

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT LEARNING
ASSESSMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By

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ABSTRACT

Student learning assessment has been embedded in higher education for more than 40 years. Nonetheless, there are still competing tensions regarding student learning assessment; the question remains whether student learning assessment is conducted primarily to satisfy accrediting requirements or to drive meaningful improvements in student learning. The tension between improvement and accountability stems from competing directives regarding the purpose and practice of student learning assessment. This study examined perceptions among faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College System regarding the importance of and factors associated with student learning assessment.

Data collected from a cross-sectional quantitative survey were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, independent t-tests, correlation analysis, and linear regression. Results indicated significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceptions of importance, motivation, implementation, and involvement, with administrators reporting higher mean scores across these constructs. Internal motivation focused on improving learning and implementation depth were found to be significant predictors on the perception of importance

regarding student learning assessment. Findings suggest that when assessment is viewed as internally motivated and embedded within institutional processes, it is more likely to be perceived as meaningful rather than procedural.

While implications emphasize the need for leadership practices and professional development that reinforce assessment as a driver of learning improvement, the data does not indicate a significant shift in the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding student learning assessment from previous studies. No significant changes in the perception of student learning assessment over decades suggests different questions need to be asked regarding student learning assessment and other indicators of student success in relation to the cultures of improvement and compliance.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

An assessment movement in higher education began in the 1980s (Ewell, 2008, 2018; Haviland, 2014; Rouseff-Baker & Holm, 2004) when external stakeholders, including the federal and state governments and accrediting agencies, called for increased accountability from institutions of higher education. In the 1990s, a focus on learning replaced a focus on teaching in higher education, shifting assessment attention to student learning (Banta et al., 2004; Ewell, 2018). In the ensuing years, these two starkly different motivations for assessment have created much tension within the academy of higher education – noted in the literature as assessment for compliance versus assessment for improvement (Ewell, 2009, 2018). In one of the earliest surveys regarding student learning assessment, accreditation was reported as the most important reason for engaging in assessment efforts (Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999). A 2009 survey of academic administrators found that, while assessment work was being done, accreditation was the primary driver of assessment practices (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). More recent surveys found that, although accreditation remained the most important driver of accreditation, improving student learning had also become an important factor for assessing student learning (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014).

Some 40 years after the assessment movement in higher education began, it is still unclear whether student learning assessment is primarily intended to meet compliance requirements or to support improvements that directly affect student learning (Ewell, 2018). Additionally, the larger scale studies focusing on student learning assessment have been answered by administrators (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), neglecting the voice of the faculty. Faculty voice is important, as they are typically responsible

for writing student learning outcomes, designing and completing student assessments, and utilizing results to identify and design improvements that will positively affect student learning.

Background of the Study

All six institutional accrediting bodies, formerly referred to as regional accrediting bodies, require higher education institutions to assess student learning outcomes and demonstrate the findings of such assessments lead to improvements in student learning and programs (Kinzie, 2019). Through the process of accreditation, most commonly by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), community colleges in North Carolina are expected to identify outcomes, assess the extent to which the outcomes are achieved, and provide evidence of seeking improvement based on the data (SACSCOC, 2024a). Through standard 8.2.a, SACSCOC expects educational programs to assess student learning outcomes as a part of its student achievement standards. In a 2018 update of the SACSCOC accreditation standards, educational program student learning assessment was moved from the focus on Institutional Effectiveness (SACSCOC, 2024a), to a focus specifically on student achievement (SACSCOC, 2024aa), signifying the accrediting body's emphasis on assessment to improve student success rather than an emphasis on the process itself. A consequence of accreditation bodies requiring institutions to provide evidence that student learning assessment is being performed is the compliance mentality, where student learning assessment is viewed as a "checking the boxes" process (Kinzie, 2019). The compliance mindset is in direct opposition to assessment for improvement, in which results are utilized to improve teaching and learning.

The two drastic approaches to student learning assessment have created competing paradigms within the academy of higher education (Ewell, 2009, 2018). Additionally, literature on student learning assessment provides limited evidence student learning improvement occurs

as a result of the assessment processes (Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Jonson et al., 2017; Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018). Kuh et al. (2014) found that “institutions have turned a corner and are embracing assessment in new, positive ways, hinting at a cultural shift in acknowledging if not embracing the value of student learning outcomes” (p. 32). However, data published by accrediting bodies, as recently as 2024, demonstrate that the standards associated with student learning assessment are consistently among the most cited standards (Higher Learning Commission, 2024; Matveev, 2022a, 2022b, 2023), indicating the process may not yet have buy-in throughout higher education. Larger studies regarding student learning assessment have been completed by administrators, not accounting for faculty attitudes or perceptions of student learning assessment. Studies that have examined faculty perceptions of student learning assessment often focus on small numbers of faculty from one institution (Emil & Cress, 2014; Swarat et al., 2017).

Statement of the Problem

While studies have shown that student learning assessment has become more commonplace in institutions of higher education, data indicate there may still be gaps in acceptance or buy-in (Higher Learning Commission, 2024; Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Matveev, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). The SACSCOC standard that directly relates to assessment of student learning outcomes, 8.2.a (formerly 3.3.1.1.), has consistently been on the SACSCOC “Most Frequently Cited Principles in Decennial Reaffirmation Reviews” (Matveev, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

Large-scale studies focusing on student learning assessment have been based on administrative responses rather than the faculty completing the student learning assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Peterson, Augustine et al.,

1999). As student learning assessment is primarily the responsibility of faculty, their perspectives on student learning assessment must be known and understood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how full-time faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) perceive student learning assessment, factors that influence their perceptions, and challenges relating to student learning assessment. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) found that much of the literature concerning faculty and administrative perceptions is anecdotal and controversial; twenty years later, I was unable to locate large-scale, published studies accounting for both faculty and administrator perceptions of student learning assessment. As literature has consistently noted that faculty support and participation are important for the success of student learning assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010), it is vital that faculty are included in all steps of the process. Consequently, understanding how faculty and administrator attitudes, support, and challenges regarding student learning assessment differ was a central focus of this study.

Conceptual Framework

The framework utilized for this study was created by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) in their research to identify differences between faculty and administrators regarding the importance of institutional effectiveness initiatives, as well as the factors that lead to the support of such initiatives. Student learning assessment has long been encompassed within the framework of institutional effectiveness (Kinzie, 2019), lending the framework to apply to the study conducted here. Through their review of relevant literature, Welsh and Metcalf (2003) identified four

variables that may influence faculty and administrator support for institutional effectiveness. The variables are:

1. Perceived Motivation, or the extent to which institutional effectiveness activities are motivated at an institution primarily by internal interests in quality improvement, instead of the need to respond to external mandates.
2. Perceived Depth of Implementation, or the extent to which institutional effectiveness activities are implemented and promote change at an institution.
3. Reported Level of Involvement, or how institutional participants view their personal involvement in the development and implementation of institutional effectiveness activities.
4. Perceived Definition of Quality, or the extent to which the prevailing view of quality at the institution emphasizes educational outcomes instead of resource inputs. (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003, p. 452).

The fourth variable, the perceived definition of quality, was not included in this study, as emphasis on outcomes rather than resource inputs, has become the standard of student learning assessment in the decades following Welsh and Metcalf's (2003) original study.

Research Questions

This study focused on full-time faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College system, to answer the following questions regarding student learning assessment of faculty and administrators working at institutions in the North Carolina Community College System.

1. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their attitudes of the importance of student learning assessment?

2. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment?
3. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment?
4. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment?
5. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment?
6. What factors account for differences in attitudes of faculty and administrators towards student learning assessment?

Research Design

This cross-sectional quantitative study was designed to measure differences in attitudes between community college faculty and administration regarding the importance of student learning assessment, identify factors that account for faculty and administration support for student learning assessment, and identify challenges encountered by faculty and administration in relation to student learning assessment. To address the research questions, this study used a web-based survey comprising closed-ended questions about faculty and administrative experience with and perceptions of student learning assessment. Survey questions were taken from two instruments previously utilized in assessment research: (1) a survey designed by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) for their study regarding faculty and administrative support for institutional effectiveness activities and (2) questions adapted from Welsh and Metcalf (2003) by Apigo (2015) for her dissertation regarding faculty and administrator perceptions of assessment in relation to institutional professional development opportunities.

The research population included full-time curriculum faculty and administrators, including chief academic officers, deans, division and department chairs, and institutional effectiveness administrators, from the 58 institutions within the North Carolina Community College System. Part-time faculty were not included in the research population as they may not be as involved in their institution's student learning assessment processes, they are not always expected to participate in student learning assessment, and may not fully understand the requirements or process of student learning assessment. T-tests were utilized to determine if there were significant differences between full-time faculty and administrators in the constructs of perceived importance, motivation, implementation, involvement, and identified challenges of student learning assessment. Correlation analysis and linear regression testing was utilized to identify factors that may account for differences in perceptions between faculty and administration.

Significance of the Study

Most of the literature on student learning assessment is prescriptive or narrative in nature rather than demonstrating improvements in student learning (Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018). Studies exploring the perceptions of faculty regarding student learning assessment initiatives are older, and findings may be outdated (Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003) or are results of small studies based on one institution with small numbers of respondents (Emil & Cres, 2014; Swarat et al., 2017). Studies of administrators provide information about how institutions are performing student learning assessment and how results are utilized in teaching and learning but do not take into consideration the faculty attitudes about student learning assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014). This study adds to data on student learning assessment from an institutional perspective and provides

NCCCS institutions, as well as other institutions or systems, with information on the extent to which faculty and administrators at associate degree-granting institutions believe student learning assessment to be an important process as well as identify factors that affect support and challenges of with student learning assessment.

Definition of Terms

The key terms in this study are defined as:

Accreditation - collegial process of self-review and peer review for improvement of academic quality and public accountability of institutions and programs (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2015).

Accrediting body - a legal entity that conducts accrediting activities through voluntary, non-Federal peer review and makes decisions concerning the accreditation status of institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Institutional effectiveness - a set of ongoing and systematic institutional processes and services, the identification and measurement of outcomes across all institutional units, and the use of data and assessment results to inform decision-making (Manning, 2011).

Student learning assessment – the process by which an institution identifies expected outcomes of student learning, assesses the extent to which outcomes are achieved, and seeks improvement based on analysis of assessment results (SACSCOC, 2024b).

Assumptions

There were two major assumptions for this study. First, I assumed that faculty and administrators would find benefit participating in a study concerning student learning assessment. Second, I assumed that participants would be honest and thoughtful with their answers, providing information that can advance the understanding of how faculty and

administrators perceive student learning assessment. I thought faculty and administrators would find value in increasing the understanding of student learning assessment from a larger perspective.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study was conducted at the 58 member institutions within the NCCCS. All institutions were invited to participate to increase the potential number of respondents, especially in the administrative categories; participants were given the option to identify their specific institution, but it was not required to complete the survey.

Full-time faculty were asked to participate, as they are typically in charge of conducting student learning assessment; part-time faculty were not included in the research population due to the potential that they may lack professional development on their institution's student learning assessment processes, are not always expected to participate in student learning assessment, and may not fully understand the requirements or process of student learning assessment. Academic administrators were limited to chief academic officers, deans, division, and department chairs. Institutional effectiveness/research administrators and staff were asked to identify themselves apart from academic administrators, as they typically have oversight of the processes involved with student learning assessment in terms of data collection, systems utilized, reporting periods, and reporting of results.

Limitations

A limitation potentially associated with this study is sample bias, which could result from the voluntary nature of the population. Sample bias would have been introduced if the individuals participating chose to do so because they had strong opinions regarding student learning assessment. For example, if everyone who participated in the survey voluntarily

participates in or serves as campus leaders of student learning assessment, results may be biased due to differences in the enthusiasm of volunteers as compared to rank and file faculty more broadly. Another limitation that may have influenced participant responses would be their level of participation in accreditation activities; without asking questions specific to participation with accreditation specific and training, there is no way to determine if the responses are influenced by accreditation knowledge and how such knowledge may contribute to the assessment for compliance versus assessment for improvement mindset.

Organization of the Study

This study is arranged in five chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter one presented background information informing the study; the purpose and significance of the study; the conceptual framework utilized; and the research questions that guided the study. Chapter two provides an overview of the related literature regarding student learning assessment. Chapter three describes the research design and methodology of the study. Included is a description of the instrument, a description of the procedures followed, and a description of the study sample. Chapter four presents an analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings. Chapter five includes the summary and implications for future research. The study is concluded with references and appendices.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Higher education institutions, including community colleges, have historically struggled to implement a comprehensive program for assessing student learning (Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Nunley et al., 2011) and failed to provide documentation that data collected is utilized for making improving student learning (Baird, 2014; Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Kinzie, 2019). There is little empirical data in the literature that examines how community college faculty and administrators perceive student learning assessment and what characteristics may predict or affect perceptions. This study examined how full-time faculty and administrators within the NCCCS perceive the importance of, motivation for, involvement in, implementation of, and challenges with student learning assessment, and identified factors that influence perceptions of both groups.

The history of student learning assessment is reviewed to conceptualize assessment in higher education over the last several decades, followed by a review of best practices in student learning assessment. The two primary paradigms for assessment in higher education, accountability and improvement, are examined. Grunwald and Peterson's (2003) framework for factors that promote faculty involvement and satisfaction with student learning assessment conceptualizes literature review by focusing on the influences of regional accrediting bodies, specifically SACSCOC, the institutional context of student learning assessment, and faculty and community college characteristics related to assessment. Finally, literature regarding challenges specific to community colleges regarding student learning assessment is reviewed.

