

BALANCING PROFIT MOTIVE AND STUDENT SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY OF THREE
REGIONALLY ACCREDITED FOR-PROFIT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

BALANCING PROFIT MOTIVE AND STUDENT SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY OF THREE REGIONALLY ACCREDITED FOR-PROFIT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Kelly Thumm Moore

Joni E. Finney

For-profit colleges and universities and accrediting agencies have been the subject of criticism and scrutiny over the past few years. This dissertation examines the primary reason for this scrutiny: the seeming conflict between profit motive and student success. It ascertains the educational values of three regionally accredited for-profit college presidents and explains the differences in how presidents and institutions balance profit motive with student success. To do so, it focuses on three central questions: first, how do for-profit colleges and universities acknowledge and address this central dilemma of balancing profit motive with student success? Second, is accreditation a constructive force or an obstacle in resolving this dilemma? And third, what other institutional factors play a role in resolving this dilemma?

Using a case study approach, this dissertation examines three “best in class” for-profit institutions, all of which are regionally accredited with the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. It concludes that each of these institutions uses a business model that ensures fiscal responsibility but not profit maximization. It also shows that accreditation in each acts as a constructive force, motivating the institutions’ focus on assessment of student learning and improvement of student outcomes. Accreditation can also further legitimize these institutions’ educational quality in a competitive marketplace that includes both for- and non-profit institutions. Finally, other factors for these institutions’ success include family ownership, small enrollment numbers, and constant program evaluation. These factors enabled both a greater focus on student success and the flexibility to retool, add, or eliminate programs to ensure financial viability and stability.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	III
ABSTRACT	V
LIST OF TABLES	VIII
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW	7
HISTORY OF FOR-PROFIT HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA.....	7
ACCREDITATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION’S ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES	15
PROCESSES OF ACCREDITATION	21
ACCREDITATION AND FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS	25
CRITICISMS OF ACCREDITATION.....	26
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	34
OVERVIEW	34
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	35
RESEARCH METHODS	35
SITE AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION.....	36
DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT.....	37
LIMITATIONS.....	40
CHAPTER 4: MIDWESTERN LARGE SUBURBAN COLLEGE SITE ANALYSIS	43
INSTITUTIONAL IMPORTANCE INDICATORS COMMUNICATING THE INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND PURPOSES	44
STUDENT SUCCESS DEFINED	46
ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING.....	48
RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND BUDGETING.....	50
PARENT COMPANY OWNERSHIP AND MLSC’S PROFIT MOTIVE.....	51
ACCREDITATION	56
INSTITUTIONAL DISTINCTIONS AND INFLUENCES.....	59
CHAPTER 5: MIDWESTERN MIDSIZE CITY COLLEGE SITE ANALYSIS	61
INSTITUTIONAL IMPORTANCE INDICATORS COMMUNICATING THE INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND PURPOSES	62
STUDENT SUCCESS DEFINED	67
STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT	69
RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND BUDGETING.....	73
PROFIT MOTIVE	75
OWNERSHIP INVOLVEMENT	77
ACCREDITATION	79
INSTITUTIONAL DISTINCTIONS AND INFLUENCES.....	84
CHAPTER 6: SOUTHWESTERN MIDSIZE CITY COLLEGE SITE ANALYSIS	85
INSTITUTIONAL IMPORTANCE INDICATORS COMMUNICATING THE INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND PURPOSES	86
STUDENT SUCCESS DEFINED	88
STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT	89
RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND BUDGETING.....	91

PROFIT MOTIVE	93
OWNERSHIP INVOLVEMENT	95
ACCREDITATION	98
INSTITUTIONAL DISTINCTIONS AND INFLUENCES	102
CHAPTER 7: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS	104
SHARED INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS	104
QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY	113
ECONOMIC REALITIES	119
STUDENT SUCCESS DEFINED	127
INSTITUTIONAL IMPROVEMENT	129
CELEBRATING SUCCESS	131
OWNERSHIP INTERESTS	132
ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS	132
CHAPTER 8: KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS	136
IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	136
<i>Research Participation</i>	136
<i>Profit Motive and Student Success</i>	137
<i>Legitimacy</i>	138
<i>Family</i>	140
IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY FOR ACCREDITORS	140
SUMMARY	142
APPENDIX A	143
APPENDIX B	146
APPENDIX C	148
REFERENCES.....	150

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: For-Profit Sector Classification, Kinser, 2006	10
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

In recent years, for-profit colleges are under intense scrutiny. For example, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2010 investigated for-profit colleges, reporting to the Health, Education, Labor, and Pension (HELP) committee of the U.S. Senate that all of the institutions investigated had conducted fraudulent activities by preying upon low-income students whose federal loans make profit for the colleges (United States Government Accountability Office, 2010). This report prompted Senator Harkin (D-Iowa), chair of the HELP committee, to request additional information regarding the operations of for-profit colleges. The GAO has since provided a revised report, but the original criticisms of the for-profit sector have not changed. In addition to Senate hearings like these, popular newspaper articles portray for-profit colleges as money hungry entities that prey on the under-privileged (Blumenstyk, 2011, December 1; Blumenstyk, 2011, December 12; Fain, 2011; Montano, 2011). According to these sources, for-profit colleges target under-privileged or low-income students for the purpose of gaining their financial aid dollars.

These criticisms highlight the tensions for-profit colleges and universities face in balancing institutional mission and profit motive. Central to the daily life of executive leadership in for-profit colleges and universities is recognizing and addressing the conflicting priorities of business interests and academic quality. Additionally, for-profit colleges and universities struggle with the competing interests of fulfilling institutional missions and goals with maintaining financial viability to ensure their continued success. However, there is a lack of understanding as to how administrators address or balance this tension. Moreover, what do presidents of for-profit colleges value?

This dissertation posits preliminary answers to these questions and others. It ascertains the educational values of three regionally accredited for-profit college presidents and explains the differences in how presidents and institutions balance profit motive with student success. To do so, it focuses on four central questions: first, how do for-profit colleges and universities

acknowledge and address this central dilemma of balancing profit motive with student success? Second, is accreditation a constructive force or an obstacle in resolving this dilemma? Third, how have the institutions used accreditation processes, and do these processes impact the resolution of conflict between profit motive and student success? Finally, what other institutional factors—such as locations, degrees awarded, and ownership status—determine how for-profit colleges acknowledge and address this conflict?

This literature review examines the rapidly changing for-profit sector of higher education as we know it today. For-profit colleges and universities are relatively new in the research landscape of higher education, and—just as in traditional higher education institutions—they contain unique organizational cultures. Therefore, an examination of the literature on organizational culture can inform our understanding of these institutions. This review also considers literature on institutional accreditation, which serves as the arbiter of quality in these institutions. The common standards across both for-profit and non-profit higher education institutions can shed light on how for-profit institutions balance or utilize the profit aspect of their institutions to improve quality and address their academic missions.

For-profit colleges and universities are not new to the higher education sector. During 2000 to 2010, the for-profit college sector experienced rapid growth in enrollment and an increase in the number of new for-profit institutions (Douglass, 2012). Consequently, the enrollment market share for for-profit colleges and universities grew from 3 to 9.1% of all students enrolled in post-secondary education during this same timeframe (Douglass, 2012). Of the 18 million students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in 2010, 10% attended for-profit colleges and universities (Aud et al., 2012). Along with this rapid growth comes greater exposure and interest in understanding the intricacies of the operational effectiveness of these institutions, which in turn has led to criticism of them (United States Government Accountability Office, 2010).

For-profit colleges and universities developed as a result of unmet educational needs (Coleman and Vedder, 2008; Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006; Ruch, 2001). Curriculum offerings in the for-profit higher education sector are diverse, ranging from vocational fields (such as

acupuncture, cosmetology, and automotive repair), to business- related programs (such as secretarial, paralegal, technology, or medical training), to professional degrees in medicine, law, or other doctoral fields (Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006). Despite the proliferation in subject matter, institutional program offerings are typically narrow in scope and align with academic disciplines (Kinser, 2006). Academic credentials offered by institutions in the private, for-profit sector include certificates/diplomas, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctoral degrees. The diversity of the for-profit sector is widely acknowledged; however, we know little about the quality of the institutions in relation to their profit-making missions, which is the purpose of this dissertation.

All colleges and universities are organizations (Birnbaum, 1988; Berquist and Pawlak, 2008) with defined cultures. These cultures reveal what an organization deems as important, and they determine, in part, an organization's effectiveness. By delving deeper into the literature on organizational culture, we can understand how organizations determine priorities, which are reflected in their various layouts, employee training structures, decision-making strategies, and language. Understanding how organizations manage internal and external problems also provides insight into organizational cultures. Thus, examining for-profit colleges' cultures enables us to assess how these organizations might respond to increased scrutiny and criticism.

