflective and deliberative cultures than organizations, but the rapid development of new knowledge and technologies and the rising expectations of external stakeholders are altering these environments. As the pace of change quickens and competition becomes commonplace in higher education, the quality-driven institution develops the flexibility to respond quickly to opportunities, threats, and shifting needs and practices. It redirects its attention and resources in response to new requirements, and accurately monitors its performance in responding to such demands.

**Foresight.** Planning for innovation and improvement allows quality-driven institutions to think into the future, tracking trends in order to better predict how conditions will change, and anticipating how those changes may affect students and other stakeholders, operations, and performance. In dynamic or trying situations, the institution with foresight can innovate proactively, making meaningful changes to improve its services and processes in ways that create new or additional value for its students and other stakeholders. Open to new approaches and techniques, the institution designs, tests, and improves its planning structures and processes through practical use and experience.

**Information.** Fact-based information gathering and thinking to support analysis and decision-making give the quality-driven institution and its personnel the ability to assess current capacities and measure performance realistically. Faculty, staff, and administrators track progress concretely and consistently, and use performance results to set ambitious but attainable targets that increase and improve the institution's capability to meet its students' and other stakeholders' needs and expectations. Data-enriched thinking nurtures evaluation and a results-orientation that maximizes the benefits and value produced for students and other stakeholders. The institution develops and refines systems for gathering and assessing valuable feedback and data, and continually seeks better methods for obtaining the most useful information on which to base decisions and improvements.

**Integrity.** Integrity and responsible institutional citizenship allow quality-driven institutions to model their values in both words and deeds. In recognizing and fulfilling
its public responsibility, the institution treats people and organizations with equity, dignity, and respect. Demonstrating responsible citizenship, it anticipates and takes into account the consequences of its actions upon the various larger communities to which it belongs, and upon the higher education system, regionally, nationally, and globally. Mindful that education serves society, the institution continuously examines its practices to make certain its effects and results actively contribute to the common good. (HLC website, AQIP Principles, 2011).
APPENDIX H

AQIP’S NINE CATEGORIES
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AQIP’S NINE CATEGORIES

AQIP Category One: Helping Students Learn

HELPING STUDENTS LEARN focuses on the design, deployment, and effectiveness of teaching-learning processes that underlie your organization’s credit and non-credit programs and courses, and on the processes required to support them.

AQIP Category Two: Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives

ACCOMPLISHING OTHER DISTINCTIVE OBJECTIVES addresses the key processes (separate from your instructional programs and internal support services) through which you serve your external stakeholders — the processes that contribute to achieving your major objectives, fulfilling your mission, and distinguishing yours from other educational organizations.

AQIP Category Three: Understanding Students’ and Other Stakeholders’ Needs

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS’ AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS’ NEEDS examines how your organization works actively to understand student and other stakeholder needs.

AQIP Category Four: Valuing People

VALUING PEOPLE explores your organization’s commitment to the development of your faculty, staff, and administrators.

AQIP Category Five: Leading and Communicating

LEADING AND COMMUNICATING addresses how your leadership and communication processes, structures, and networks guide your organization in setting directions, making decisions, seeking future opportunities, and communicating decisions and actions to your internal and external stakeholders.
AQIP Category Six: Supporting Institutional Operations

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONAL OPERATIONS addresses the organizational support processes that help to provide an environment in which learning can thrive.

AQIP Category Seven: Measuring Effectiveness

MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS examines how your organization collects, analyzes, distributes, and uses data, information, and knowledge to manage itself and to drive performance improvement.

AQIP Category Eight: Planning Continuous Improvement

PLANNING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT examines your organization’s planning processes and how your strategies and action plans help you achieve your mission and vision.

AQIP Category Nine: Building Collaborative Relationships

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS examines your organization’s relationships – current and potential – to analyze how they contribute to the organization’s accomplishing its mission. (HLC website, AQIP Nine Categories, 2011).
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