Literature focusing on faculty and administrator perceived importance of, variables that influence their support of, and challenges related student learning assessment was examined to provide a backdrop on which to compare the results of this study. Data from previous studies

was examined to gain an understanding of what is currently known about the importance of and challenges with student learning assessment.

Student Learning Assessment in Higher Education

According to Ewell (2008), the assessment movement in higher education began in the early 1980s when the first national conference on the topic was held and several major publications brought assessment in higher education to a national level (Cain & Hutchings, 2015; Ewell, 2008). Two reports, *Involvement in Learning* from the National Institute of Education and *Integrity in the College Curriculum* from the Association of American Colleges, argued that assessment was essential for curriculum and pedagogy improvement (Ewell, 2008). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, produced by the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education, primarily focused on the need for reform across content, standards, expectations, and teaching in the K-12 sector, but also called for all levels of education to assess the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Hundley & Kahn, 2019). *Time for Results*, by the National Governor's Association, argued that knowing what college graduates know and can do was the best way to judge the effectiveness of higher education institutions (Ewell, 2008). This study led to state level adoption of policies requiring the collection and reporting of student learning assessment data.

The State mandates for student learning assessment lost momentum in the early 1990s due to budget constraints in a time of recession. The 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act required higher education regional accrediting bodies to demand evidence of student academic achievement (Ewell, 2008; Hundley & Kahn, 2019). SACSCOC was the first higher education regional accrediting body to adopt review criteria related to accountability in the early 1980s (Ewell, 2010; Head, 2011; Peterson & Augustine, 2000); Today, all six higher

education institutional, formally regional, accrediting bodies include standards related to accountability with specific standards addressing student learning assessment (Kinzie, 2019). The American Association for Higher Education released *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* in 1992; the authors, leading authorities on assessment at the time, wanted the principles to espouse the importance of improving student learning while serving as a guide for institutions to discuss and develop their own processes (Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Hutchings et al., 2012).

Beginning in the mid-2000s, there were calls for greater accountability in higher education (Ewell & Jones, 2006). According to Ewell (2008), the culmination of three reports was “the beginning of fundamental transformation in what it means to be accountable” (p. 11). The Business-Higher Education Forum called for institutions to rigorously conduct student learning assessment and make the results publicly accessible (Ewell, 2008). The results of a study were published in the 2004 edition *Measuring Up*, published by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, showing that it was possible to collect multiple types of data related to student learning assessment (Ewell, 2008). *The National Commission on Accountability*, released by the State Higher Education Executive Officers, supported the recommendations of these reports, as well as calling for a nationwide student record system and for accrediting bodies to make their results of institutional accreditation public knowledge (Ewell & Jones, 2006).

With the 2006 release of the Spelling’s Commission report *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of American Higher Education* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), assessment as part of accountability in higher education was again placed in the spotlight. The report called for post-secondary institutions to measure and report student learning assessment

data, providing recommendations to institutions, regional accrediting bodies, and the federal government that would aid in making student learning assessment a priority. These recommendations included the use of quality instruments by institutions for collecting student learning assessment data; a call for faculty to take responsibility in identifying learning outcomes and developing local measurements; incentives to be provided by the federal government for institutions that develop an outcomes-focused accountability system; and a call to accrediting bodies to create a framework to align standards on student learning assessment and making the accreditation process transparent (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The Department of Education moved to transform its recommendations through legislative rule-making, which was stopped in 2007 with a new version of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act (Ewell, 2008). According to Ewell (2008), these provisions would have “significantly transformed the accountability role of assessment” (p. 12).

The impact of the Spelling Commission’s report did not vanish with the end of the legislative rule-making process. Several accountability proposals and systems have been created because of the push for student learning assessment through the report. These include the Voluntary System of Accountability, created by National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (Ewell, 2008) and the Voluntary Framework of Accountability, created by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACU, 2015). Former President Obama’s college completion agenda may also have influenced accountability, with the call for America to have more college completers than other nations by 2020. In 2013, each of the formally regional accrediting bodies, together with six national higher education associations including the American Association of Community Colleges, crafted the *Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement*, a

statement that “intended to emphasize the need to effectively assess student achievement” (para. 1).

Student Learning Assessment Best Practices

Student learning assessment process has been described as a cyclical process in the literature (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Banta and Palomba (2015) described the process as a three-step process: planning, implementation, and improvement, while Suskie (2018) described the process as a four-step process: establishing goals, providing learning opportunities, assessing learning, and using results; other processes exist as well. While the number of steps within the processes is different, student learning assessment is meant to be a continual improvement process, one in which outcomes are identified, methods of assessment are created and administered, results are studied, potential changes are identified, and results are reassessed to determine if the changes were successful. The literature states there is no one-size-fits-all process for student learning assessment and that individual institutions should create a process that works best to meet their mission and the needs of their faculty and students (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Within the differing descriptions of best practice processes, there are overarching steps that help ensure the assessment process is successful and that student learning is improved.

Student learning assessment experts agree that the process must be thoroughly planned prior to implementation (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Planning requires that all stakeholders be engaged in the process; while each institution will identify who the appropriate stakeholders are, faculty and academic administrators are vital to the process in that they will be those responsible for the

follow-through of the process (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Other stakeholders that can provide input, review outcomes, and provide suggestions include other institutional staff, students, trustees, alumni, employers, and community representatives. A thorough written plan is necessary to ensure that all stakeholders understand the assessment process; the plan should include why the process is important to the institution, who is responsible for which parts of the process, what the process entails, and the timing of the different parts of the process (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Additionally, a plan should link student learning assessment to other institutional processes such as program review, planning, and budgeting. The planning phase also includes determining at which levels outcome assessment is appropriate to meet institutional needs; assessment frameworks may require learning assessment at one or more levels including course, program, divisional, and institutional.

Once the institutional plan for assessment is defined, planning at the appropriate levels must occur. Clear learning outcomes must be aligned with course, program, divisional, and institutional goals (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Measurement tools must be identified for each outcome; these include direct and indirect measurements. Direct measurement of student learning includes assessments such as exams, presentations, capstone projects, portfolios, and rubrics (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Indirect measurements ask students to reflect on their learning and include satisfaction surveys, end-of-course examinations, focus groups, and exit interviews (Banta & Palomba, 2015). In planning, it is important to clearly identify points at which data is measured and may include entrance and exit points, in multiple courses, or at specific points in time.

After the planning process is completed, implementation or measurement begins. This is the part of the process in which learning takes place and measurement data is collected (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Implementation may occur by semester, annually, or over a defined period, as identified in the assessment plan. At close of the implementation phase, data is aggregated and reviewed to determine how well the learning outcomes were met. The findings should be utilized to determine what improvements can be made that will impact student learning (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). Improvements may be as simple as changing course materials or assignments or as major as changing coursework or program course offerings. Once changes are identified and implemented, the implementation cycle begins again to determine whether the changes made measurable improvements in student learning. Experts agree that there also needs to be a review of the student learning outcomes process itself to determine if the process is working to improve student learning or has become a burdensome process in which no pertinent data is obtained.

For the student learning assessment process to have widespread acceptance among faculty and staff, administrators at the institution must promote the process as an important part of student learning (Caudle & Hammonds, 2018; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Faculty must buy-in to the process of examining the data to determine areas of opportunity for improvement to occur.

Competing Paradigms: Accountability and Improvement

The competing mandates for assessment in higher education, as described above, have created competing paradigms among faculty, staff, and administrators when it comes to student learning assessment (Ewell, 2009; Jonson et al., 2017). Assessment for accountability, also described as a culture of compliance, is based on outputs and conformity to established

standards, rules, or regulations while assessment for improvement, or a culture of assessment, is based on continuous improvement of learning processes in which deficiencies are expected to be identified and acted upon to improve the student learning experience (Ewell, 2009; Fuller et al., 2016). Literature emphasizes that institutional policies, decisions, messaging, and use of results of assessment shape the culture towards assessment at an institution (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Fuller et al., 2016; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010).

The accountability or compliance paradigm is rooted in conformity to established standards, rules, or regulations (Ewell, 2009). Results of assessments are utilized to assure external stakeholders of the effectiveness of an institution. Evidence is typically gathered from an objective standpoint, with measurements and evidence being quantitative. These types of measures include numbers of graduates, performance on standardized examinations, or survey results compared across institutions (Jonson et al., 2017). Results are most likely communicated with outside entities rather than internal stakeholders such as students and faculty. Assessment processes end when reporting periods are over, as when an accrediting report is completed and there are no processes identified to work towards any changes in the results.

The improvement, or culture of assessment, paradigm is rooted in improving teaching and learning by detecting deficiencies in processes, curriculum, and instruction that may affect student learning and acting upon them to elicit improvement; such a process is often referred to as continuous improvement (Ewell, 2009; Jonson et al., 2017). Results of such assessments are used to enhance teaching and learning. Quantitative and qualitative evidence is gathered from many different sources including faculty designed assignments, portfolios, capstone projects, and standardized tests and are typically judged by faculty rather than outside entities. Rather than

being communicated to outside entities, results are utilized by faculty to guide interventions within the learning processes and create improvements through feedback loops; assessments are identified, results are gathered, changes are made, assessments are given, and results gathered again. The process should be ongoing with outcomes published for visibility in syllabi and catalogs.

Factors Affecting Perceptions of Student Learning Assessment

In their early work on support for student assessment, Peterson and Einarson (1997) created a framework of institutional support for student assessment that outlined external influences on, causes of support for, and utilization and impact of student learning assessment. In 2003, Grunwald and Peterson identified factors associated with faculty involvement and satisfaction with student assessment. Based on their review, Grunwald and Peterson (2003) expanded on the original framework of support for student assessment to depict how external influences, institutional context, and institutional characteristics influence faculty satisfaction and involvement with student learning assessment. Their revised framework provides a lens through which to examine factors that affect perceptions of student learning assessment.

External Influences

In their work for the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Peterson and Einarson (1997) identified multiple external influences that affect student learning assessment in higher education institutions. These include national efforts, such as those described earlier in this paper; state-level initiatives, such as state mandates for learning assessment and performance reporting; institutional accreditation through regional and professional accrediting bodies; and the expectations of the private sector that college graduates acquire specific knowledge and skill sets that carryover into the workplace. Data shows that accreditation has remained the major

influence on two-year institutions in conducting student learning assessment over several decades (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999; Peterson & Einarson, 1997; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). As this study applies to community colleges in North Carolina, who do not have state mandates for assessment but are required to be accredited by SACSCOC, the literature pertaining to the external influences of regional accreditation will be the focus of this literature review.

In a 1999 project conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, a survey of chief academic officers at two-year institutions found that 79% of institutions identified that regional accreditation had increased involvement in student learning assessment and 62% indicated that regional accreditation was the reason student learning assessment was initiated (Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999; Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999). Studies conducted throughout the next two decades continued to demonstrate regional accreditation was found to be the most important factor in conducting student learning assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Accreditation is viewed by many as tedious, however there are benefits, the most important of which is to continue receiving federal funding and assistance (Head & Johnson, 2011).

Institutional Accreditation

The institutional, formally regional, accrediting agency for North Carolina community colleges, SACSCOC, was the first institutional accrediting agency to institute accountability measures geared toward institutional effectiveness in accreditation standards (Ewell, 2008, 2010; Head, 2011; Peterson & Augustine, 2000). While earlier standards required education programs to evaluate educational effectiveness (SACSCOC, 1997), it was not until guidelines were

adopted in 2001 that standards specifically identified assessment of student learning outcomes as a measure of the effectiveness of academic programs (SACSCOC, 2001).

Through the standards in Section 8: Student Achievement of the SACSCOC Principles of Reaccreditation, SACSCOC (2018a) compels institutions to identify, evaluate, and publish goals related to student achievement as well as identify student learning outcomes, assess the extent of achievement, and provide evidence of seeking improvement within program and throughout general education coursework. Standard 8.2.a requires educational programs to assess student learning outcomes as a part of its student success processes; prior to the 2018 SACSCOC (2018a) Principles of Reaccreditation updates, student learning assessment was categorized as an institutional effectiveness standard. This change implies SACSCOC supported the idea of moving from assessment for compliance to assessment for student success. The earlier requirements of student learning assessment as a means of measuring institutional effectiveness rather than student success were in line with the results of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement study, which found that 89% of institutions were required to provide evidence of an assessment plan; 78% were required to provide evidence of the use of assessment results for improvements; and 72% were required to provide the intended uses of student learning assessment (Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999; Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999); none of these concepts specifically required institutions to demonstrate student success or changes being made to specifically increase student opportunities for success.

While SACSCOC has stated that a “one size fits all” mentality is inappropriate and diminishes the individual missions of institutions” (SACSCOC, 2024b), the guidelines presented to institutions for student learning assessment have been more general rather than strongly prescriptive. The lack of preciseness may be a major factor in the non-compliance rate for

standards in section eight of the SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation. Data shows that Standard 8.2.a, the academic program student learning assessment (previously standard 3.3.1.1) has been the most commonly cited standard for non-compliance in the fifth-year review process (Baird, 2014) and the standards regarding student learning assessment have remained among the most cited standards for the ten-year reaffirmation review for many years, including the most recent for which data is published (Matveev, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). SACSCOC (2024b) does provide institutions with some expectations that should be met through student learning assessment, including the expectation that planning and assessment of academic programs, including the development and assessment of student learning outcomes, is an on-going process. Programs are expected to demonstrate effectiveness for each academic program at the degree, diploma, and certificate level.