The colleges are under scrutiny because of several performance outcomes, including poor graduation rates, increased student indebtedness, and—most significant in this review—high student loan default rates (United States Government Accountability Office, 2010). Since the accreditation process enables institutions to participate in the Federal Title IV financial aid programs, students at accredited for-profit institutions may receive federal grant money and participate in federal student loan programs. Accrediting agencies thus also come under fire for reviewing and approving these institutions. Understanding the various nuances of accreditation and the role it plays in for-profit colleges will allow us to further understand the institution's culture.

Accreditation began as a way to discern the levels of education being offered between what is now defined as secondary level education (high school) and post-secondary level education (college) (Selden, 1960). In the beginning, accreditation worked on both levels because college presidents wanted to know that secondary students were ready for college-level work and because the purpose was to compare institutions. The first accrediting agency, the North Central Association, began creating evaluation measurements for secondary and post-secondary institutions (Young, 1983).

Initially, accreditation also focused on inputs: size of faculty, faculty credentials, and the number of volumes in the library, for example. These quantitative criteria became overly standardized, however, and thus the accrediting agencies modified them to focus on a more holistic, mission-based approach (Ewell, 2008). The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), one of six regional accrediting agencies, modified their criteria to these new standards in the mid-1930s (Ewell, 2008). After the GI Bills of the 1940s and 1950s expanded veterans' access to higher education, the federal government looked more closely at accrediting organizations to help it determine which institutions would be eligible to participate in GI Bill grant programs (Douglass, 2012; Ewell, 2008; Kinser, 2006).

Over time, accreditation has continued to change. Currently, it focuses primarily on outputs: how an institution evaluates itself, how an institution meets criteria, how it assesses and improves student learning. Eaton indicates that there are currently four roles for accreditation: first, accreditation ensures quality; second, it provides access to funds; third, it engenders private sector confidence in higher education; and fourth, it eases transfer of credit (2009).

For-profit institutions utilize accreditation for the same purposes, but they also modify these or add new ones. For example, quality is also known as "quality assurance," "quality improvement," "institutional effectiveness," "institutional development," and "value." Regional accreditation of for-profit institutions also serves to legitimize that institution locally, as it becomes associated with other prestigious, name-brand institutions that hold the same accreditation. It

also marks that for-profit institution as being part of a small set of other for-profit institutions that are regionally accredited (Kinser, 2003).

Regional accreditation was initially not available to for-profit institutions; at first, only national accrediting agencies worked with for-profits. In the 1970s, two lawsuits challenged regional accreditation's limits to non-profit institutions. While these lawsuits did not directly enable the institutions in question to achieve regional accreditation, they ultimately changed regional accrediting bodies' institutional eligibility standards (Kinser, 2006). After these lawsuits, regional accrediting bodies modified their guidelines: instead of focusing on an institution's tax structure or financial model to determine eligibility, they use a geographic model. Now, regional accrediting bodies increasingly work with for-profit colleges, who benefit from this decision because of added value to their institutions' bottom lines (Kinser, 2003).

The literature continues to show that college presidents value accreditation. While several studies reveal the value of accreditation for presidents, most were confined to regionally accredited institutions (Asgill, 1976; Brown, 1999; Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2006; Poppenhagen, 1977; Waggener, Southerland and Leonard, 1990; and, Waggener, Southerland and Leonard, 1991). Of these, only two included for-profit colleges and their perceived valuation of accreditation (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2006; Prince, 2000). In the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) study, the investigators interviewed 30 college presidents of regionally accredited institutions to understand their perspectives on accreditation at a time when its purpose had been called into question (2006). The study concluded that college presidents believed in the purpose of accreditation and that they supported the premise that it serves as quality assurance. Additionally, the presidents recognized that they were responsible for promoting the benefits of accreditation and that the process allows for an in-depth review of their institution. Unfortunately, this study included only one president from a for-profit institution (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2006).

I have located only one study that evaluates nationally accredited, for-profit institutions to ascertain their perceived value of accreditation (Prince, 2000). In her focus on institutions

accredited by the Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), a national accrediting organization, Prince explored how these institutions implemented policies on institutional effectiveness, what degree of importance they placed on institutional effectiveness, and how we can navigate the discrepancies between implementation and importance (Prince, 2000). She uses institutional effectiveness to define and measure quality, as it contributes most to measuring an institution's continuous improvement in the ACICS system, which is recognized by the CHEA and the U.S. Department of Education. Using a quantitative approach in which institutional owners were surveyed, Prince showed that the for-profit institutions agreed that the highest level of congruence between the implementation and the degree of importance was found in the items relating to an institution's "mission" and "objectives."

These studies offer valuable information about how presidents value accreditation; however, they leave open the question of how for-profit institutions accredited by different accrediting bodies perceive accreditation. Moreover, more study is needed about what factors—such as the type of accrediting body, a regional or a national accreditation—might influence these institutional perceptions. Finally, we do not know what primarily motivates for-profit colleges to pursue accreditation, and whether these motivators differ based on the type of accreditation.

Chapter 2: The Literature Review

This literature review examines the history of the for-profit sector of higher education, culminating in definition of this sector as it exists today. Although for-profit higher education has been in existence in the United States for over 100 years, research on for-profit colleges is in its early stages. Because of the rapid changes in higher education, especially for-profit higher education, in the past decade, further examination of the for-profit sector is needed. In the following section, I provide the history of research on the for-profit sector, including research on organizational cultures and accreditation, in order to show the interventions of my own study.

History of For-Profit Higher Education in North America

For-profit education has existed for over 500 years: the first such evidence of for-profit education dates to 1494, when Lucas Pacioli of Italy developed the method of double-entry bookkeeping (Kinser, 2006; Petrello, 1988). Historians further show that education in handwriting, bookkeeping, “commercial” arithmetic, and writing took place in England in the 16th through 18th centuries (Kinser, 2006; Turner, 2007). These textbooks became the foundation for commercial education in the early American colonies.

Indeed, vocational education in exchange for remuneration was in existence in North America during European colonization (Kinser, 2006; Ruch, 2001). Dutch settlers organized private schools for the teaching of mathematics, writing, and reading in the middle of the 17th century (Ruch, 2001; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). At this time, James Mortan began to teach business accounting, and other proprietary schools trained students in surveying, navigation, business, and building trades. During the 17th century, for-profit schools—focused both on general education and job skills training—outnumbered publicly supported schools in North America (Honick, 1995). Single entrepreneurs typically owned and operated these ventures.

Following the colonial period, for-profit education in the United States evolved through four additional stages (Honick, 1995). From 1800-1850, commercial schools created business curricula in urban locales; these shifted from the colonial apprenticeship model to one that

combined formal theory and practical experience (Honick, 1995; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). From 1850-1900, for-profit schools increased in number as industry continued to expand (Honick, 1995; Turner, 2007). During this period, the nation's first corporate chain was created: Bryant and Stratton colleges (Honick, 1995). Significant technological advances—such as the typewriter and the Gregg shorthand system—spurred demand for business-related education. By the end of the 19th century, for-profit education was experiencing greater competition from the public sector (Coleman and Vedder, 2008; Honick, 1995), and, as a result, it also faced increased scrutiny.

This increased scrutiny corresponded with other reforms of the Progressive Era (Honick, 1995), as new legislation on the state and federal levels worked to clean up industry, government, and education from corruptive forces. A series of reports described for-profit institutions as unscrupulous in their recruitment methods, thereby misleading students about their employment opportunities. Indeed, many institutions used “solicitors” working on a commission basis to enroll students (Honick, 1995). The Flexner Report of 1910 sharply criticized the condition of medical education in the United States and Canada, resulting in closing of private, for-profit medical schools (Honick, 1995; Thelin, 2004). Public support for for-profit higher education eroded.

In response to this lack of public support and increased scrutiny from governmental and other agencies, the for-profit education industry created a professional association and a code of ethics (Petrello, 1988). By the early 20th century, the professional association began lobbying efforts to establish good relationships with the federal government (Petrello, 1988; Turner, 2007). These efforts paid off, as for-profit schools began to be included in the federal grant and loan programs of the GI Bill (Cohen and Kisker, 2010).

From the early 1920s to the present day, critiques of the industry have included concerns about its advertising and recruitment methods, about the academic quality offered to students, about the future employability of those students, and about the stability and longevity of individual schools. More recently, and extending back over the past 50 years, these critiques have expanded to include concerns about high tuition costs and subsequent student debt and default rates, the exploitation of non-traditional students, low completion rates, poor placement rates, and

low wage outcomes for graduates (Blumenstyk, 2011). As we have seen, the for-profit education industry has been characterized by extensive external criticism throughout much of its history (Bailey, 2001; Beaver, 2009; Clowes, 2010; Honick, 1992; Honick, 1995; Loonin, 2005; Lynch, Engle, and Cruz, 2010; Turner, 2007; United States Government Accountability Office, 2010; United States Government Accountability Office, 1990; Wildavsky, 2011).

For-profit institutions' instability, profit motive, and narrowed learning foci have certainly exposed them to criticisms. However, these institutions also fill a niche not adequately occupied by non-profit higher education institutions. For-profit schools offer opportunities to non-traditional students and marginalized populations (such as women and students of color) by improving access to coursework at convenient times and in convenient locations (Beaver, 2009; Berg, 2005; Coleman and Vedder, 2008; Honick, 1995; Ruch, 2001). While these schools at first existing almost solely in the United States, this model has now expanded worldwide (Douglass, 2012).

Characteristics of For-Profit Higher Education in the United States

Several characteristics define for-profit or proprietary institutions. Initially, these were defined by ownership characteristics, and most were owned by a single entrepreneur. This strategy enabled them to react quickly to changes in workplaces (Honick, 1995; Turner, 2007). Today, several schemas exist to classify the various ownership models of for-profit educational institutions; no single scheme has been adopted. Beaver (2009) offers one method: he defines two types—the “enterprise college” and the “super system” of schools—and they differ in that the enterprise college is privately held and the super system is publicly traded. As for-profit schools grow in enrollment, they have become increasingly diversified in type (Kinser, 2003, 2006). This section articulates the various types of schools and classification schemes.

Kinser (2006)'s scheme for outlining the categories of for-profit higher education includes the categories of location, ownership, and highest degree awarded (Table 1). He divides each of these broad categories further into subcategories, so that location, for example, is further broken down into “neighborhood,” “regional,” or “national” categorization. Kinser's “neighborhood”

institutions are located in a single state, while regional institutions might be present in multiple neighboring states and national institutions are located throughout the United States or are located online (Kinser, 2006).

**Table 1: For-Profit Sector Classification
Kinser, 2006**

Category	Subcategory	Explanation
Location	Neighborhood	Single state
	Regional	Multiple neighboring states
	National	Virtual or more geographically dispersed
Ownership	Enterprise	Owned by a family or individual entrepreneur
	Venture	Owned by independent private corporations – non-family members in significant management positions
	Shareholder	Owned by publicly traded organizations
Highest Degree Awarded	Institutes	Offer at most a 2-year degree
	Colleges	Offer a four-year degree
	Universities	Offers programs leading to graduate or professional degrees

Kinser's ownership category "refers to the management structure of the institution" (2006, p. 32); this category includes the subcategories of "enterprise," "venture," and "shareholder" (2006, p. 34). "Enterprise" ownership means that a family or an individual entrepreneur owns the institution, while "venture" ownership indicates an independent private corporation(s) with non-family members in significant management positions. "Shareholder" institutions are owned by publicly traded organizations. Kinser's final category, "highest degree awarded," includes the three subcategories of institutes, colleges, and universities (2006). "Institutes" are those institutions that offer only two-year degrees, while "colleges" offer four-year degrees and universities offer four-year and graduate or professional degrees. For example, MTI College in Sacramento, California would in Kinser's system be classified as a neighborhood enterprise institute, since it exists only in California, is family-owned, and offers two-year degrees, while DeVry University would be a national shareholder university, since it exists throughout the United States, is traded publicly, and offers advanced degrees (2006, p. 33).

Deming, Goldin, and Katz (2011) provide another set of definitions to categorize the for-profit sector. What Kinser calls "neighborhood" in their system becomes "independent," since "independent schools" in their schema operate in "no more than one state and have no more than five branch campuses" (Deming, Goldin and Katz, 2011, p. 2). "Chain" schools "operate in more than one state or have more than five campus branches within a single state" (Deming, Goldin and Katz, 2011, p. 2). Finally, their system designates an institution as "online" if this word appears in its name or if "no more than 33% of the school's students are from one U.S. state" (Deming, Goldin and Katz, 2011, p. 2).

Understanding Organizational Cultures

Over the past few decades, organizations have begun to evaluate their institutional cultures in an effort to improve. By understanding how an organization's culture works, the executives leading the organization may find ways in which to change the culture for better (Berquist, 2008; Collins and Porras, 2002; Fairfield-Sonn, 2001; Goffee and Jones, 1998;

Hampden-Turner, 1990; Peters and Waterman, Jr., 2003; Schein, 2010; and Tierney, 2008). To undertake these evaluations, organizations must come to terms with varied definitions of culture, varied categories and characteristics of it, and the roles of executive leadership in defining, managing, and shaping organizational cultures.

Definitions of culture are wide ranging, yet my investigation of the literature around organizational cultures reveals three major themes across definitions. First, culture could serve as a problem solving mechanism within an organization (Hampden-Turner, 1988; Schein, 2010); in this way, it addresses ambiguities and dilemmas. Incorporating the work of noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Tierney adds another possible understanding of organizational culture, that of a symbiotic, “interconnected web of relationships” wherein “the components of culture will overlap with one another” (Tierney, 1988, p. 17). Culture has also been defined as maintenance for long-term viability: “doing business every day in an effort of sustainability” (Goffee and Jones, 1998). Culture never involves a single individual, but rather is defined by the actions of multiple people.

For the purposes of this study, the most helpful definition of organizational culture comes from Schein (2010):

The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 18)

Emphasizing problem solving, Schein’s definition is relevant for this study of for-profit higher educational institutions because they must respond quickly to the needs of the businesses that will employ their graduates (Turner, 2007). Schein further notes that university cultures must balance various stakeholder needs:

In religious, educational, social, and governmental organizations, the core mission or primary task is clearly different, but the logic that the mission ultimately derives from a balancing of the needs of different stakeholders is the same. Thus, for example, the mission of a university must balance the learning needs of the students, . . . the needs of the faculty to do research and further knowledge, the needs of the community to have a repository for knowledge and skill, and the needs of the financial investors to have a viable institution, and, ultimately, even the needs of society to have an institution to facilitate the

transition of late adolescents into the labor market and to sort them into skill groups. (2010, p. 75)

As such, Schein's definition is most relevant to understanding and explaining the for-profit higher education environment and was used as the guiding definition in this study.

To further understand university cultures, we must move beyond stated missions and look to the unspoken or understated pieces of information that provide a more holistic picture of what organizations value. I have identified two models in the literature that can help us understand the components of university cultures. First, Schein identifies three levels of culture (2010, p. 24): the first is "Artifacts," which include aspects such as the physical layout of space, the clothing worn by the staff, organizational charts, and technology in use. Artifacts also include observed behavior, such as institutional language or rituals (Schein, 2010, pp. 23-24). Outside researchers interested in learning about a culture from artifacts must engage in interviews with insiders in order to ensure correct interpretations.

Schein's second level of culture, "Espoused Beliefs and Values," includes ideals, goals, values, aspirations, and rationalizations of individuals within the group. The rationalizations may or may not be congruent with the behavior and/or with other artifacts (2010, p. 25). In other words, cause and effect may not be interpreted correctly. For example, if sales decline for the first time in a business, a manager may recommend increasing advertising. If employees have never experienced a moment when sales improved after advertising was increased, they will most likely believe in their leader's recommendation. If the business later struggles with another problem, and the same leader recommends increasing advertising, which subsequently seems to solve the problem, the employees perceive that advertising yields positive results. If this cycle continues, the value of advertising moves from a shared *value* into a shared *assumption*. These assumptions then make up the third level in Schein's model, "Basic Underlying Assumptions." Schein believes that basic assumptions describe the deepest levels of unconscious thought, which are taken for granted and determine behavior, perception, thought, and feeling, such as the value of advertising in the above example (Schein, 2010, p. 28).

Another way to understand institutions and their cultures is through a framework developed by Tierney (1988, 2008), whose key components include environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. “Environment” encompasses both employees’ perceptions of the culture—such as stable or changing, intimidating or welcoming—and the institution’s relationship to surrounding environments. Evaluating the “mission” of an organization first involves defining it and assessing the level of agreement about that definition, as well as communication of the mission and determination of how it is incorporated into decision-making processes. “Socialization” refers to how the organization incorporates new employees into its culture, while “information” encompasses how information is disseminated and what kinds of information are considered valuable. “Strategy” investigates how the organization makes decisions, including who makes them and how the culture rewards or punishes good and bad decisions, respectively. Finally, “leadership” examines employees’ expectations of organizational leaders and identifies the informal and formal leaders of an organization.

Understanding and developing a strong organizational culture is imperative to creating a long-standing organization (Collins and Porras, 2002; Peters and Waterman, Jr., 2004). Research conducted by Collins and Porras and Peters and Waterman, Jr. evaluated a number of companies to determine what characteristics set them apart from organizations that were not considered elite. Despite differing methodologies, both reached the same conclusions: first, in order for an organization to succeed over the long term, its leaders must clearly articulate and promote corporate values; and second, these values must not be solely about money. Peters and Waterman, Jr. emphasize that a single-minded focus on profits does not advance organizations: “Profit is like health. You need it, and the more the better. But it’s not why you exist. Moreover, in a piece of research that preceded this work, we found that companies whose only articulated goals were financial did not do nearly as well financially as companies that had broader sets of values” (p. 103). Collins and Porras concur by noting, “Enlightened business leaders around the globe intuitively understand the importance of timeless core values and a purpose beyond just making money” (p. xvi).