Student learning outcomes are expected to specify the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes students should develop in courses and/or in a program. While no direction is given to the types of assessment methods that should be used, institutions should choose measurements which are “appropriate to the nature of the discipline and consistent over time” (SACSCOC, 2024b, p. 71) to enable the evaluation of student cohorts. SACSCOC expects institutions to produce mature data and that assessment methods be evaluated and revised at regular intervals. Additionally, institutions should provide evidence of, rather than a plan of, improvement that is based on analysis of student learning assessment (SACSCOC, 2024b).

Institutional Variables

Grunwald and Peterson (2003) identified variables within the institutional construct of their framework including institutional approaches to, support for, management practices and policies for, and the uses and impacts of student learning assessment processes that are known to

influence faculty support of institutional effectiveness. These variables represent the planning and support strategies adopted by an institution that support student learning assessment as a successful initiative. Grunwald and Peterson's (2003) institutional construct intersects the variables identified by Welsch and Metcalf (2003) and provides a wider lens through which literature can be reviewed regarding factors that affect both faculty and administration attitudes towards importance, motivation, implementation, and involvement in student learning assessment.

Institutional Approach

The institutional approach to student learning assessment considers the types of measurements used for, timing of, and level of aggregation of student learning assessment data. Selecting appropriate student learning assessment measurements is dependent upon the purpose or driver of assessment – compliance versus improvement (Ewell, 2009; Jankowski et al., 2018; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Student learning assessment conducted to meet external purposes such as accreditation often utilize externally developed assessment tools while internal purposes such as improving student and institutional performance often utilize internally derived assessment methods (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Peterson, Augustine et al. (1999) found that all types of higher education institutions were more likely to utilize internally derived instruments rather than standardized or commercially available ones. Kuh et al. (2014) found that institutions were using “multiple measures and a wider variety of measurement tools” (p. 33) than was being used in previous years. In NILOA's most recent study, associate degree institutions utilize assessment tools that provide more immediate value in improving student learning, including placement exams, classroom-based performance assessments, and rubrics (Jankowski et al., 2018).

Institutions may select a variety of content to examine as a part of a student assessment plan. Variables may be related to student inputs and outputs, as well as environmental variables (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Input variables, typically collected upon admission, include information about a student such as demographic information, past academic performance, and student intentions. Environmental variables may include course-taking patterns, use of institutional services such as tutoring, and the receipt of financial aid. Output variables, typically measured during a student's time within an institution or after departure, are most related to performance and knowledge.

Within each of these variables, assessment may measure a student's cognitive, affective, psychomotor, or behavioral functioning. Peterson, Augustine et al. (1999) found that associate degree-granting institutions are more likely to assess cognitive functioning rather than affective or behavioral. Twenty-five years ago, associate degree-granting institutions were more likely than other types of institutions to assess basic skills, student academic intentions, and vocational skills and less likely to assess higher-order thinking skills, general education knowledge, and competencies within a student's major (Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999). In more recent years, associate degree-granting institutions have utilized performance-based assessments such as rubrics, classroom-based assessments, and capstone projects (Jankowski et al., 2018), which indicates these institutions have moved towards assessing higher-order thinking skills, general education knowledge, and major specific competencies. Collecting student learning assessment data on a comprehensive selection of variables will better inform institutional decision-making than data related only to student performance (Kuh et al., 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997; Rouseff-Baker & Holm, 2004).

When creating a student learning assessment plan, institutions should determine when and at what intervals assessment data should be collected (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Assessment leaders should determine if assessment data will be collected from students upon entering or leaving the institution or at points during enrollment (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). It must also be determined how often assessment data will be collected at the program and course level (Banta & Palomba, 2015). In their review of the literature on the timing of assessment, Peterson and Einarson (1997) found that assessment plans collecting multiple points of data were recommended and that linking student performance with institutional experiences provided a better platform for institutional decision-making. They also found that data collection was most likely to occur at a student's point of entry and that few institutions measured a change in student performance over time (Peterson & Einarson, 1997).

Peterson, Augustine et al. (1999) found that 98% of associate degree-granting institutions assessed basic skills upon a student's entry; 61% and 59% of associate degree-granting institutions assessed competency during enrollment and at exit respectively; and that only 42% of associate degree-granting institutions assessed students both during enrollment and at exit. Associate degree-granting institutions were most likely to assess basic skills and student academic intentions at a student's point of entry; higher order thinking skills and competence in their major field upon a student's exit; and general education competency, vocation and professional skills, development, involvement, and institutional satisfaction during enrollment (Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999). The studies conducted by Peterson and others in the late 1990s focused more on input and output data points while more recent studies focus on the levels at which data is aggregated.

When considering student learning assessment, institutions must determine how data will be aggregated (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Aggregation levels range from courses to programs to institutions. How an institution chooses to aggregate data should be directly related to the overall purpose of assessment such as learning improvement at the course, program, or institutional level, institutional or program accreditation, or program review (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Peterson, Augustine et al. (1999) and Peterson, Einarson et al. (1999) found that associate degree-granting institutions aggregated data at the course level, program/department level, and institutional level. More recent studies indicate that institutions are using assessment at course, program, school/college, and institutional levels, but that more change resulted from assessment results at the course and program levels (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009).

Institutional Support Strategies

Institutional support strategies reflect an institution's approach to student learning assessment. Strategies may be reflective of external pressures for student learning assessment and internal commitment to student learning improvement. Strategies that reflect external pressure for assessment are often referred to as assessment for compliance or accountability. Strategies that reflect an institution's commitment to improving student learning through assessment are referred to as assessment for accountability or improvement (Ewell, 2009). The strategies associated with assessment for accountability do not typically result in improvements, which is the overarching goal of student learning assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015).

When examining institutional support in relation to external pressures, the existence of external mandates for assessment must be considered (Ewell, 2008; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). As previously noted, institutional accreditation has been a major motivator for institutions to

complete student learning assessment. Institutional improvement is less likely to occur if the only motivation for implementing student learning assessment is such a mandate (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). While other external pressures may exist, such as programmatic or specialized accreditation and state mandates, this study focused on institutional, formally regional, accreditation as the major external factor; specialized accreditation was taken into account as a covariate of faculty response to the research questions, as it was noted by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) as future research need.

An institutional commitment to improving student learning has also been identified as a major force for student learning assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2015; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Internal institutional support strategies encompass the institution's commitment by creating structure and identifying the function of assessment. These strategies comprise the planning process, linkage of student learning assessment with institutional mission and goals, and resource allocation (Jonson et al., 2017). Kuh et al. (2014) found that associate's degree-granting institutions were more likely to tie assessment to budgeting, strategic planning, and benchmarking. Literature identifies dimensions within the planning process that best support student learning assessment including the formulation of a comprehensive assessment plan; planning using a series of steps; examining practices at other institutions; conducting pilot projects before widespread dissemination; and broad participation in planning (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997).

Leadership and governance of student learning assessment relate to the structure of involvement by administration, faculty, and staff, as well as the structure that is used to guide the efforts and decision-making processes (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Important players in the leadership of student learning assessment are members of senior

administration and formal or informal leaders among faculty and staff (Emil & Cres, 2014; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Welsh and Metcalf (2003) found that faculty were more likely to support assessment activities if they perceive they have a voice in the activities.

Leadership support strategies that communicate the importance of student learning assessment including communicating that student learning assessment is an institutional priority; clearly stating the purposes and uses of student learning assessment; and committing adequate resources to support student learning assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Emil & Cres, 2014; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Jankowski et al. (2018) found that academic administrators needed help in communicating the value and purpose of assessment beyond compliance. Peterson, Einarson et al. (1999) found that associate degree-granting institutions were most likely to use presidential and institutional-wide activities related to assessment as well as workshops and faculty governance committees to promote student learning assessment. Kuh et al. (2014) found that associate's degree-granting institutions were more likely than other types of institutions to report both improvement plans and how the results were being used, which indicates at some institutions, improvement rather than compliance is becoming a predominant ethos for student learning assessment.

Positions or departments associated with the responsibility for overseeing student learning assessment may be positioned with a specific position, organizational unit, or committee (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Responsibility for student learning assessment may be assigned to the chief academic officer, a department of institutional effectiveness, or a project coordinator. An office of institutional research has been most used by associate degree-granting institutions to oversee the day-to-day operation of student learning assessment and these personnel most often reported to the chief executive or chief academic officer (Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999).

However, limited support by institutional research offices has been identified as a barrier to implementation of student learning assessment in community colleges, as funding for these departments may be limited and staff obligations many (Nunley et al., 2011). In 2014, associate's degree-granting institutions were more likely than other institutional types to institutional research offices supportive of assessment efforts (Kuh et al., 2014)

The involvement of faculty in the decision-making processes is advocated to promote and indicate the importance of student learning assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Fuller et al., 2016; Jonson et al., 2017; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010). Studies indicate academic administrators believe faculty are more involved in the assessment process, however faculty development in utilizing assessment results is needed to improve student learning (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014). A study of institutional researchers identified barriers several barriers that exist for including faculty in the assessment process such as high teaching loads, lack of knowledge and understanding, lack of sense of purpose, and lack of support or follow through by administration (Nunley et al., 2011). It is also suggested that student affairs personnel, non-academic staff, and students have some role in student learning assessment decision-making processes (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Peterson, Einarson et al. (1999) found that 73% of associate degree-granting institutions had an institutional-wide planning group that included membership consisting of academic affairs administration, faculty, student affairs administration, institutional research, and the chief executive officer; this is consistent with the recommendations of widely recognized assessment publications (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010).

Institutional Policies and Practices

The policies and practices created to implement and support student learning assessment are important components in the creation and sustainability of student learning assessment.

Policy and procedural influences include resource allocation, the use of analytic support systems, communication of results, professional development, faculty evaluation, and academic planning and review. Resource allocation must consider the fiscal, physical, and staff resources necessary as well as how to link resource allocation and student learning assessment (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Fiscal, physical, and staff considerations include creating an assessment office with support personnel, the cost of purchasing or creating assessment instruments and analytic support systems, analyzing the results and implementing changes, and professional development related to student learning assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Peterson, Einarson et al. (1999) found that 47% of associate degree-granting institutions have a budget allocation specific to student learning assessment. More recent studies have not asked questions directly related to budget allocation for assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014).

Data analytic systems may be institutionally created or commercially purchased. Institutions must first determine the needs of a data analytic system before determining which method is best; some systems focus on data storage while others focus on data collection (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Some commercially available systems have sections to enter in assessment outcomes, goals, or objectives, as well as measurements, findings, targets, and action plans (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Additionally, institutions need to consider a system's ability to track students over time, including student characteristics, and are accessible to many different users (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). In 1997, 34% of associate degree-granting institutions had a computerized database and were the most likely of all types of institutions to utilize one

(Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999). Associate degree institutions indicated the assessment management system being utilized as somewhat supportive of assessment efforts (Jankowski et al., 2014; Kuh et al., 2014); while no direct evidence was reported in that study regarding perception of assessment related to the ease of use of a selected data management system, one could argue that the harder to utilize systems may have a negative impact on the user's perception of the reason for the data collection. Additionally, the studies are unable to identify if there is a correlation between the low perception of support in data management systems and the actual utility of the system or a lack of understanding of the system by respondents and users (Jankowski et al., 2014).

Professional development is most often focused on faculty but should also be appropriate for student affairs staff (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Administrators must determine what types of professional development strategies to employ. Student learning assessment professional development strategies include single-session workshops, multiple-session workshops, learning communities, or ongoing throughout the assessment cycle; focus on the different phases of assessment from development, deployment, and data interpretation; and may target new, adjunct, and seasoned faculty and staff (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Kuh et al. (2014) and Peterson, Einarson et al. (1999) found that associate degree-granting institutions had the most extensive use of professional development of all types of higher education institutions.

The predominant position in the literature regarding tying student learning assessment to faculty evaluation is that results should not be tied to evaluation processes (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). The use of incentives or rewards for those involved in student learning assessment has been cited as ways to achieve widespread participation (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Potential incentives include salary increases,

release time, public recognition, clerical support, and travel perks (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Associate's degree-granting institutions were the least likely of all institutions to use student learning assessment data in faculty evaluations but were most likely to consider assessment skills in the hiring process and to provide public recognition to those involved (Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999).

Scholars have advocated the integration of student learning assessment with other academic processes including program review, curriculum planning, and budgeting (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Jankowski et al. (2018) found that student learning assessment was included in many other processes including program review and improvement, curricular modification, and learning outcome revision. Associate degree-granting institutions were most likely to report having completed formal evaluation processes of student learning assessment (Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999). Common elements of the evaluation of student learning assessment processes include review of the plan or policies, the achievement of objectives, the structure and responsibility for planning, and problems in conducting assessment.

Institutional Use of Results

Major decisions that may be impacted by student learning assessment include academic planning, revising of institutional mission and goals, professional development, and resource allocation (Kuh et al., 2014; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Additionally, student learning assessment may shape academic policies and planning such as faculty and staff selection criteria and reward structures; design and content of student support services, tracking systems, orientation activities, student advising, counseling, and planning (Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Peterson, Einarson et al. (1999) found that decision-making in some associate degree-granting institutions was influenced by student learning assessment, but most respondents are unaware of

the impact of student learning assessment on institutional decision-making. The processes that were influenced included student learning assessment processes, academic support services, teaching methods, and curriculum (Peterson, Einarson et al., 1999). In a study of four-year institutions, Blach and Wise (2010) found that few institutions had established structures in place to use assessment data for institutional improvement. Kuh et al. (2014) found that associate degree institutions were more likely to utilize assessment results in institutional decision-making, including strategic planning, budgeting, professional development, and benchmarking.