Berg (2005) comes to the same conclusion in his investigation of the cultural aspects of for-profit higher education environments. In his research of two for-profit higher education institutions (The University of Phoenix and DeVry University), Berg notes that both organizations recognize the conflict between money-making interests and academic quality. By focusing on mission and institutional values in their decision-making processes, for-profit colleges manage this conflict by ensuring that profit motives are not the dominant force.

Indeed, profit motive is not enough for an institution to survive over the long term: instead, both employees and leaders must deeply internalize an organization's values (Collins and Porras, 2002). Additionally, employees who can articulate and believe in their organization's values and norms create meaning for themselves within the organization, enabling their organization to grow. Berg (2005) quotes a University of Phoenix executive who stated at a planning retreat that employees "want to be involved in something that is interesting and worthwhile and useful" (p. 134). Schein (2010) would articulate this employee's sense of purpose as the process of internalizing an organization's basic underlying assumptions.

Accreditation and Higher Education's Organizational Cultures

One of the basic underlying assumptions regarding quality in for-profit higher education is the institutional pursuit of accreditation. Accreditation requires colleges and universities to conduct self-evaluations that document institutional norms and values and then to make their findings available to the public. These evaluations must review the institutional mission statement, showing how faculty, staff, and students enact its norms and values daily. Accreditation also affirms that the institution adheres to widely adopted standards of educational quality.

Achieving accreditation has become an embedded value within the organizational culture of some for-profit higher educational institutions. Accreditation requires institutions to state publicly their mission and values. External accreditation, particularly in relation to assessment of programs, also motivates institutions to keep a focus on academic quality. DeVry University, for

example, highlights the ways in which the accreditation process motivated its founders to focus on academic quality and align itself with traditional, non-profit higher education:

To receive accreditation at the graduate level in the early seventies was a big move [laughs]; it took a lot. And so the founders, Dennis Keller and Ron Taylor, making all the decisions that they made, realized that it was extremely important that they consider academic quality as much as the business approach because we were being scrutinized by the nonprofits, the traditionalists, to see what we would do. . . . So we almost went to the extreme to try and prove ourselves. (qtd. in Berg, 2005, p. 136)

By pursuing accreditation at the graduate level, DeVry aimed to “prove [itself]” to others in the higher education industry that they offered a quality academic program. Aware that its reputation for academic quality might be otherwise, DeVry thus used the accreditation process to show others that academic quality was as important as the business interest of the institution.

Despite or perhaps because of accreditation’s importance, its definition has changed over time.¹ In 1938, accreditation was defined as the “recognition accorded to an educational institution in the United States by means of inclusion in a list of institutions issued by some agency or organization which sets up standards or requirements that must be complied with in order to secure approval” (qtd. in Selden, 1960, p. 97). In 1960, the executive director of the National Council on Accreditation defined accreditation as “the process whereby an organization or agency recognizes a college or university or a program of study as having met certain pre-determined qualifications or standards” (Selden, 1960, p. 6). Approximately ten years later, it was defined as “a process of recognizing those educational institutions whose performance and integrity entitle them to the confidence of the educational community and the public” (Orlans, 1975, p. 2). Finally, the most current definition of accreditation stems from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation: “Accreditation is a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities[,] and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (Eaton, 2009b, p. 1).

The notion of “quality assurance” continues to be at the forefront of debates regarding accreditation of higher education institutions. While some believe accreditation is a sufficient

¹ All of the definitions to follow are provided by the organizations that have or are currently playing a leadership role in the management of accreditation in the United States.

indicator of quality assurance in higher education (Alstete, 2004; Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2010; Eaton, 2009; Ewell, 2008; Oden, 2009; Prager, 1995), others argue that it no longer accurately assesses quality (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Leef and Burris, 2002; Orlans, 1970). Proponents of accreditation as a mechanism for quality assurance point to several reasons in support of this philosophy. First, accreditation is the only process that legitimizes institutions: it enables institutions to accept grants, scholarships, and other funding sources, and it enables students to participate in professional licensure requirements (Ewell, 2008). Second, the peer-reviewed process of accreditation benefits institutions by promoting cross-pollination of ideas and initiating improvements. College presidents recognize this value; surveys conducted with them (Alstete, 2004; Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2006) reveal that they find the process of internal evaluation beneficial. Third, accreditation serves a regulatory function: without it, the federal government would need to regulate higher education, and it is ill-prepared to do so due to budgetary constraints and inexperience (Ewell, 2008).

Of course, even proponents of accreditation recognize that the processes and systems could be improved. Detractors of accreditation highlight these points. For example, they note that institutional and programmatic accreditation processes are duplicative, which wastes time and money (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007). They also point out that the majority of accreditation review focuses on inputs rather than on student outcomes (Leef and Burris, 2002; Orlans 1970). Detractors argue that the process is not sufficiently transparent, and that its peer-review does not function as intended because reviewers do not want to appear harsh in order to avoid the same treatment when their institution comes up for evaluation (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007). Finally, detractors point out that the accreditation process is not always used to support continuous improvement (Gillen, Bennett and Vedder, 2010).

History of Accreditation Processes in the United States

Accreditation was developed over 100 years ago as a mechanism to differentiate colleges from secondary institutions (Ewell, 2008; Selden, 1960). This uniquely American system has changed over the years in response to the demands of higher education institutions and society. A review of accreditation's historical context provides the opportunity to view accreditation activities in different eras. Embedded in this history are the different types and roles of the accrediting bodies and the institutions they accredit. This history further sheds light upon the role of college and university presidents over time.

The history of accreditation in the United States can be divided into four distinct eras (Ewell, 2008; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010). The first era, from the late 1800s through the 1930s, inaugurated regional and national accrediting organizations. Then as now, regional accrediting organizations primarily assessed non-profit institutions, while national accrediting organizations assessed "institutions whose primary purpose is career training" and which "are often, but not exclusively, for-profit and proprietary," many of which "do not grant degrees" (Ewell, 2008, p. 12).

The first regional accrediting body, North Central Association ("North Central"), and the national accrediting body, National Association of Accredited Commercial Schools (NAACS)², were both founded during this period, in 1895 and 1912, respectively (Brittingham, 2009; Ewell, 2008; Semrow et al., 1992). Both became the pre-eminent bodies for accreditation—North Central for regional institutions and NAACS for for-profit institutions of higher education—however, their foci remained somewhat diverse. North Central looked at institutional benchmarks, such as faculty size, number of library volumes, and endowment levels, in order to standardize membership. NAACS focused more on contributing to the public good by emphasizing ethical behavior, professional development, and public relations (Ewell, 2008; Petrello, 1988). It even required its members to sign a Code of Ethics (Petrello, 2008).

² NAACS is the precursor to the Association of Independent Colleges and Schools (AICS) and the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) (Petrello, 1988; Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, 2011).

The second era of accreditation history—from roughly the 1930s through the 1950s—is called the “building a role” (Ewell, 2008) or “quality improvement” (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010) period. During this era, regional accrediting bodies changed how they evaluated institutions. First, accrediting agencies began to differentiate between two- and four-year higher education institutions, creating separate standards and sometimes separate commissions to evaluate these different types of institutions. The agencies also shifted from a focus on “outputs” to a focus on a college’s mission. Reflecting this change, North Central’s publications from this period focused on “characteristics of excellence” or “quality” rather than “standards” (Semrow, et al., 1998, p. 17). The peer-review process became a standard part of accreditation at this time, as did the understanding that accreditation was designed for institutional improvement (Ewell, 2008). The process itself became broader and deeper for all institutions under review.

Since the early days of its founding in 1911, NAACS attempted to join with North Central as a unified accrediting agency (Petrello, 2009, p. 82), but the alliance did not come to fruition, and NAACS was forced to develop its own standards of accreditation. At this time, NAACS adopted quantitative accrediting standards similar to other regional accrediting bodies. This milestone is important in the history of accreditation because regional and national accrediting bodies subsequently diverged: NAACS emphasized mission orientation and the development of minimum quality assurance standards, while North Central and other regional accreditation agencies pursued “aspirational standards, holistic peer review[,] and an emphasis on improvement” (Ewell, 2008, p. 32).

The third era of accreditation history—from the 1950s to the mid-1980s—is referred to as the “Golden Age” or as “Quasi-Regulation” (Ewell, 2008). This period was known as “golden” in part because the needs of higher education institutions and those of accrediting bodies were in sync at this time. During this period, North Central reformed its criteria and review process so that institutions came under review every 10 years. It also adopted seven generalist criteria for accreditation, and it recruited and trained “consultant-evaluators,” peer-reviewers who

emphasized institutional improvement, quality assurance, and the formal incorporation of an institution's self-study (Ewell, 2008).

NAACS also underwent several changes during this time period: it merged with the Association of Independent Colleges and Schools (AICS) (Petrello, 1988), and, in 1991, changed its name to the Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, 2011). Like North Central, ACICS substantially revised its standards during this time period, but it limited the review cycle to six years and added additional reporting metrics on degree completion and job placement (Ewell, 2008; Petrello, 1988).

During this era, accrediting bodies saw substantial changes in their relationship with the federal government as it sought to use the accrediting agencies as a mechanism for ensuring quality in higher education institutions. The GI Bill of 1944 enabled returning-World War II veterans to pursue educational and vocational training; however, at that time, the federal government did not offer information about eligible institutions (Ewell, 2008). Consequently, the Congress passed the Veterans Readjustment Act (also known as the "Second GI Bill") in 1952. This law established and maintained a list of eligible institutions, and it empowered accreditation agencies to serve as "trustworthy" arbiters for prospective students (Ewell, 2008, p. 83). A decade later, the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963 also impacted the relationship between the federal government and accreditation agencies, as it required accreditation by all higher education institutions seeking any federal funding. This relationship was strengthened with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which created a nationwide student financial aid system (Ewell, 2008). When this law was reauthorized in 1972, for-profit institutions were also able to participate in federal financial aid programs (Ewell, 2008).

The fourth and final era, which began in 1985, is still ongoing today. Described as the age of accountability and assessment, this period is beset with concerns about for-profit institutions, including increasing student loan default rates, allegations of federal financial aid fraud, and concerns about the decline in the quality of education (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder,

2010). As a result, Congress passed new legislation in the 1992 Higher Education Act Reauthorization that restricted distance learning, limited an institution's revenues from federal financial aid, and introduced quality assurance measures that assess student learning (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010).

Processes of Accreditation

The accreditation process is cyclical in nature and ranges from every few years to as many as 10 years (Eaton, 2011) depending on the accreditation body. The two main agencies—the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), a regional accrediting body, and the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), a national accrediting body—follow the same general process for accrediting higher education institutions. The five-step process for initial or renewal of accreditation includes a self-study, peer review evaluation, a site visit, judgment by the accrediting body, and participation in ongoing, periodic, external review (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, 2010; Eaton, 2012, 2011; Kells, 1983; The Higher Learning Commission, 2010).

The first step—the self-study—is a document prepared by the institution to evaluate its performance based on the accrediting body's standards (Eaton, 2011; Ewell, 2008). The self-study primarily addresses the institutional mission and how the institution is achieving its mission in different areas, including examples from its activities, facilities, and policies. All of these materials express the norms and values of the organization. Secondly, the self-study addresses how well an institution determines its achievement of the accrediting bodies' standards (Ewell, 2008; Kells, 1983).

After submission of the self-study, a peer-review panel reviews it and other documents. This panel is composed of peer faculty and administrators serving as a "third-party mechanism for assuring quality inside the boundaries of the academy" (Ewell, 2008, p. 75). This same peer review team will also visit the institution, where it will conduct interviews with board members, senior administrators, faculty, staff, students, and the broader community.

At this point, the accrediting agency will review all of the institution's documentation—including its self-study and the peer-reviewed report—in order to make a decision about accrediting the institution. Following an affirmative decision about accreditation, the institution continues to participate in on-going external review by submitting regular reports to the accrediting body (Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools, 2010; Eaton, 2011).

Both HLC and ACICS participate in this basic five-step process, but there are some differences in the details of how they carry out the steps. First, HLC's process is significantly longer than that of ACICS: achieving accreditation with HLC can take up to nine years, while the same process in ACICS takes only 24 months. As one might expect, HLC's process thus requires more steps and more on-site visits. Furthermore, HLC requires a public comment phase before each of its comprehensive visits, a step that adds time to the process. Finally, HLC provides multiple pathways for maintenance of accreditation once it is initially achieved, which provides options for its diverse institutional membership organizations.

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC)

HLC requires institutions to achieve "candidacy status" before obtaining their initial accreditation credential. To achieve this status, institutions advance through two phases: Phase I determines an institution's eligibility through a combination of documentation and interviews. First, institutions submit a "Letter of Inquiry with Preliminary Evidence," which shows that an institution has met HLC's eligibility requirements, has paid the requisite fee, and has requested a Pre-Application interview. If these materials are complete, HLC will schedule a Pre-Application Interview, whose purpose is to ascertain the level of readiness of the institution and discuss its proposed timeline for pursuing regional accreditation. Upon conclusion of the interview, HLC will send a post-interview letter with recommendations or concerns about the institution that must be rectified before proceeding.

Once the institution completes these recommended actions, it may continue to pursue candidacy by submitting a "Letter of Intent to Submit the Eligibility Filing" along with the required

fee. Within one year of submitting this filing, the institution must submit the “Eligibility Filing: Institutional Submission,” which includes a narrative report on various aspects of the institution along with documentation supporting the narrative. At this time, the institution must begin following HLC’s “Obligations of Affiliation.”

If all documentation is in order, HLC will review the materials and schedule a panel review, whose purpose is to determine if the institution is ready to host an evaluation visit for candidacy. Upon conclusion of the panel review, HLC will send a “Letter of Eligibility” to the institution. If the determination is positive, HLC requests that the institution submit a “Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy” (Higher Learning Commissions, 2014b).

When an institution submits this letter, it enters Phase II of the process for seeking accreditation. Phase II includes five steps: the self-study, peer review, on-site visit, review and decision, and ongoing evaluation. The institution’s self-study is due eight weeks before the on-site visit, and it must include a comprehensive evaluation and evidence that it has met all of the eligibility requirements, assumed practices, and federal compliance regulations. During the on-site visit, a trained team of peer reviewers will visit the campus and interview board members, senior leadership, faculty, staff, students, and external constituencies. Following the visit, the review team will draft a report determining whether the institution meets all the eligibility requirements and assumed practices, and whether it “has the capacity to meet the Criteria fully within the four-year candidacy period” (Higher Learning Commissions, 2014b). In order to come to a decision on the accreditation, the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) conducts a hearing and prepares a report of its own; this report indicates the IAC’s decision and/or recommendations. HLC’s Board of Trustees then reviews all of the documentation and makes a decision to grant or deny initial candidacy.

This candidacy phase lasts four years, during which time the institution must host another evaluation visit two years after being granted initial candidacy status. At the end of the four-year candidacy status, the institution will be evaluated for initial accreditation, at which time it will prepare another self-study, host another on-site evaluation team, and participate in another

hearing by the IAC. HLC's Board of Trustees will again review the IAC's report and make a determination either to grant accreditation or delay candidacy status for a fifth year. If candidacy is extended, the institution will host an evaluation visit in the fifth year as well (Higher Learning Commission, 2014b.)

Once an institution achieves accredited status with the HLC, the process for maintaining that accreditation moves to three "pathways": the "Standard Pathway," the "Open Pathway," and the "AQIP Pathway." Institutions that have received initial accreditation status within the last ten years are required to follow the Standard Pathway requirements. During this ten-year cycle, HLC's focus is on improvement at the institution. The institution must host two comprehensive visits—in years four and 10 of the 10-year cycle—during which time the institution must complete an Assurance Review, an Improvement Review, and an on-site team visit. The Assurance Review is conducted by the peer-review team, which evaluates the institution's adherence to the criteria for accreditation and its progress on the items marked for improvement during any previous visit(s) (Higher Learning Commission, 2013b). After the visits, the peer review team prepares a report, which is reviewed by HLC. In the fourth-year visit, HLC will make a determination to accept the report, call for monitoring, or initiate another accreditation action. In the 10th year, HLC will make a determination to reaffirm accreditation with or without monitoring. At this time, it will also determine whether the institution is eligible to pursue either the Open Pathway or AQIP processes for future accreditation cycles (Higher Learning Commission, 2013b).

Open Pathway follows a 10-year cycle with an Assurance Review in the fourth year, and an Assurance Review and Comprehensive Evaluation with an on-site visit in the 10th year. The institutions that follow this pathway also commit to a quality initiative between years five and nine (Higher Learning Commission, 2014).

The AQIP—or Academic Quality Improvement Program—Pathway is different from the other two pathways in that its focus is on systematic quality improvement. Once approved for this process, institutions must identify and accomplish a variety of "Action Projects" that "will drive

measurable improvements and address its unique issues, opportunities, or challenges” (Higher Learning Commission, 2013, p. 12).

The AQIP Pathway uses nine categories to help the institution determine its Action Projects. Each institution will commit to three or four Action Projects, the completion of which could take months or years. During this process, the institution uploads to HLC any information about its progress on each of the Action Projects. This documentation is available on the HLC website for review by other member institutions and by the public (Higher Learning Commission, 2013, p. 13). HLC provides regular feedback to the institution on each of its Action Projects.