Literature on institutional impacts of student learning assessment focuses on student performance, faculty behavior, and curriculum changes. Little empirical data is available that directly links changes in student performance with student learning assessment processes (Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Jonson et al., 2017; Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018). More commonly, data suggest that student learning assessment impacts program reviews, curriculum modifications, policy development or modification, and institutional improvements (Kuh et al., 2014). Studies suggest program and curriculum changes are the most common impact resulting from student learning assessment at associate's degree-granting institutions (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Curriculum changes include revising course content, length, and sequencing, as well as balancing out required and elective courses and changing course evaluations.

Faculty and Student Learning Assessment

Assessment literature has sustained one important stipulation for success in student learning assessment – faculty inclusion in and support of the process, from creation to implementation is necessary (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Emil & Cres, 2014; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010; Welsh et al., 2003; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). According to Cain and Hutchings

(2015), curricular matters have long been the responsibility of faculty, from design to implementation to evaluation, therefore improvement for learning is “inherently a faculty-centric process” (p. 98) relying on their expertise, judgements, and supports.

Not only is faculty inclusion in each step of the process important, faculty collaboration is necessary for student learning assessment at the program and institutional levels (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Caudle & Hammons, 2018; Nunley et al., 2011). Barriers inhibiting community college faculty participation in the assessment process include high teaching loads; lack of knowledge and understanding of the process; inadequate training, and lack of support or follow-through by administration (Caudle & Hammons, 2018; Hutchings, 2010; Nunley et al., 2011). These same barriers, in addition to a perceived loss of academic freedom, an increase in the bureaucratic mandates of administration and other outside entities, increased work for little return, and little evidence that indicates assessment makes a difference in student learning and achievement, have been identified by faculty as reasons why engagement in student learning assessment may be minimized (Cain & Hutchings, 2015; Emil & Cres, 2014; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Hutchings, 2010).

Several characteristics have been regarded in literature as important indicators of faculty participation and engagement in student learning assessment. Faculty involvement and satisfaction with student learning assessment processes increase when they believe the process is used for improvement purposes including programmatic, student achievement, and instructional improvements (Caudle & Hammons, 2018; Gruenwald & Peterson, 2003, Welsh et al., 2003; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Ewell (2009) noted that in the early days of student learning assessment, activities were removed from the classroom, making it more about compliance than improvement; for faculty to believe in the process of student learning assessment, outcomes,

measurements, and actions must be tied to the classroom and student learning. Studies indicate that institutions are utilizing assessment approaches that are more meaningful for improvement purposes, many of which are classroom-based processes (Kinzie et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014). Emil and Cres (2014) found that faculty who viewed the processes as an educative process were more likely to be engaged in student learning assessment. Grunwald and Peterson (2003) found that as faculty work at an institution longer, their satisfaction with the institutional approach to assessment increases.

According to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB, 2022), adjunct faculty accounted for 69% of instructional faculty in North Carolina public two-year colleges; slightly higher than the 64% noted across two-year colleges in the SREB region. As previously noted, faculty are a driving force in the success of a student learning assessment program; with high numbers of adjuncts at the community colleges, including them in the process is both essential and challenging. Nunley et al. (2011) found that adjunct faculty are involved in student learning assessment at a much lower rate than full-time faculty. While adjunct faculty may be required to assess students via embedded assignments, they may not have an understanding as to what is being assessed or why the process has been implemented. Because they are often hired only to teach courses, adjunct faculty are less likely to be provided professional development on assessment processes and are not typically included in assessment discussions and creation (Blaich & Wise, 2018; Nunley et al., 2011). Communicating with adjunct faculty about assessment processes may be difficult as they are not as likely to participate in on-campus activities, such as departmental and college-wide meetings regarding assessment (Buffardi, 2019). It is important for full-time faculty and administration to work with and include adjunct

faculty in the assessment conversations to ensure they understand the process, the reasoning, and the methods (Buffardi, 2019).

Gruenwald and Peterson (2003) found that years worked at a specific institution and total years worked in higher education were potential predictors in a faculty member's satisfaction with the institutional approach to student learning assessment. Though not typical in the North Carolina Community College system, studies have shown that faculty tenure or rank may affect their investment in student learning assessment. Faculty experiences with program specific accreditation as well as experiences in accreditation or assessment at workplaces outside of higher education may increase their understanding, support, and participation in student learning assessment (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Studies on faculty commitment to or engagement in student learning assessment are limited and as noted by Emil and Cres (2014), "further inquiry into faculty attitudes, values, and motivations regarding assessment is critical" (p. 534) to identify strategies to leverage faculty participation in student learning assessment.

Challenges of Student Learning Assessment in Community Colleges

According to Nunley et al. (2011), community colleges face many challenges in student learning assessment that differ from their four-year counterparts. Perhaps the biggest hurdle community colleges face is the student demographic who enroll in the institutions and their overall educational goals. The students who attend community colleges have a multitude of goals upon admission, many of which are achievable without obtaining a formal credential. The multitude of goals including basic skills classes, skill or trade acquisition, traditional technical programs, and university transfer preparation, require the mission of the institution to be broad. Due to the broad nature of the missions, with multiple learning opportunities and approaches,

multiple methods for learning assessment are required to ensure all students are meeting their learning goals (Nunley et al., 2011).

The student characteristics of those that matriculate into a community college are much different than the students who enroll in a four-year college or university (Nunley et al., 2011). The reading and writing skills of many of the college students entering a community college are at lower than high school levels. These students often do not take developmental coursework in the appropriate sequences, start and stop out of class work based on life events, are unsure of their educational goals, lack a foundation of support outside of school, are unsure how to navigate the college environment, and often leave an institution without completing a credential (Kennedy, 2023). Because the student population is so different, community colleges must figure out how to assess students based on their unique learning needs and goals; this is drastically different from the traditional university student who enters college with the plan of completing a program of study for which learning is typically assessed at the end of a program. As many students enroll in a community college to complete one or two courses, a certificate rather than a full degree, or stop out of college prior to completion (Chen & Hu, 2021; Kennedy, 2023), community colleges that choose to measure learning at the end of a program or within a capstone course not be necessary for certificate completion may miss assessing the learning of many of their student body.

Students enrolling in community colleges spend much more of their lives in settings outside of the classroom, such as their home, workplace or other educational institutions (Kennedy, 2023). They may have a wealth of life experience different from traditional college students and display patterns of starting and stopping out based on circumstances outside of the classroom. It is difficult for community colleges to measure that knowledge and skills were

specifically gained in the classroom or as a program completer; this may not be an issue if an institution is trying to measure what students are expected to know at the end of a course or program but would prove difficult if student learning assessment attempted to prove the student gained knowledge or skill specifically as a result of a course or program (Nunley et al., 2011).

Additional problems community colleges may face are a deficiency in funding for student learning assessment, lack of support in institutional research, and as mentioned previously, a high number of adjunct instructors (Nunley et al., 2011). While many of the experts in student learning assessment describe best practices that encourage rewarding faculty with stipends or release time out of the classroom to actively work on learning assessment, this is often difficult for community colleges due to their lower funding models. The high cost of standardized testing or surveys used to measure student learning as well as the high cost of software that aid in the collection aggregation and reporting of data may be a budget restraint, leaving faculty and staff to create home-grown assessment processes, which may limit how deep assessment practices are (Nunley et al., 2011). Limited professional support, by way of institutional research departments, may lead to a lack of research capacity, difficulty in understanding how student data is compiled, and not utilizing data as an institutional priority.

Institutional Characteristics

Carnegie Classifications

Utilizing institutional classifications in research allows researchers to make comparisons of similar environments. Institutions of higher education are classified by the Carnegie Foundation by the types of credentials awarded, program mix, student course-taking characteristics, and size and setting. Associate granting institutions have a basic definition based on disciplinary focus, which is either transfer, career-technical, or mixed and student type, which

is either traditional, nontraditional, or mixed. There are nine total classifications within the associate degree classifications. Associate degree-granting institutions are also categorized based on their instructional program focus to include: high transfer, in which fewer than 30% of credentials awarded are in career and technical programs; mixed transfer/career and technical, in which 30 to 49% of credentials awarded are in career and technical programs; and high career and technical, in which more than 50% of the credentials awarded are in career and technical programs. Associate degree-granting institutions can be classified based on the course-taking patterns of students, which looks at the percentage of the student population attending part- versus full-time. Associate's degree-granting institutions are also classified based on size or full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment, which is calculated as full-time plus one-third part-time. These classifications include very small, small, medium, large, and very large.

Previous editions of the Carnegie Classifications were based on measures including institutional setting, size, and number of campuses. Institutions were classified as rural, suburban, or urban based on the setting in which they were located. Institutional size was based on a full-year unduplicated headcount. Campus designations were based on the number of physical campuses that have institutional control and governance. (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.).

Program Disciplines

The NCCCS, like most institutions of higher education, categorizes academic programs into program disciplines, which consist of programs that are within similar fields. The NCCCS has eleven program areas including college transfer, general education, agriculture and natural resources, biological and chemical technologies, business technologies, commercial and artistic production technologies, construction technologies, engineering technologies, health sciences,

industrial technologies, public service technologies, and transportation system technologies (North Carolina Community College System, n.d.).

While all institutions within the NCCCS are accredited at the institutional level by SACSCOC, some programs may be required or choose to participate in specialized, programmatic accreditation. Ewell et al. (2011) found that faculty from accredited programs were more likely to report that institutional-level accreditation was a major influence in assessment efforts. Faculty from accredited programs also reported being more engaged in and having higher faculty involvement in assessment work and reporting more use of assessment results than those of non-accredited programs (Ewell et al., 2011).

Kuh et al. (2015) noted that it is important to consider faculty disciplines when asking about assessment, as specific disciplines “inform how faculty perceive and approach assessment” (p. 103). Ewell et al. (2011) found that faculty in education and health science programs are the most active disciplines in assessment, which may also be tied to specialized accreditation. There was found to be a wide variety in the types of measurements used within different disciplines (Ewell et al., 2011; Swarat et al., 2017); it is important to consider that different types of measurements may be better utilized to capture learning in different disciplines. Swarat et al. (2017) noted that, because of the wide range of assessment measures utilized between disciplines, “it would be impossible and unwise to require disciplines to follow prescribed assessment methods” (p. 9) and that the integrity of the assessment process could be maintained while allowing programs to manage the processes in ways that work best for them. Ewell et al. (2011) noted that more research regarding how different disciplines engage in and undertake assessment would contribute to a better understanding of assessment processes overall. Asking about program disciplines and understanding which programs have specialized accreditation

requirements will allow the researcher to make comparisons of faculty within similar environments.

Summary

The review of the literature on student learning assessment explored the history, the effect of regional accreditation on, the institutional approaches to, faculty participation in, and challenges of student learning assessment over the last four decades. While some early scholars of student learning assessment debated whether student learning assessment had staying power or was a fad, others discussed the two cultures that emerged – one of compliance and one of improvement. Large scale studies have traditionally targeted academic and institutional effectiveness administrators and left out the voice of faculty; the studies that have captured faculty voices have typically been small and conducted at one institution with only a handful of faculty included. By utilizing the survey of faculty and administrator perceptions of student learning assessment, this study supplements the small body of literature representing the faculty while also examining differences in perceptions of faculty and administrators.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional quantitative study was designed to measure differences in perceptions between community college faculty and administrators regarding the importance of student learning assessment and identify factors that influence their support for student learning assessment. The study instrument was designed by Apigo (2015) in her dissertation regarding faculty and administrator perceptions of assessment in relation to institutional professional development opportunities; her instrument was based on the instrument used by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) in their studies on faculty and administrator perceptions of institutional effectiveness. The sample population pulled from a large, diverse system of community colleges, which allowed for representativeness of the study populations and improves the likelihood that the findings will be generalizable to two-year institutions across the United States. Descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing were performed to test the research questions and hypotheses.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Using a fixed choice instrument, the study addressed the following research questions and hypotheses:

- RQ1: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perception of the importance of student learning assessment?
- H₀1: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perception of the importance of student learning assessment.
- RQ2: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment?
- H₀2: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment.

- RQ3: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment?
- H₀₃: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment.
- RQ4: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment?
- H₀₄: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment.
- RQ5: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment?
- H₀₅: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment.
- RQ6: What factors account for differences in perceptions towards the importance of student learning assessment?

Site Selection and Research Population

Research was focused on faculty and administrators from the 58 institutions within the North Carolina Community College System. The North Carolina Community College system, the third largest in the United States, is a robust system of institutions of varying size, location, and diversity across the system. In 2024, the NCCCS employed nearly 31,000 employees, 38% of whom are curriculum faculty and administrators (NCCCS, 2024a), and educated over 590,000 students (NCCCS, 2024b). The size of the system and large number of faculty and administrators provided a large pool from which to obtain respondents, as well as allow for generalizability to other institutions, systems, and accrediting bodies.

The research population included full-time curriculum faculty and college administrators, including chief academic officers, deans, division or department chairs, and institutional effectiveness administrators. Because the researcher was attempting to identify differences in perceptions regarding student learning assessment, survey respondents were asked to identify their primary role at the institution but were given the ability to not answer. Part-time faculty were not included in the research population as they may lack professional development on institutional student learning assessment processes, may not be expected to participate in student learning assessment, and may not fully understand the requirements or process of student learning assessment. Participants were asked to identify the institutions at which they are primarily employed but were allowed to continue the survey without providing an answer.

Instrumentation

To address the research questions, this study used a web-based survey comprised of closed-ended questions related to faculty and administrator experiences with and perceptions of student learning assessment (see Appendix C). Survey questions were taken from two instruments previously utilized in assessment research: (1) a survey designed by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) for their study regarding faculty and administrative support for institutional effectiveness activities and (2) questions adapted from Welsh and Metcalf (2003) by Apigo (2015) for her dissertation regarding faculty and administrator perceptions of assessment in relation to institutional professional development opportunities. Permission was granted by Metcalf to utilize his original study instrument and by Apigo to utilize her revisions and questions regarding challenges.

Five areas of interest, further referred to as constructs, were measured by the survey; these include the perceived importance of student learning assessment, the motivation behind

student learning assessment, the depths of implementation of student learning assessment, personal involvement in student learning assessment, and perceived challenges of student learning assessment. Questions regarding student learning assessment depth of implementation and level of involvement were adapted from the original questions drafted by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) by simply replacing their term “institutional effectiveness” with the term “student learning assessment”. Questions regarding the perceived importance of and motivation for student learning assessment were taken directly from Apigo’s (2015) adaptations and questions regarding challenges with student learning assessment were written by Apigo based on her literature review regarding variables that may be associated with challenges identified in assessment.

The study questions originally developed by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) were based on variables identified in their literature review that pertain to the research of institutional effectiveness:

1. Perceived Motivation, or the extent to which institutional effectiveness activities are motivated at an institution primarily by internal interests in quality improvement, instead of the need to respond to external mandates.
2. Perceived Depth of Implementation, or the extent to which institutional effectiveness activities are implemented and promote change at an institution.
3. Reported Level of Involvement, or how institutional participants view their personal involvement in the development and implementation of institutional effectiveness activities (p. 452).

Since Welsh and Metcalf (2003) included assessment as a part of the definition of institutional effectiveness processes studied in their research, and because many in higher

education today interchange the terms institutional effectiveness and assessment, the questions and the variables on which the questions were based, ensured the original questions, as well as Apigo's adaptations of them relevant for this study. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) validated these questions by having a panel of post-secondary education professionals rate the questions based on appropriateness; additionally, the study was piloted to increase reliability.

The study questions created by Apigo (2015) to measure challenges related to assessment were based on variables identified in her literature review based on characteristics for meaningful SLO characteristics; each of the identified challenges are associated with the implementation and integration of student learning assessment within institutional culture. These questions were pre-tested by faculty and administrators prior to administration, which increased the validity and effectiveness of these items.

The survey opened with a statement of informed consent (see Appendix C) and respondents had the option to move forward with the survey or opt out of participation. Respondents wishing to participate were asked several demographic questions including the institution at which they were primarily employed; the amount of time they have worked in community colleges, the NCCCS, and most current position; and for those who were currently teaching or have previously taught, the discipline in which they taught and if they had experience with specialized accreditation. Following demographic questions, each of the five constructs had a series of questions, referred to as items, from which respondents answered using a five-point Likert scale. The Likert scale utilized for each question on the study included the following options: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, and strongly agree. In Qualtrics, each of the Likert options were assigned a corresponding numerical code with strongly disagree equaling one, disagree equaling two, neither agree nor disagree equaling three, agree

equaling four, and strongly agree equaling five. Several questions in the survey were reverse coded to prevent response bias.

Data Collection Procedures

To solicit participation, a request for participation was sent via email, utilizing listservs specific to NCCCS institution presidents and chief academic officers (CAO). Participation invitation emails included an overview of the research, a description of the research population, a statement that personally identifiable information was not being collected, information about and contact information for the researcher, and a link to the survey in Qualtrics. To reach institutional effectiveness/research (IE/IR) staff at all 58 institutions are members, the same request for participation was posted to the Community College Planning and Research Organization (CCPRO) Microsoft Teams site. The requests for participation sent to the presidents, CAOs and IE/IR staff also asked that participants in those positions forward the survey request to deans, division and department chairs, and faculty at their institutions and encourage the participation of those positions as well. To increase participation, peers in attendance at the North Carolina Community College System conference in October 2024 were provided with the information to participate via QR codes and I posted a link to the study on my LinkedIn page.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Survey data, with the assigned numerical code for each of the Likert scale answers, was downloaded from Qualtrics and exported into SPSS. Each construct being measured contained seven to eleven items. Each item was scored so that a higher number reflects: (1) a stronger perceived importance of SLO assessment, (2) a greater belief that institutional improvement is the primary motivation for SLO assessment, (3) a greater belief there is

extensive implementation of SLO assessment, and (4) a higher level of respondent involvement in professional development for SLO assessment. Several questions in the survey were reverse coded to prevent response bias. Prior to performing data analysis, the questions that were reverse coded were adjusted in SPSS to ensure consistency in results. To compare the results of full-time faculty and administrators, the position was recoded into a new variable; the variable of administrators included anyone who identified a position of chief academic officer, academic dean, academic division chair, academic department chair, or IE/IR administration.

For each of the constructs, reliability analysis was performed using each of the items assigned to the specific construct, to ensure correlation; values above 0.7 indicated acceptable reliability within the construct. The mean value for each construct was calculated. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated for each group of respondents.

Independent t-tests were performed to determine if there were significant differences between full-time faculty and administrators in the constructs of perceived importance of, motivation for, depth of implementation of, involvement in, and identified challenges of student learning assessment. Based on Apigo's original study, the construct related to challenges was divided by questions pertaining to challenges in leadership, resources, institutional commitment, and assessment processes. Testing was conducted using an $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance. Correlation analysis was conducted to analyze the strength and direction of relationships between the perceived importance of student learning assessment and the other constructs of motivation, implementation, involvement, and challenges. Linear regression tests were utilized to examine the relationship between perceived importance of learning assessment and the other constructs, including motivation, involvement, implementation, leadership challenges, commitment challenges as well as position, program type, and participation in specialized accreditation, to

determine which factors predict perceived importance of student learning assessment and how their effects vary across groups. All analyses were conducted using complete cases for each construct individually. For instance, if a respondent had missing responses for the Importance construct but provided complete responses for the other construct, their response was excluded from the Importance analysis but included in analyses of the remaining outcomes.

Summary

As scholars continue to debate the efficaciousness of student learning assessment, it is important to understand differences in academic administration and faculty perceptions of student learning assessment and recognize the challenges related to the process. This study utilized a survey that measured five areas of interest including the perceived importance of student learning assessment, the motivation behind student learning assessment, the depth of implementation of student learning assessment, involvement in student learning assessment, and challenges of student learning assessment. Participants were solicited through various means including NCCCS position specific list serves, the NCCCS bi-annual conference, and LinkedIn. Data was collected through Qualtrics and results were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, independent t-tests, correlation analysis, and linear regression analysis in the statistical software SPSS.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study examined how full-time faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) perceive student learning assessment and identified factors that influence their perceptions. The following research questions and hypotheses are addressed in this study:

- RQ1: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perceptions of the importance of student learning assessment?
- H₀₁: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perceptions towards the importance of student learning assessment.
- RQ2: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment?
- H₀₂: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment.
- RQ3: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment?
- H₀₃: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment.
- RQ4: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment?
- H₀₄: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment.

- RQ5: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment?
- H₀₅: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment.
- RQ6: What factors account for differences in perceptions towards the importance of student learning assessment?

Survey Sample

The study sample included full-time faculty, academic administrators, and institutional effectiveness and research (IE/IR) administrators in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). Participants were recruited for the study via NCCCS list serves, in which list serve members were asked to forward the survey request to appropriate faculty and staff within their respective institutions; in person at the NCCCS conference; and via LinkedIn.

Prior to obtaining results for the survey, G*Power software was utilized to determine an adequate sample size (Faul, et al., 2007). Using a two-tailed independent t-test with a significance level of 0.05, a desired power of 0.80, and an effect size of 0.5, the analysis indicated that each group should have a sample size of 64, for a total population of 128.

A total of 200 people elected to participate in the survey, however 25 of those did not respond to the question about position and 11 designated they were part-time faculty; these respondents were not included, resulting in a total sample of 164 participants. Due to varying response rates across survey questions, the total number of respondents (n) for each research question differs, as participants were not excluded from the study if they did not answer every question. Analyses were conducted using complete cases for each outcome individually; for example, if a respondent had a missing value for the Importance outcome but provided complete

responses for the other outcomes, their response was excluded from the Importance analysis but included in analyses of the remaining outcomes.

Of the total sample, 99 identified as full-time faculty and 65 identified as one of the position types categorized into administrators (chief academic officer, academic dean, academic division chair, academic department chair, or IE/IR administrators), as summarized in Table 1. Based on these calculations, the population for this study is sufficient and stronger than the population recommended by G*Power.

Table 1

Faculty and Administrator Demographics

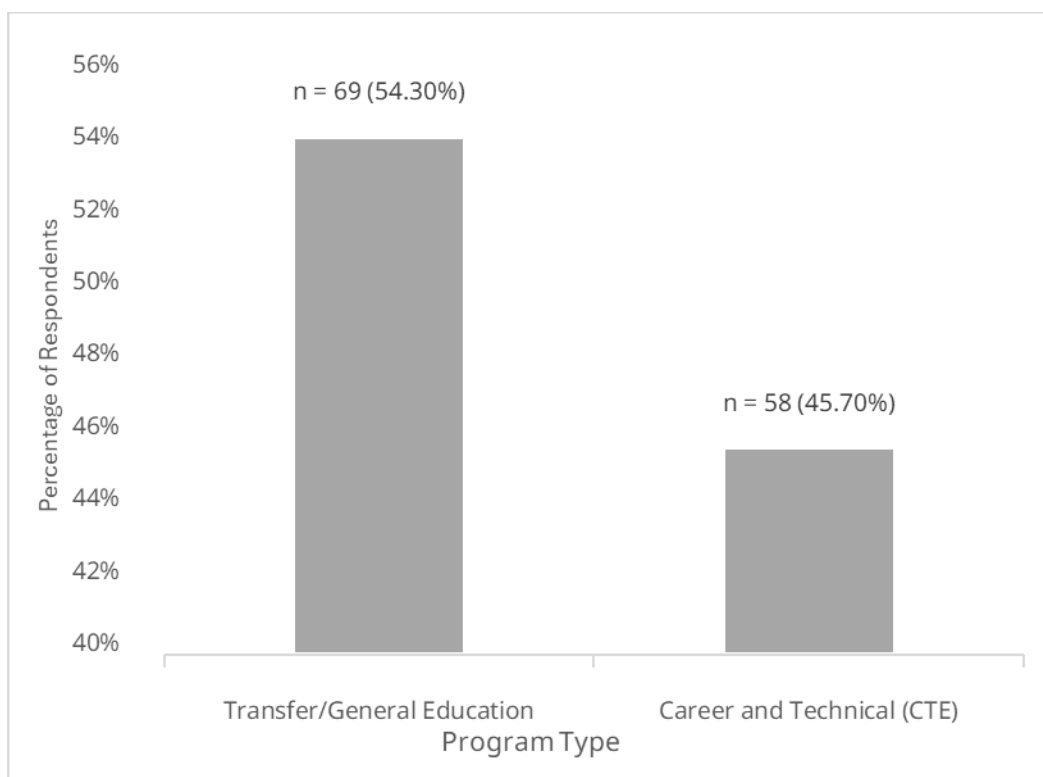
Role	n	% of Total Sample	% of Administrators
Faculty	99	60.4%	—
Administrators	65	39.6%	100%
Chief Academic Officer	11	6.7	16.9
Academic Dean	13	7.9	20
Academic Division Chair	1	0.6	1.5
Academic Department Chair	12	7.3	18.5
IE/IR Administration	28	17.1	43.1
Total	164	100%	—

Note. Percentages for administrator subcategories are based on the total number of administrators (n = 65). Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Additional demographic data was collected on participants to better describe the participants. Participants were asked to identify the program area in which they primarily taught and if their program had programmatic or specialized accreditation; this information is summarized in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1

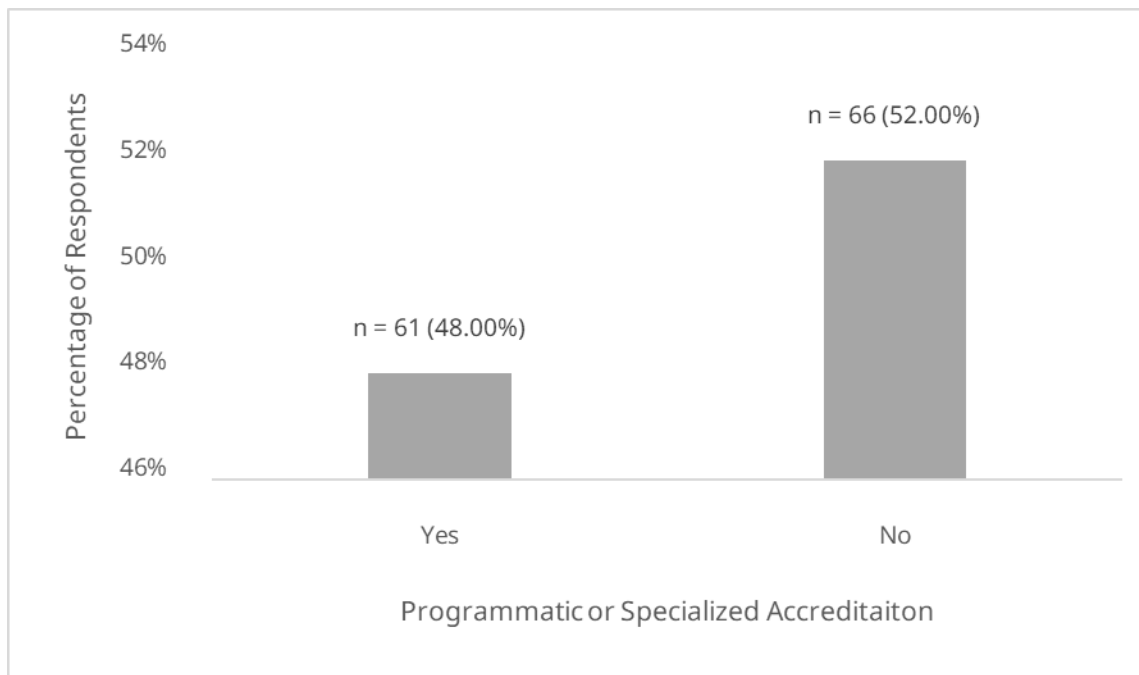
Primary Area of Instruction



Note. Responses to this question include faculty and administrators; total N = 127. A total of 37 did not answer this question.