AQIP employs a seven-year cycle. At the beginning of the cycle, the institution participates in a Strategy Forum with other member institutions. During this forum, it creates initial Action Plans for implementation. Three to four years after the Strategy Forum, HLC will provide feedback to the institution in the form of a Systems Appraisal Feedback report. With this report in hand, the institution attends another Strategy Forum to use this feedback to shape the next set of strategies and Action Plans. All of this documentation becomes part of the institution’s evidence that it is meeting all of the Eligibility Requirements. A team of trained peer reviewers visits the campus one year before its Reaffirmation of Accreditation review and produces a Quality Checkup Visit report. No other visit to campus is required. HLC’s Board of Trustees makes a determination during its reaffirmation review to reaffirm accreditation (Higher Learning Commission, 2013).

Accreditation and For-Profit Institutions

National accrediting agencies, such as the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), have traditionally accredited career-focused, for-profit institutions, while regional accrediting bodies (such as North Central) have reviewed and accredited non-profit colleges and universities. There has been a movement by the for-profit higher educational institutions to seek regional accreditation (Kinser, 2003, 2006, 2006b; Prager, 1995; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). As it has done throughout its history (Ewell, 2008), North Central has taken the

lead in addressing this new prospect of working with and accrediting for-profit higher education institutions. According to a 2010 CHEA almanac, North Central currently accredits 1,017 institutions, 42 of which are degree-granting, for-profit institutions. In comparison, Middle States³ accredits 20 such institutions, Southern Association accredits 16, Western accredits 11, New England accredits 10, and Northwest Commission accredits 3. ACICS accredits 472 for-profit degree-granting institutions.

While research regarding for-profit education is growing (Berg, 2005; Breneman, Pusser, and Turner, 2006; Hentschke, Lechuga and Tierney, 2010; Kinser, 2006b, 2003; Lechuga, 2006; Ruch, 2001), research on accreditation in the for-profit sector is limited. Prager (2005) notes that “[n]ational accrediting association practices are observable but remain largely unstudied in a sustained scholarly fashion, like most other areas related to proprietary schools” (p. 65-66). Kinser (2003) continues in the same vein: “While the literature on for-profit higher education has been expanding, . . . little has been written about regionally accredited institutions as a group” (p. 3). Additionally, only one study has been conducted on proprietary schools accredited by ACICS (Prince, 2000).

Criticisms of Accreditation

President Barack Obama unveiled his proposal for a new system of accreditation if the current system of accreditation failed to hold institutions accountable for value, affordability and outcomes in a document released after his State of the Union address in 2013 (The White House). This recommendation stemmed from criticisms in accreditation processes for failing to

³ At this time, there are six national accrediting organizations: Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Middle States Commission on Higher Education (“Middle States”), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (“Southern Association”), New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education and New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Technical and Career Institutions collectively referenced as (New England), North Central Association of Colleges and Schools The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (Northwest), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities collectively referenced as (Western Association).

hold institutions of higher education accountable for affordability, value, and student outcomes (The White House, 2013, p. 5). But of course, President Obama's criticisms of accreditation are not new, nor is he the sole voice speaking about the failings of the current accreditation system.

University presidents, faculty, elected officials, and the public have all criticized accreditation, and they have done so for many decades (Gaston, 2014; Selden, 1960). In his book *Accreditation: A Struggle Over Standards in Higher Education* (1960), William Selden noted:

One very grave danger to the future of accrediting by voluntary accrediting associations is . . . that they have lost the interest of most of the presidents of the outstanding colleges and universities throughout the country and are suffering from a lack of this type of leadership and support. The accrediting associations are on trial as they have never been before. (p. 92)

Additionally, he noted that the accrediting processes were struggling to assist institutions with innovating for the future by being able to "adjust rapidly to world-wide and national forces (p. 89). These and other arguments against accreditation have been leveled for over fifty years. Most detractors focus on seven distinct points, summarized by Judith Eaton, president of the CHEA, in her newsletter of 27 June 2013:

- higher education performance is declining;
- accreditation is too costly;
- current accreditation is a barrier;
- accreditation is too secretive;
- accreditation is burdensome and intrusive;
- accreditation is rife with conflicts of interest;
- accreditation is ill-equipped.

The bulk of this criticism centers around regional accrediting bodies only; perhaps these receive more criticism because they are more prominent than other accrediting bodies (Gaston, 2014, p. 111).

Decline of Higher Education Performance

Accreditation comes under fire mostly because of the perception that the United States has experienced a decline in the performance of higher education (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). These critics argue that accrediting bodies have failed to oversee the institutions they accredit, resulting in a reduction in the quality of higher education (American Council on Education, 2012; Leef and Burris, 2002; Gaston, 2014; Greenberg, 2014). These critics argue that accrediting bodies' criteria or standards for accreditation are focused on inputs and processes rather than on outcomes (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; Gaston, 2014; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder 2010; Leef and Burris, 2002; Vedder, 2013). For example, accreditors focus more on quantifying certain aspects of an institution's operations, such as the number of volumes in the library, faculty teaching loads, and facility square footage. Additionally, declining academic standards such as grade inflation (Leef, G. and Burris, R. 2002) result in limited student achievement and limited evidence of student learning outcomes (Brown, 2013; Dickeson, 2006; Eaton, 2013; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Hartle, 2011; Leef and Burris, 2002; Schray, 2006). Graduation rates are low and college graduates are entering the work force without the requisite skills that employers say they need (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; Eaton, 2013). Furthermore, loan default rates are escalating (Eaton, 2013).

Other evidence supporting the argument that higher education performance has declined centers on the accreditation process itself. Some critics note that the quality standards are outdated and misplaced (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010). Others comment that the 10-year cycle of reaffirming an institution's accreditation status is too long (Dickeson, 2006) and that the scrutiny during the visit is not significant (Gaston, 2014). These critics claim that college officials consequently get little substance from the accreditation visit, which has become a stamp of approval when accreditation is reaffirmed, with no meaningful change occurring at the institution (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010). On the other side of the spectrum, Paul LeBlanc notes that

accrediting bodies are receiving criticism for being too laid-back in their regulations of for-profit colleges and universities (2013).

Cost of Accreditation

Critics also claim that accreditation is too costly (DeMillo, 2013; Eaton, 2013; Leef and Burris, 2002). The accrediting bodies collect dues and fees from the institutional members in order to fund the process of accreditation; colleges and universities also pay for the expense of the site teams visiting their campuses. These expenses are classified as direct costs (Kelderman, 2012); however, indirect costs of accreditation—such as preparation of the self-study, personnel time spent preparing for site visits—also contribute to the expense of accreditation (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; American Council on Education, 2012; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010).

Accreditation raises costs in other indirect ways, such as prescribing minimum credentials and lower teaching loads for faculty members. Detailed examinations of federal government requirements also contribute to indirect costs, as colleges must provide documentation about credit-hour calculations, student complaint policies, student identity policies, and U.S. Department of Education Title IV findings (American Council on Education, 2012; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Vedder, 2013). These indirect costs hinder innovation by “diverting financial and human resources away from more productive uses” (Brown, 2013).

Barriers to Improvement Caused by Accreditation

This hindrance of innovation is something that critics point to as a barrier to institutional improvement (Brown, 2013; Eaton, 2013; Gaston, 2014; Hall, 2012; Hentschke, 2012; LeBlanc, 2013; Schray, 2006). For example, institutions that experiment with new modes of learning complain that the regulatory burdens of accreditation undermine their efforts (Kelderman, 2013). Accreditation also serves as a “catch-22”: in order for colleges and universities to access public dollars, institutions must prove themselves in advance; however, institutions cannot prove

themselves unless they are accredited (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010, p.22). For for-profit institutions, accreditation has posed a barrier because they have had to rely mostly on national (rather than regional) accreditation in order to access these public funds (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010, p. 19). Finally, accrediting agencies serve as the final barrier to competition. Institutions that seek regional accreditation must align themselves with an accrediting body based on their geographic location. As such, they are beholden to the criteria and standards associated with that particular body (Vedder, 2013). For example, Dana College, a liberal arts college in Nebraska, sought approval from their regional accrediting body for an ownership change to a for-profit provider. The accrediting body denied the ownership change resulting in the institution's closure. New, innovative or different institutions cannot seek a regional accrediting body that may be more aligned with their institutional mission due to geographic limitations.

Secretive Nature of Accreditation

Accrediting agencies are also criticized for being too secretive (Eaton, 2013). Accreditors have different criteria and standards with which to assess institutional quality, and they use different language and terminology to describe similar things (American Council on Education, 2012). Without the ability to select a particular accrediting body, institutions are beholden to these varying standards. And since the terms and procedures are not uniform across the different accrediting bodies, the process is confusing to the public (Kelderman, 2013). As a result, accreditation is not transparent and looks like a closed and secretive process (Hartle, 2011).

Indeed, most accrediting reports are not made available to the public (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Hall, 2012; Leef and Burris, 2002; Vedder, R., 2013). Accreditors have stated that since they are focused on helping institutions improve, information must be kept confidential to ensure that the institution will be open and honest in describing its strengths and areas for improvement. However, this secrecy of peer review means that the students, parents, and the broader public are left in the dark (Brown,

2013; Dickeson, 2006; Gaston, 2014; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Leef and Burris, 2002). The HLC of the North Central Association, one of the six regional accrediting bodies, publishes “notification of accrediting actions,” but does not publish team reports on their website (The Higher Learning Commission, 2013b). The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), another of the six regional accrediting bodies, has made strides in the area of transparency: effective June 2012, the WASC publishes all evaluation team reports and commission action letters on its website (Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013).