Figure 2

Experience with Programmatic or Specialized Accreditation



Note. Responses to this question include faculty and administrators; total N = 127. A total of 37 did not answer this question.

Research Questions One Through Five

Five constructs including the perceived importance of student learning assessment, the motivation behind student learning assessment, the depth of implementation of student learning assessment, involvement in student learning assessment, and perceived challenges of student learning assessment were measured by the survey. Reliability analysis was performed on the group of questions within each construct. Each of the five constructs had a Cronbach's α of >0.70 , as detailed in Table 2, therefore demonstrating acceptable internal consistency.

Table 2*Reliability Analysis of Constructs*

Construct	Cronbach's α	Number of Items
Importance	.84	11
Motivation	.80	7
Implementation	.77	9
Involvement	.83	7
Challenges	.88	8

To answer research questions one through five, descriptive statistics and independent t-tests were utilized to compare faculty and administrator responses; Table 3 summarizes the results of these tests. Statistically significant differences were found between faculty and administrator in the areas of importance of, motivation for, implementation of, and involvement in student learning assessment.

Table 3

Comparison of Faculty and Administrator Means, Standard Deviations, and T-Test Results on Student Learning Assessment Constructs

Construct	Faculty			Administrator			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD			
Importance	85	3.76	.68	58	4.17	.54	-4.04	137	<.001***
Motivation	80	3.02	.72	57	3.32	.65	-2.51	127	.013*
Implementation	78	3.52	.59	56	3.73	.56	-2.14	122	.035*
Involvement	75	3.80	.76	56	4.14	.64	-2.65	127	.009**
Challenges	74	3.23	.75	55	3.22	.91	.55	104	.96

Note. Response options were as follows — 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

Research questions one through five and the respective findings are:

- RQ1: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perceptions of the importance of student learning assessment?
- Findings: There are statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perceptions of the importance of student learning assessment; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.
- RQ2: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment?

- Findings: There are statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.
- RQ3: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment?
- Findings: There are statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.
- RQ4: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment?
- Findings: There are statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.
- RQ5: Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment?
- Findings: There are no statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment; therefore, the null hypotheses is accepted.

The construct questions related to the perceived importance of student learning assessment were designed to assess how important respondents felt specific activities related to student learning assessment are, and when aggregated, describe the overall feelings of importance regarding the practice. There was a significant difference between faculty ($M=3.76$, $SD=.68$) and administrators ($M=4.17$, $SD=.54$) in their perceptions of the importance of student

learning assessment. Administrators rated the importance of assessment higher than faculty, indicating that administrators attribute greater importance to student learning assessment than faculty. It is important to note that the faculty mean of 3.76, on a five-point scale, indicates a generally positive perception of the importance of student learning assessment.

The motivation construct questions were designed to assess whether respondents felt student learning assessment was driven more by internal improvements or external requirements. Higher scores on the five-point scale indicate that the assessment process is motivated by internal improvement rather than external mandates. There was a statistically significant difference between faculty ($M=3.02$, $SD=.72$) and administrators ($M=3.32$, $SD=.65$) in their perceived motivation for student learning assessment. Administrators rated the questions in the construct higher than faculty, indicating administrators view student learning assessment as being more internally motivated.

The implementation construct questions were designed to assess how thoroughly student learning assessment is embedded into institutional processes. Data show a statistically significant difference in faculty ($M=3.52$, $SD=.59$) and administrators ($M=3.73$, $SD=.56$) in perceived depth of implementation. The higher mean response of administrators suggests the group views the process of student learning assessment as more deeply integrated in institutional processes than faculty.

The involvement construct questions were designed to determine how institutional respondents view their personal involvement in the development and implementation of student learning assessment. The data reveal a statistically significant difference in involvement in student learning assessment, where administrators ($M=4.14$, $SD=.64$) reported greater involvement in assessment activities than faculty ($M=3.80$, $SD=.76$). This data indicate that

administrators may be more actively engaged in the processes of assessment and decision-making than faculty.

The challenge construct questions were written to determine how participants rated commonly identified challenges of student learning assessment. When comparing the means of all eight questions within the construct, there was no significant difference found between faculty ($M=3.23$, $SD=.91$) and administrators ($M=3.22$, $SD=.91$). Questions were further separated into subtopics to determine if there were differences in how faculty and administrators perceived challenges with leadership, resources, institutional commitment, or processes. The data is summarized in Table 4. The data does not show a significant difference in perceived challenges within the different subtopics, but results do suggest that process challenges are more of a concern for all respondents than other types of challenges.

Table 4

Comparison of Faculty and Administrator Means, Standard Deviations, and T-Test Results on Student Learning Assessment Challenge Subtopics

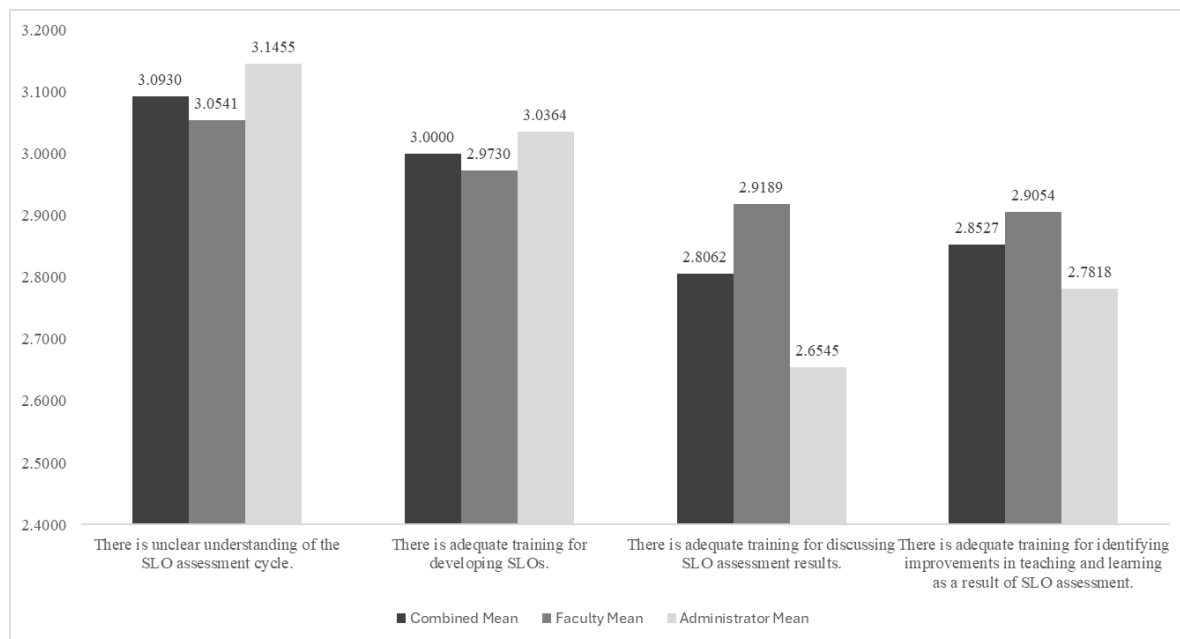
Challenge Subtopic	Faculty			Administrator			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD			
Leadership	74	3.46	1.17	55	3.69	1.23	-1.08	113	.28
Resources	74	3.35	1.08	55	3.25	1.25	.46	106	.65
Commitment	74	3.57	.83	55	3.59	.91	-.11	110	.91
Processes	74	2.96	.85	55	2.90	1.00	.348	105	.73

Note: Response options were as follows — 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree

To further assess the concerns related to the process challenges, the means of the individual questions within the category were examined to determine if there was one or more specific areas faculty and/or administrators answered with lower scores. As noted in Figure 3, adequate training in the areas of result discussion and identifying improvements in teaching and learning were found to be more of a concern than training of developing student learning outcomes and understanding the assessment cycle, with administrators scoring these areas lower than faculty.

Figure 3

Student Learning Assessment Process Concerns



Note: Response options were as follows — 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree

Research Question Six

To explore factors influencing differences in perceptions of the importance of student learning assessment, correlational analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were performed.

Correlation analysis, summarized in Table 5, was conducted to analyze the strength and direction of relationships between the perceived importance of student learning assessment and the other constructs of motivation, implementation, involvement, and challenges. The correlation data show that there are significant ($p < .01$), moderate to strongly positive correlations (correlation coefficients range from $r = .32$ to $r = .53$) between motivation, implementation, and involvement, and perceived importance of student learning assessment. Data show a significant ($p \leq .05$), yet weakly positive correlation ($r = .18$) between challenges related to leadership and institutional commitment and perceived importance of student learning assessment. The subtopics of process and resource challenges showed no significant correlation with perceived importance of student learning assessment.

Table 5*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Constructs*

Construct	<i>n</i> ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1.Importance	143	3.93	.66	-								
2.Motivation	137	3.14	.71	.53**	-							
3.Implementation	134	3.61	.58	.32**	.37**	-						
4.Involvement	131	3.95	.73	.44**	.35**	.56**	-					
5.Challenges	129	3.22	.82	.139	.359**	.715**	.410**	-				
6.Process Challenges	129	2.94	.92	.07	.25**	.62**	.36**	.916**	-			
7.Leadership Challenges	129	3.56	1.20	.18*	.31**	.58**	.35**	.78**	.58**	-		
8.Resource Challenges	129	3.31	1.15	.12	.33**	.57**	.32**	.80**	.66**	.57**	-	
9.Commitment Challenges	129	3.58	.86	.18*	.39**	.62**	.34*	.77**	.51**	.66**	.57**	-

Note: ^a*n* represents the number of participants who answered all questions related to each construct; differences are due to some participants not responding to all items within a given construct.

Response options were as follows - 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree

p*<.05, *p*<.01

Next, a three-step hierarchical regression, summarized in Table 6, was performed to examine the effect of position on perceived importance of student learning assessment after removing the effects of the control variables motivation, involvement, implementation, leadership challenges, commitment challenges, position, and control variable/position interactions. Other variables related to challenges were not included as they were determined to have no significant correlation with importance. The first step of the regression model was determined to be significant, indicating that the control variables strongly influence the perceived importance of student learning assessment. With the inclusion of position, the model remains significant for predicting perceived importance; however, the small change in F indicates that position does not have a significant impact on predicting importance. In the third step, the addition of the interaction variables significantly improves the model, indicating the relationship between some of the control variables and perceived importance depends on position.

Table 6*Summary of Hierarchical Regression with Perceived Importance as the Dependent Variable*

Step	Predictor Variable	R ²	ΔR ²	ΔF
1	Control Variables ^a	.41	.41	16.835**
2	Position ^b	.43	.02	1.62**
3	Interaction Variables ^c	.48	.05	3.19**

Note.

^a Control variables include motivation, involvement, implementation, leadership challenges, and commitment challenges.

^b Includes the control variables and position (faculty versus administrator).

^c Includes control variables, position, and interactions of each control variable x position.

** $p < .001$.

Since the hierarchical regression results showed interaction effects based on position, separate regression analyses were conducted for faculty and administrators. These analyses examined how motivation, implementation, involvement, leadership challenges, and commitment challenges differently predict the perceived importance of student learning assessment for each role. Results are summarized in Table 7. The regression model for faculty was statistically significant ($F(5,68) = 15.361, p < .001$) and explained 53.0% of the variance in perceived importance of student learning assessment ($R^2 = .530$), with motivation ($\beta = .547, p < .001$) and involvement ($\beta = .407, p < .001$) as the only significant predictors. The regression model for administrators was not statistically significant ($F(5,49) = 1.880, p = .115$) and explained only 16.1% of the variance in perceived importance of student learning assessment ($R^2 = .161$), with motivation ($\beta = .392, p = .012$) as the only significant predictor.

Table 7

Comparison of Predictors of Importance for Faculty and Administrators

Predictor Variable	Faculty			Administrator		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Motivation	.56	.09	.55**	.33	.13	.39*
Implementation	.36	.09	.41**	.01	.15	.01
Involvement	-.042	.15	-.04	.16	.19	.16
Leadership Challenges	-.04	.07	-.07	.01	.08	.02
Commitment Challenges	.01	.10	.01	-.12	.13	-.20

Note: Faculty $R^2 = .53, p < .001$

Administrator $R^2 = .16, p$ is not significant.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Welsh and Metcalf (2003) suggested that college personnel who participate in programmatic accreditation activities may hold different attitudes toward institutional effectiveness than those who do not. To determine if programmatic accreditation may impact the perceived importance of student learning assessment in the respondents of this study, an independent t-test was performed between the respondents that indicated their program requires specialized or programmatic accreditation and those that do not. As summarized in Table 8, specialized or programmatic accreditation has no significant impact on the perceived importance of student learning assessment, nor the other constructs of motivation, depth of implementation, involvement, or perceived challenges.