Burdensome Nature of Accreditation

Accreditation has also been criticized for being burdensome and intrusive. For the most part, critics of accreditation agree that accrediting bodies increasingly intrude on governance matters and institutional autonomy (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; American Council on Education, 2012; Brown, 2013; Eaton, 2013; Neal, 2012; Vedder, 2013). Additionally, the structure of accreditation processes is archaic and contains too many layers and filters (Dickeson, 2006).

Conflicts of Interest Implicit to Accreditation Processes

Critics of accreditation also point to conflicts of interest in the process. As noted earlier in this section, the member institutions of accrediting bodies finance the accreditors that are reviewing them (Eaton, 2013; Field, 2013). In addition to this financial conflict, evaluation teams are composed of college and university personnel from other schools within the same region (Leef and Burris, 2002). And the accrediting body boards are similarly made up of elected and appointed representatives from the same area colleges (Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Kelderman, 2011; Vedder, 2013). These close ties lead to risk of “reciprocal leniency and suspicion of a conflict of interest” (Gaston, 2014, p. 113). Perhaps more dangerous is the risk to public perceptions, since these relationships lend the appearance that accreditation can be bought (Hartle, 2011).

Accreditation Agencies Ill-Equipped to Meet Changing Needs

The higher education landscape is changing rapidly, and critics doubt that the accrediting bodies can continue to serve as arbiters of institutional quality. Accrediting bodies have failed to keep pace with the diversification of higher education (Gaston, 2014). In 2011, *Chronicle of Higher Education* reporter Eric Kelderman warned that accreditors were “ill-equipped to monitor the fast growing for-profit sector” (2011). The “pass-fail” approach of accreditation systems means that institutions need only meet minimum standards in order to achieve accreditation (Dickeson, 2006; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Vedder, 2013). Without levels of gradation, accreditors cannot enforce high standards, leading to the enrollment of unqualified students who have little chance of graduation and who frequently end up in debt (Brown, 2013). Under the current system, “All institutions are subject to the same review regimen despite the fact that all institutions are not at equal risk” (American Council on Education, 2012, p. 23; Gaston, 2014). Finally, because accreditation reviews occur relatively infrequently, accrediting agencies are not in the position to assess immediate fiscal problems or performance levels, and thus, they cannot take immediate action against substandard institutions or those that continue to exploit federal aid dollars (American Council on Education, 2012; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Hartle, 2011; LeBlanc, 2013; Schalin, 2013).

Conclusion

For-profit colleges and universities are organizational entities that have a substantial and long history in the United States. These institutions possess unique cultures, norms, and values. In examining a for-profit college’s mission and the ways in which that mission manifests itself on campus, we can determine what that institution deems important.

For-profit higher education institutions cannot exist solely as profit-making enterprises. In order to remain in business, these institutions must provide vision and meaning for their employees and high-quality educational experiences for their students. One way to ensure this

high-quality experience is to utilize the accreditation process. While there are critics of accreditation, there are many who believe that accreditation continues to serve as a mechanism for ensuring academic quality, especially for for-profit institutions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

The primary focus of this study is to ascertain how presidents of for-profit colleges and universities balance the profit motive with the motive for student success at their institutions. It also explains how accreditation can act as a constructive force or obstacle to these competing motivations. Finally, it articulates what other institutional factors—such as location, degrees awarded, and ownership model—influence regionally and nationally accredited for-profit institutions' decisions about profit motive and student success.

As we have seen, the accreditation process has historically been sufficient for signaling the quality of a higher education institution. However, accreditation processes are facing increasing criticisms, just as for-profit colleges also become targets of intense public scrutiny. Recent Congressional inquiries (Bridgepoint Education, Inc., 2011; For-Profit Schools, 2010) into the motives of for-profit colleges and the ability of accrediting agencies to evaluate and oversee these and non-profit institutions have highlighted for-profit organizations' admissions and marketing practices, use of federal financial aid dollars, and student loan default rates. This scrutiny makes an understanding of the role of accreditation in relation to for-profit institutions even more timely.

In exploring how for-profit college leaders embed accreditation processes into the academic life of the college, we may determine which parts of these processes are valuable to institutions and whether they might aid institutions in balancing profit and student success. This study's results may thus assist executive leaders at for-profit colleges in evaluating internal operations with the goal of better managing the competing motives of profit maximization and student success. The results of this study may also prove beneficial to the accrediting bodies, who might gain understanding about how institutions use the accreditation process to navigate these competing priorities. Finally, for-profit colleges and universities may use this research to advance their understanding of the roles of ownership, location, degree levels, and curricular offerings in relation to the organization's balance of profit motive and student success.

Research Questions

This study examined how college presidents of for-profit regionally accredited institutions value different educational aspects, particularly in relation to the question of balancing profit motive and student success. It posed the following questions:

1. How do regionally accredited for-profit colleges and universities acknowledge and address the dilemma of balancing profit motive and student success?
2. Is accreditation a constructive force or an obstacle in resolving this dilemma?
 - 2a. How have the institutions used accreditation processes to resolve the dilemma of balancing profit motive and student success?
3. What other institutional factors play a role in resolving this dilemma?

Research Methods

To answer these research questions, I chose a case study design, which allows for the examination of institutional differences and similarities. Yin (2009) explains that a case study design in qualitative research has a “distinctive place in educational research” (2009, p. 19), while Merriman notes that qualitative research in education is the most common form of research (2009, p. 23).

However, as Schein notes, it is difficult to understand institutional culture by conducting surveys (2010), since participants may not understand certain questions, may interpret and thus respond to questions differently, or may offer superficial answers. He notes that “[i]t is difficult to get at the deeper levels of culture from paper and pencil perceptions (Schein, 2010, p. 160). Multiple qualitative methods—including site visits, observations, and interviews—yield stronger results (Schein, 2010, p. 176).

These qualitative methods enabled me to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events—such as . . . organizational and managerial processes . . . [and] school performance” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Through case study document review and interviews, I gathered in-depth, detailed information that enriched my understanding of how college leaders use the accreditation process to improve their institutions.

Site and Participant Selection

I used the U.S. Department of Education's data (<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>) to identify all accredited institutions in the United States. I then sorted these data so that I could identify only those institutions that were accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (HLC), a regional accrediting body, and the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), a national accrediting body. I chose the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) agency because it accredits both the largest number of post-secondary institutions generally and the largest number of for-profit institutions (specifically) (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2010). The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) was chosen because it is the oldest accrediting body and only one of two national accrediting bodies recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and U.S. Department of Education.

At this point, I used the websites of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (HLC), to select institutions for inclusion in the study based on the HLC's designation of "best in class." These institutions did not require special, off-year reporting to the HLC, indicating that they were in good standing. I chose only those institutions that offered an associate's degree or higher, though some institutions offered diploma programs as well.

This strategy yielded seven HLC-accredited institutions for the purposes of this study. Originally, four of these seven institutions agreed to participate. However, one of the HLC regionally accredited institutions declined to participate leaving three regionally accredited institutions participating in the study. Using Kinser's for-profit sector classification schema discussed in Chapter 2, I have classified the three institutions as 1) a neighborhood venture institute, 2) a neighborhood enterprise college, and 3) a neighborhood enterprise university. Two of the three institutions are located in the Midwest, while the third is located in the Southwest. Enrollment at these three institutions ranges from 400 to 1,000 students. The three institutions combined offer academic credentials starting at the certificate level, and building to associate's

degree, bachelor's degree, and master's degree levels. These three institutions represent the diversity of institutions accredited by HLC.

Similarly, in identifying for-profit higher education institutions accredited by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), I used the ACICS websites to select institutions for inclusion in the study based on ACICS' 'Honor Roll' designation. This designation is granted to institutions who, in renewing their grant of accreditation with ACICS, have "demonstrated an excellent understanding of accreditation standards and expectations" (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, 2012, p. 21). To provide a set of comparable institutions to those accredited by HLC, I chose only those institutions that offered academic associate degrees or higher, though some institutions offered diploma program as well.

This strategy yielded a total of 61 eligible institutions all of whom were invited to participate in the study. Four of these 61 institutions agreed to participate. Based on Kinser's for-profit sector classification schema, I classified one of these institutions as national shareholder college, two of these institutions as national shareholder institutes and one as a neighborhood venture institute.

After agreeing to participate in the study, all four of the institutions declined to participate prior to conducting the site visits. Two of the institutions cited "advice of legal counsel" as the reason for declining to participate in the study. One of the institutions declined to participate based on Attorneys General requests. The fourth institution declined to participate due to language in the Informed Consent Form. Specifically, the institution was concerned about the risk of a breach in confidentiality and that information shared by the institution and/or participant may be made public. With the withdrawal of the four nationally accredited institutions, I modified the study to examine only regionally accredited institutions.