Table 8

Comparison of Means, Standard Deviations, and T-Test Results Between Respondents with Specialized or Programmatic Accreditation and Those Without

Construct	Specialized/ Programmatic accreditation						<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	Other			n	Mean	SD			
	n	Mean	SD						
Importance	54	3.76	.71	60	3.96	.63	-1.54	107	.07
Motivation	49	3.06	.75	60	3.15	.70	-.65	99	.52
Implementation	48	3.53	.66	59	3.65	.55	-.99	92	.33
Involvement	46	3.97	.69	58	3.99	.75	-.13	100	.90
Challenges	39	3.18	.88	48	3.15	.88	.20	81	.85

Note: Response options were as follows - 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree

To further explore factors that may or may not impact perceived importance of student learning assessment, as well as the other constructs, an independent t-test was utilized to compare respondents indicated they teach or have taught in programs designed primarily for transfer to other colleges and/or universities and those primarily teaching or have taught in career and technical education programs, which lead to entering the workforce upon graduation. As shown in Table 9, program type also has no significant impact on the perceived importance of student learning assessment, nor the other constructs of motivation, depth of implementation, involvement, or perceived challenges.

Table 9

Comparison of Means, Standard Deviations, and T-Test Results Between Respondents Teaching in Transfer/General Education versus Career and Technical Education Programs

Construct	Transfer/General Education			Career and Technical			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD			
Importance	61	3.80	.74	54	3.90	.60	-.80	112	.43
Motivation	60	3.02	.74	51	3.15	.67	-1.01	109	.31
Implementation	59	3.55	.60	51	3.61	.60	-.54	106	.59
Involvement	58	3.88	.72	49	3.96	.77	-.54	99	.59
Challenges	49	3.05	.92	38	3.23	.73	-.98	85	.33

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine how full-time faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) perceive student learning assessment and identify factors that may influence their perceptions. The findings indicated that there are significant differences in how faculty and administrators perceive the importance of, the motivation for doing, the depth of implementation, and involvement in student learning assessment. Additionally, the findings show there is no significant difference in perceived challenges with student learning assessment between faculty and administrators.

Regression analysis demonstrated that motivation, depth of implementation, level of involvement in student learning assessment all strongly influence respondents perceived importance of student learning assessment. The addition of position in the analysis indicated that position independently contributes to perceived importance of learning assessment. When examining faculty and administrator responses separately due to significant interaction effects, motivation and involvement were found to be strong predictors for faculty while only motivation was significant for administrators. Additional analyses revealed that the type of program a person teaches in and participation in specialized or programmatic accreditation are not significant factors in the perceived importance of student learning assessment. The final chapter will further analyze these findings, discuss how they connect to existing literature, discuss implications for institutional practices, and provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This final chapter further explores the study findings as they relate to the conceptual framework created by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) and existing literature on the topic of student learning assessment. Implications regarding student learning assessment will be discussed and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Since the 1980s, higher education institutions have been called upon to demonstrate accountability for student learning (Ewell, 2008, 2018; Haviland, 2014; Rouseff-Baker & Holm, 2004); one of the accountability measures that arose from those calls was the report of student learning assessment data. Early research done on the topic of student learning assessment demonstrated that compliance, typically through accreditation, was the major motivating factor for performing student learning assessment (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999). More recent studies have indicated that improving student learning has also become an important factor for assessing student learning (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study was to examine how full-time faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) perceive student learning assessment and factors that influence their perceptions. This study aimed to add to the body of literature on student learning assessment from an institutional perspective, including both faculty and administrators at associate degree-granting institutions by answering the following questions:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in their perceptions of the importance of student learning assessment?
2. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived motivation for doing student learning assessment?

3. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived depth of implementation of student learning assessment?
4. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in involvement with student learning assessment?
5. Are there statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators in perceived challenges associated with student learning assessment?
6. What factors account for differences in attitudes of faculty and administrators towards student learning assessment?

Discussion

Research Question One

Research question one examined the perceived importance of student learning assessment among community college faculty and administrators. While other studies have explored what motivates institutions to perform student learning assessment, the types of assessment activities being utilized, or how well processes are implemented (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999), few have asked questions specifically related to perceived importance of the process (Apigo, 2015; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003; Welsh, et al., 2003). As student learning assessment is contemplated in literature as both a means of accountability and a process to ensure improvements in student learning (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2021; Ewell, 2009; Fuller et al., 2016; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010), it is important that scholars understand how those performing the processes perceive the importance.

The data indicate that administrators attribute greater importance to student learning assessment than faculty, though faculty responses do indicate a positive perception of the

importance of the processes. The data support the findings of other studies that have asked participants about importance; Welsh and Metcalf (2003) and Apigo (2015) also found administrators to rate importance higher than faculty, with faculty responses regarding importance more positive than negative. More research is needed to help understand why administrators and faculty do not place the same level of importance on student learning assessment and how institutions may increase faculty perceptions of the importance of the processes.

Research Question Two

Research question two explored the perceived motivation of community college faculty and administrators for performing student learning assessment. Perceived motivation reflects the extent to which faculty and administrators believe student learning assessment activities are utilized by an institution to meet internal interests in student improvement rather than for the need to respond to external mandates, such as accreditation (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). While studies have shown that accreditation has been the major influence for conducting student learning assessment over several decades (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999; Peterson & Einarson, 1997; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003), an institutional commitment to improving student learning has also been identified as a driver of the process (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2015; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003).

The data substantiate that academic administrators rated the questions regarding motivation higher than faculty, indicating administrators view student learning assessment as being more internally motivated for improvement rather than meeting external requirements. This finding substantiates that of Welsh and Metcalf (2003). However, other studies in which academic administrators were surveyed have indicated that external mandates, specifically

institutional and programmatic accreditation, were ranked higher as reasons for prompting student learning assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Nunley et al., 2011; Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999; Peterson & Einarson, 1997). Future inquiries may examine contextual nuances related to administrators' perceptions.

The data indicated that faculty perceive student learning assessment more neutrally, suggesting both external and internal motivators as drivers of the process. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) had a similar finding, with their faculty mean leaning a bit more towards internal motivation than the faculty in this study. Other research has not specifically asked faculty for their insights into the motivation for performing student learning assessment at the institutional level; most research in which faculty have been specifically studied with regard to student learning assessment has examined their personal motivation for participation (Caudle & Hammons, 2018; Emil & Cres, 2014; Gordon & Smith, 2022; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Ray, Peterson, & Montgomery, 2012).

Research Question Three

Research question three explored how community college faculty and administrators perceived the depth of implementation of student learning assessment. Depth of implementation refers to institutional integration, intentionality, and support for student learning assessment. Literature indicates that institutional commitment to student learning assessment, reflected in clearly defined assessment processes, broad faculty and staff involvement, communication, and adequate resource support, is a key driver of utilizing assessment for improvement. (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Emil & Cres, 2014; Jankowski et al., 2018; Jonson et al., 2017; Kuh et al., 2015; Nunley et al., 2011; Peterson & Einarson, 1997; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003).

The data suggest that administrators view student learning assessment as more fully implemented in institutional processes; however, faculty responses suggest a generally positive perception of student learning assessment implementation. Each of these findings compares well to those of Welsh and Metcalf (2003). In their research on faculty, Grunwald and Peterson (2003) found faculty were neutral to slightly not satisfied with institutional approaches to and support of student learning assessment, both constructs that contained aspects of implementation. Additionally, they identified multiple institutional factors that were found to predict faculty satisfaction with institutional approaches to and support of student learning assessment (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003); these factors could be utilized in additional studies to determine how well they predict faculty satisfaction with institutional implementation of student learning assessment processes.

Research Question Four

Research question four explored the perceived level of involvement of community college faculty and administrators in performing student learning assessment. The level of involvement refers to the participants' views of their personal involvement in student learning assessment. The involvement of faculty in all aspects of the student learning assessment processes has been advocated to promote and indicate the importance of student learning assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Fuller et al., 2016; Jonson et al., 2017; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010), however literature seems to assume administrator involvement in the process as there is little mention of how administrative positions are actually involved.

The data indicate that administrators in this study have a high level of involvement in the student learning assessment process. Faculty responses indicate they are actively involved but not at the level reported by administrators. These findings support those of Welsh and Metcalf

(2003). Wang and Hurley (2012) found that faculty are more willing to engage in student learning assessment when they perceive the processes as scholarly and there are benefits to teaching and learning. Additional research would be useful to determine how those faculty reporting higher levels of involvement perceive the process as beneficial and in what context.

Research Question Five

Research question five examined the perceived challenges of student learning assessment amongst community college faculty and administrators. The challenges addressed by the study were divided into four subgroups: leadership, resources, commitment, and processes. The challenges addressed in this study were identified by Apigo (2015) based on her literature review regarding variables associated with assessment challenges; the specific challenges addressed are associated with the implementation and integration of assessment, as they address areas such as leadership, resources, institutional integration and training for student learning assessment.

The data do not show a significant difference in perceived challenges within the different subtopics between faculty and administrators, suggesting both groups share similar views on the challenges presented. As the responses of both groups tend to be more neutral in the areas of leadership, resources, and commitment, this indicates that, while these challenges are not perceived as major barriers, there is still work to be done in the implementation and integration of student learning assessment.

The data do indicate concern around student learning assessment processes; faculty and administrators both responded more negatively to questions regarding the availability of training in discussing student learning assessment results and identifying improvements made because of student learning assessment processes. These concerns align with past research, which indicates

the need for more professional development specific to the processes of assessment, utilization of data, and identifying improvements (Emil & Cres, 2014; Friedlander & Serban, 2004; Gordon & Smith, 2022).

Research Question Six

Research question six examined what factors may influence perceptions of the importance of student learning assessment. Correlation data suggest that positive perceptions of importance of student learning assessment are strongly associated with internal motivation, personal involvement, and well-implemented processes; leadership and commitment also showed significant, yet weak, correlations.

Regression analysis results confirm internal motivation, personal involvement, and well implemented processes as meaningful predictors of perceived importance of student learning assessment and indicate that the effect of some predictors varies by role. Further examination of the effect of predictor variables on the perception of importance by role indicates that internal motivation and depth of implementation are significant predictors of importance for faculty whereas only internal motivation is a significant predictor for administrators. These results imply that, while personal involvement, leadership, and commitment are meaningful contributors to importance of student learning assessment, their influence does not appear to be specific to faculty or administrators.

The findings differ somewhat from that of Welsh and Metcalf (2003), who found that perceived motivation and personal level of involvement significantly predicted how important faculty and administrators viewed institutional effectiveness activities, including student learning assessment; additionally, depth of implementation also emerged as a significant predictor for administrators. The consistent finding across both studies is that internally motivated learning

assessment is a significant predictor of how faculty and administrators perceive the importance of student learning assessment; this underscores the need for institutions to cultivate a culture where assessment is valued for improvement purposes rather than merely a compliance process.

Welsh and Metcalf (2003) also looked at the influence of specialized or programmatic accreditation in their study with the theory that those in disciplines participating in such accreditation may be more favorable to institutional effectiveness initiatives, which prompted the inclusion of such a question in this study. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) found there to be no significant difference between those who indicated participating in specialized or programmatic accreditation in perceived importance of, primary motivation for, depth of implementation, and level of involvement in institutional effectiveness activities, which include student learning assessment; as a result of those findings, the authors suggested that future studies include examination of participation in specialized or programmatic accreditation. This study had the same findings; no significant difference was found between respondents indicating they had been associated with programs that had specialized or programmatic accreditation and those that had not.

I was also interested in examining whether the primary area of instruction had any effect on participant responses. While this relationship has not been previously examined, I was curious to understand whether teaching primarily transferable general education courses versus job-related career and technical courses would impact responses related to perceived impact, primary motivation for, level of implementation of, personal involvement in, and perceived challenges of student learning assessment. In practice, many of the courses taught within the general education framework may also be required to provide learning data for general learning outcome assessment in addition to specific, program related types of assessment; for this reason, as well

as the fact that all general education faculty must possess a master's level degree to teach transferrable courses, I wanted to determine whether the data may indicate that faculty and administrators who have served in general education courses may have differing views of student learning assessment. The data showed that the area of instruction had no significant impact.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Insofar as the intent of this study was to explore the perceptions of full-time faculty and administrators within the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) regarding student learning assessment and add to the existing literature, the study met its objectives. The data indicate the more internally motivated student learning assessment processes are, the more likely they are to be seen as important. Additionally, the data indicate that faculty perceive student learning assessment to be more important when the processes are deeply implemented. These findings substantiate the literature published regarding best practices for implementing student learning assessment for improvement rather than compliance (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Kuh et al., 2015; Suskie, 2009, 2018; Walvoord, 2010).

Based on these findings, community colleges need to follow best practices for learning assessment. First, student learning assessment should be framed as a driver of improvement in teaching and learning. Institutions must engage all stakeholders in the design and interpretation of assessment measures and align assessment activities with strategic goals. Assessment leaders can celebrate how assessment findings have led to tangible improvements, which will reinforce the perception that assessment is a vital tool for enhancing student learning and institutional effectiveness. Finally, institutions should provide targeted professional development, recognize contributions to assessment, and foster ongoing dialogue across departments to further strengthen a sense of shared ownership.

This research adds to the body of literature regarding student learning assessment and includes insights regarding faculty perceptions, which is an identified gap in the literature; however, few new insights were realized. The data obtained from this study could be looked at question by question to see if there are very specific topics that could inform practice in a different way or further serve to provide actionable data to support best practice literature. Researchers wanting to better understand the perceptions of importance of student learning assessment, especially the perceptions of faculty, could probe deeper into the subject by looking at different populations of faculty and administrators within higher education. As this study and that of Welsh and Metcalf (2003) only included schools accredited by SACSCOC, inclusion of institutions that are accredited by different institutional accreditors would be helpful to determine whether there is any relationship between the institutional accrediting bodies requirements regarding student learning assessment and administrator and faculty perceptions. Additional research regarding how participation in specialized or programmatic accreditation or teaching discipline may also provide insight into faculty perceptions of student learning assessment. Research specifically targeting faculty that includes questions specific to the “why” assessment is being performed, from both institutional and personal lenses, may also help understand better why the competing paradigms are still present.

Many of the studies referenced herein selected faculty for their involvement in accreditation and/or assessment activities (Caudle & Hammons, 2018; Emil & Cres, 2014; Gordon & Smith, 2022; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Ray, Peterson, & Montgomery, 2012; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003), which was identified as limitations by researchers. This study did not limit participants based on their experiences, nor did it ask participants to characterize their experiences. Having additional studies that include any administrator or faculty who wish to

participate, while capturing more information regarding their experiences with accreditation and/or assessment activities, may provide more insight into the perceptions regarding student learning assessment.

Student learning assessment in higher education has now been in practice for more than three decades, yet the competing paradigms of accountability/accreditation and improvement still exist. This is evidenced in the literature reviewed for this study and the data solicited from participants of this study. However, more than two decades after the Welsh and Metcalf (2003) study, the data do not indicate a significant shift in the perceptions of student learning assessment from the faculty or administrative perspective. Responses from faculty regarding importance of the student learning assessment process remain slightly higher than neutral, and those of administrators have not yet reached the level of “strongly agree” in the importance. As experts and researchers, are we asking the wrong questions about student learning outcome assessment? Are the conversations taking place on individual campuses regarding student learning assessment – from the reasons it is completed to how to utilize the results – hampering the perception of the processes by faculty and administrators alike?

In informal conversations, professional development presentations, assessment publications, and accreditation body meetings, I have encountered a wide range of approaches to assessing student learning outcomes. While there are commonalities in processes, there are also differences in the process from institution to institution. While some may argue this provides institutional autonomy on how and what is assessed, is it possible that the very notion of autonomous processes continues to cultivate a culture of accountability rather than one of improvement? Or is it the results and comments of peer reviewers during accreditation reviews that continue to promote one culture over another? Data from both SACSCOC and HLC indicate

that findings associated with standards and criteria associated with student learning outcomes assessment are among the most cited in both mid-cycle and reaffirmation reviews (Higher Learning Commission, 2024; Matveev, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). This pattern may reflect what Miller (2025) describes as a shift in accreditation from a mechanism to ensure educational quality toward one centered on procedural compliance and documentation. Future research could investigate how faculty and administrators perceive the processes in relation to the specific conversations happening on individual campuses and how an institution's previous accreditation reviews have possibly cultivated a culture of accountability versus improvement. In this same vein, it would be helpful to gain a better understanding of how peer reviewers are trained regarding student learning assessment standards and how decisions are made regarding findings for related standards.

It is possible that requiring student learning outcome assessment as a direct measure of student achievement by accrediting bodies has led to a misunderstanding of its intended purpose. Particularly among faculty and administrators who lack formal training in accreditation language, there may be the expectation that improvements must be demonstrated rather than discussing how assessment results are utilized in planning to make changes that will hopefully lead to improved student outcomes. Examining the perceptions of those without such training could provide valuable insight into how they interpret accrediting bodies' expectations regarding student learning assessment and may help explain why the practice is still viewed by some as a compliance or accountability measure rather than as an opportunity to enhance the student learning experience.

Another area of research that may help gain insight into the ongoing conflicts between cultures of compliance and improvement would be to examine attitudes towards more recent

calls for transparency in higher education. Recent legislative efforts, such as the College Transparency Act (National Skills Coalition, 2025; U.S. Congress, 2025), highlight the growing calls for transparency of public institutions of higher education by requiring reporting on data such as completion, employment, and post-graduation earnings to demonstrate institutional accountability. While the call for transparency is framed as promoting institutional value and accountability to consumers, it may unintentionally deepen the culture of compliance where institutions prioritize data reporting to satisfy external demands rather than using data to drive meaningful improvement in student learning. Institutions may become preoccupied with meeting reporting requirements and maintaining favorable numbers, rather than delving into the vital questions of how students learn, why programs succeed or falter, and what meaningful enhancement looks like. This aligns with broader critiques that external accountability mandates emphasize procedural adherence and documentation over engagement with improvement processes (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Ewell, 2008; Peterson & Einarson, 1997; SHEEO, 2019).

Conclusion

The large-scale studies focusing on student learning assessment have been based on responses of people in administrative positions rather than the faculty, who are typically charged with completing student learning assessment (Jankowski et al., 2018; Kuh et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Peterson, Augustine et al., 1999). This study sought to add faculty voices to the body of literature regarding student learning assessment, while providing additional perspectives of academic administrators as well. The findings indicate that, while both groups generally view student learning assessment as important, administrators rate its importance higher than faculty. Motivation was found to be the most significant predictor, as internally driven purposes such as improving teaching and learning are more strongly associated with positive perceptions than

external purposes such as compliance and accreditation. The results also suggest that faculty perceptions are more affected by the depth of implementation of student learning assessment than administrators.

The findings of this study do not indicate a significant shift in the perceptions of student learning assessment from the faculty or administrative perspective over the last several decades and continue to support the literature regarding best practices in student learning assessment. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of fostering a culture of improvement to strengthen the value placed on student learning assessment by faculty and administrators. Institutions aiming to enhance their assessment practices can consider strategies that establish clear links to instructional practices and involve all stakeholders in both the creation and implementation of student learning assessments. By doing so, colleges can move beyond procedural compliance toward a more collaborative and improvement-oriented approach in which student learning assessment contributes directly to student success and institutional effectiveness.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284
rede.ecu.edu/umcib/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Erica Caracoglia](#)
CC: [David Siegel](#)
Date: 8/28/2024
Re: [UMCIRB 24-001452](#)
Faculty and Administration Perceptions of Student Learning Assessment in North Carolina Community Colleges

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 8/28/2024. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2AB.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Caracoglia Research Consent wording.docx(0.01)	Consent Forms
Caracoglia Research Survey Questions.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Caracoglia Survey-Research-Consent-Letter-Template-for-Expedited-Research- 06 05 2024 rev esc 081924(0.02)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY INVITATION EMAIL

Dear Colleague,

I am a, Ed.D. candidate in the in Educational Leadership – Higher Education Administration program at East Carolina University (ECU). I am also the Associate Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness/Research and SACSCOC Liaison at Martin Community College.

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study entitled, “Faculty and Administration Perceptions of Student Learning Assessment In North Carolina Community Colleges”. Dr. David Siegel from the Higher Education Leadership Department at ECU is my faculty chair.

The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of faculty, academic administrators, and Institutional Effectiveness/Research (IE/IR) staff regarding student learning assessment. By doing this research, I hope to better understand how student learning assessment is perceived by these different groups of community college employees, identify factors that influence perceptions, and identify the perceived challenges with student learning assessment.

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a faculty member, academic administrator, or IE/IR staff member at one of the 58 North Carolina Community College System institutions.

If you agree to take part in this survey, you will be asked demographic questions related to your position and Likert-type scale questions that relate to the importance of, motivation for, implementation of, your involvement in, and perceived challenges with student learning assessment. No personally identifiable information will be collected during the survey. The estimated amount of time it will take you to complete this survey is 10 minutes.

Please contact Erica Schatz Caracoglia at schatze95@students.ecu.edu or 252-402-6146 for any research related questions. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, call the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you can stop at any time. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, please click this link – LINK HERE.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely,
Erica Schatz Caracoglia, Principal Investigator

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT AND SURVEY INSTRUMENT

You are being invited to take part in a research study entitled, “Faculty and Administration Perceptions of Student Learning Assessment In North Carolina Community Colleges”, conducted by Erica Caracoglia, an Ed.D. candidate in the in Educational Leadership – Higher Education Administration program at East Carolina University (ECU). You are being asked to participate because you are a faculty member, academic administrator, or IE/IR staff member at one of the 58 North Carolina Community College System institutions. The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions regarding student learning assessment. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. No personally identifiable information will be collected. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can stop at any time. There is no penalty for not taking part in this research study. Please contact Erica Schatz Caracoglia at schatze95@students.ecu.edu or 252-402-6146 for any research related questions or the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a participant. Please select yes to participate in the study.

- Yes
- No

Demographical information

1. Please select the name of the North Carolina community college where you are primarily employed.

Insert drop down menu of all 58 institutions here.

2. Which of the following best describes your main role at your campus?
 - Full-time faculty
 - Part-time faculty
 - Chief Academic Officer
 - Academic Dean
 - Academic Division Chair
 - Academic Department Chair

- IE/IR Administration
- 3. How long have you worked at a community college?
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - >10 years
- 4. How long have you worked within the North Carolina Community College System?
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - >10 years
- 5. How long have you been working in your current position?
 - 1-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-10 years
 - >10 years
- 6. If you are faculty, in what area do you primarily teach?
 - College Transfer/General Education
 - Agricultural and Natural Resources Technologies (15XXX programs)
 - Biological and Chemical Technologies (20XXX programs)
 - Business Technologies (25XXX programs)
 - Commercial and Artistic Production Technologies (30XXX programs)
 - Construction Technologies (35XXX programs)

- Engineering Technologies (40XXX programs)
 - Health Sciences (45XXX programs)
 - Industrial Technologies (50XXX programs)
 - Public Service Technologies (55XXX programs)
 - Transportation Systems Technologies (60XXX programs)
 - Not applicable
7. Does the program in which you teach have programmatic or specialized accreditation processes that involve assessment of students?
- Yes
 - No

Perceived Importance of SLO Assessment (*These items will utilize a Likert scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree*). Read each statement. Select the descriptor that matches how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

- 8. SLO assessment plays an important role in improving our institution.
- 9. SLO assessment plays an important role in improving our program.
- 10. SLO assessment plays an important role in improving our student success.
- 11. SLO assessment will be an important part of regional accreditation well into the future.
- 12. SLO assessment efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of our institution are worthwhile.
- 13. SLO assessment is not an important component of my job responsibilities.
- 14. At my institution, SLO assessment is primarily the responsibility of administrators.
- 15. SLO assessment is a fad that will likely be replaced by another area of emphasis.

16. SLO assessment at my institution is, or would be, strengthened by active participation of faculty members.
17. Resources dedicated to SLO assessment activities are investments in our long-term institutional effectiveness.
18. Documenting SLO assessment should be an integral element to any regional or departmental specific accreditation criteria.

Internal Versus External Motivation (*These items will utilize a Likert scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree*). Read each statement. Select the descriptor that matches how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

19. We mainly conduct SLO assessment activities because of accreditation requirements.
20. Improvements of programs and services is the primary motivation for SLO assessment on our campus.
21. If there were not outside requirements or mandates, our commitment to SLO assessment activities would probably diminish.
22. SLO assessment is a natural extension of the ideals of investigation and inquiry within the institution.
23. Change happens so slowly at our institution that it's hard to specify what changes are based on SLO assessment.
24. The results of our SLO assessment process seem to be more important to outside stakeholders than to our campus community.
25. Our institution offers such quality that SLO initiatives can do little to improve it.

Depth of Implementation (*These items will utilize a Likert scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree*). Read each statement. Select the descriptor that matches how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

- 26. Our institution has a systematic process of SLO assessment.
- 27. Program SLOs are generally known by individuals in the program.
- 28. SLO assessment is a continual process at our institution.
- 29. Faculty, staff, and administrators are actively involved in SLO assessment at our institution.
- 30. SLO assessment activities throughout our institution are not very interrelated.
- 31. Our SLO process has been customized for our institution.
- 32. Expected student achievement results are clearly defined at our institution.
- 33. Our institution is committed to allocating resources for the SLO process.
- 34. A variety of professional development opportunities is offered at our institution.
- 35. SLO assessment does little to help our institution fulfill its mission.
- 36. Our institution dedicates sufficient resources to SLO assessment.

Level of Involvement Index (*These items will utilize a Likert scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree*). Read each statement. Select the descriptor that matches how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

- 37. I am highly involved in SLO assessment at my institution.
- 38. I have participated in defining specific SLOs for my program/area.
- 39. I have helped formulate assessment techniques to measure progress toward program SLOs.
- 40. I am not familiar with the SLO assessment plan for my program.

- 41. I have engaged in specific exercises to aid in my institution's SLO assessment activities.
- 42. I have not made improvements as a result of specific results from our SLO activities.
- 43. I am not personally aware of the benefits of SLO assessment.

Challenges of SLO Assessment (*These items will utilize a Likert scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree*). Read each statement. Select the descriptor that matches how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

- 44. There is a lack of leadership for SLO assessment at my institution.
- 45. There are adequate resources to support SLO assessment efforts.
- 46. SLO assessment efforts are not embedded in the institutional culture.
- 47. SLO assessment efforts are connected to institutional strategic planning.
- 48. There is unclear understanding of the SLO assessment cycle.
- 49. There is adequate training for developing SLOs.
- 50. There is adequate training for discussing SLO assessment results.
- 51. There is adequate training for identifying improvements in teaching and learning as a