Data Collection and Management

The interview protocol "is a major way of increasing the reliability of case study research and is intended to guide the investigator in carrying out the data collection from a single case study (. . . even if the single case is one of several in a multiple-case study)" (Yin, 2009, p. 79).

To develop my interview protocol, I drafted questions designed to enhance understanding of the role of the president or other executive on campus, particularly in relation to the issues of balancing profit motive and student success, the role of accreditation in managing this dilemma, and determining whether other institutional factors influence the balancing act. I asked the same questions of the second- and third-tier members of the academic and administrative communities; this strategy enabled me to understand the degree to which the president or other executive leader is embedded in the campus community. Interviewing first-, second-, and third tier members of the campus's academic and administrative community also revealed how others thought about the balance of profit motive and student success, how deeply embedded the accreditation processes are, and how others perceive their relative value to the organization.

Schein identifies the "tiered" members as subcultures themselves: they act as executive, engineer, and operator (2010). The "executive" subculture is the executive leadership of a given organization, while the "engineer" subculture includes "designers of the work." The "operator" subculture includes the front-line staff of the organization (Schein, 2010). As we have seen, when many of an organization's employees internalize and can articulate their organization's values and norms, the organization thrives (Berg, 2005; Collins and Porras, 2002).

Data collection occurred in three stages: first, receiving permission and scheduling logistics; second, conducting on-site, semi-structured interviews; and third, interviews with representatives from outside of the organization, such as the CHEA, HLC, and ACICS. During Stage One, I conducted telephone calls and wrote e-mail messages to establish contact and make scheduling arrangements. At this time, I also reviewed the institution's website, accrediting information, and academic catalogue information. Participating institutions also provided their most recent self-study and response as well as additional accrediting agency reports and communications. Two of the three institutions agreed to provide their annual financial reports as filed with the HLC. Review of the materials prior to the on-site visit led to reformulation of some of the interview questions that were to be asked in Stage Two of the data collection. These mainly included questions about the institution's mission, vision, and institutional purpose statements.

Stage Two of the data collection included on-site, semi-structured interviews at each institution. Interviews were conducted with the president, academic dean, chief admissions officer, director of finance or student services, one full-time faculty member, and one adjunct faculty member. To maintain consistency and comparability across sites, I standardized titles that were different across the three study sites. I conducted six interviews at each site but at one site, I conducted seven interviews, adding an interview with an additional operational director.

I worked with the president's office to schedule all interviews over the course of a single day at each campus. One interview was conducted over the phone because the participant was sick on the day the visit was scheduled. A second interview was conducted both in-person at the site and finished over the phone due to an unavoidable scheduling conflict. The institution's president identified individuals for participation in the study and coordinated the schedule. Prior to the interview, participants were sent an email confirmation of the interview along with an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). The interview protocol is noted in Appendix B.

Names of institutions and individual interviewees remain confidential unless the interviewee chose otherwise. Maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the participants ensures that they are not put into an undesirable position (Yin, 2009). In order to maintain institutional and individual confidentiality, each institution and interviewee was provided a pseudonym. Position titles were used as the identifiers for the individual participants. A separate database was created to house this information, which was password protected and available only to the researcher.

Interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy of statements and comments. Upon conclusion of the campus visit, an independent, private, third party transcribed the recordings; the transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement. The digital audio file was transferred to a password-protected computer that only the interviewer has access to, while written documents provided by the institution were kept in a secure, locked area. Electronic documents provided by the institution were saved to a password-protected computer that only the interviewer has access to. A thorough reading of the transcribed interviews occurred upon receipt to check for

completeness of the transcription. A second reading of the transcriptions allowed for coding of the responses. Analysis and coding of the transcripts was conducted using NVivo®, a qualitative data analysis software program.

A total of 45 codes were used to sort the data collected. These codes were developed from the literature and from reviews of the transcripts and documents. For the first research question, which addresses the balancing of profit motive and student success, the following were used: admissions process, campus environment or culture, change implementation, change implementation frustration, decision making, increased revenue vs. academic quality, strategic planning, institutional importance, mission, profit motive, public good initiative, resource allocation or budgeting, shareholder and student success balance, shareholder vs. campus-led initiatives, strategic planning and improvement processes, student complaints, student success, success, success communicated, values, and vision.

The codes focused on accreditation included: accreditation, AQIP, continuous improvement, national accreditation, self-study daily life, and self-study process. Codes created for the third research question, on the evaluation of institutional distinctions, included: institutional characteristics, academic program offerings, day-to-day operations, location, ownership, and student population. Additional codes created at this time included: faculty qualifications, family, leadership, legacy, licensure, programmatic accreditation, remediation, student learning assessment, and transfer credit policies.

Stage Three of data collection was designed to control for bias. This stage included interviews with a representative from the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (HLC), and the Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS). These interviews occurred over the phone, and the interview protocol for these interviews appears in Appendix C.

Limitations

This study is limited in that it included only three degree-granting, for-profit colleges and universities, and that these three were volunteers. Further, institutions chosen for this study were

limited to those accredited by the HLC. The study excludes for-profit institutions accredited by other national or regional accrediting bodies.

The study also limited participants to degree-granting institutions. Accredited for-profit institutions that offer academic credentials below an associate degree make up a substantial number of institutions in the United States, but these institutions were eliminated both to create a manageable sample size and to include an investigation of general education components, which are not required at the certificate or diploma level.

Moreover, the study excluded non-profit institutions.

As a campus president of a nationally accredited for-profit college and an evaluator for a national accrediting agency, I may bring bias to the findings. To control for my own bias, I employed several strategies. First, I followed Yin's three principles for data collection (2009): I used multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, documents produced by the institutions, and documents produced by the accrediting agencies. I also created a case study database to store the interviews, documents, and document analyses. Finally, I created a chain of evidence to increase the reliability of the information (Yin, 2009, p. 122).

Part of that chain of evidence is the creation and answering of case study questions. The following questions were used to guide analysis:

- 1) What is important to the institution?
- 2) How are the mission, vision, and values brought to life at this institution, and how deep in the organization is the understanding of mission, vision, and values?
- 3) What role does profit motive play?
- 4) How does the institution define and celebrate student success?
- 5) How does the institution allocate resources, and who makes these decisions?
- 6) What role does ownership play in the organization?
- 7) What role does accreditation play in the organization?
- 8) What is distinctive about this institution?

This study maintained the chain of evidence by linking case study questions, case study protocol, citations in the case study database, and the case study report. No information was lost, and all information was reviewed. This clearly defined process controls for bias and supports the validity of the case study model (Yin, 2009, p. 123).

Chapter 4: Midwestern Large Suburban College Site Analysis

The Midwestern Large Suburban College (MLSC) is located in a large suburb in the Midwest with two locations in the same metropolitan area. Over 75 years old, MLSC enrolls approximately 400 students: 84% are female, 71% are 24 years old or younger, and 50% are white, and 34% are Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). It employs fewer than 60 full- and part-time faculty and staff members, and the majority of its faculty members (77%) have full-time status. The institution currently offers nine different certificate and associate's degree programs in the business and health fields. MLSC admissions accepted 67% of its applicants⁴, and 50% of matriculated students are enrolled full-time and are attending college for the first time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

The 2012 retention rate for first-time, full-time students is 69%, while the graduation rate is 72%.⁵ Retention is managed deeply during the first two weeks of enrollment, according to the chief admissions officer. During this time, all admitted students enroll on a "trial basis," and either party can withdraw from the agreement: a student can withdraw or the university can request withdrawal if the institution is not a good fit. If the student does withdraw, s/he is not charged tuition. This process is tracked internally.

MLSC is classified as a private, for-profit institution in the Carnegie Classification system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), and it is owned by a privately held corporate

⁴ The academic dean makes all admissions decisions, with the exception of one program. For this program—which has both programmatic and institutional accreditation—a committee composed of the program's director, the academic dean, and the college president makes enrollment decisions. The committee's decision must be unanimous; if a single vote is for denial of admission, the student is not admitted. The Admissions Office may appeal the academic dean's decision to the president, whose decision is then final.

⁵ According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), "retention rates measure the percentage of first-time students who return to the institution to continue their studies the following fall." The graduation rate "tracks the progress of students who began their studies as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students to see if they complete a degree or other award such as a certificate within 150% of 'normal time' for completion of the program in which they are enrolled."

entity that also owns more than five other career-focused, for-profit colleges throughout the United States.

MLSC is regionally accredited, and, therefore it is eligible to participate in Federal Title IV financial aid programs. Seventy-two percent of its students received Pell grants in 2011-2012. The institution reports three-year cohort default rates of 8.5% in 2009 and 3.5% in 2010.

Interviews were conducted with six individuals at this location: the president, the academic dean, the chief admissions officer, the senior level director, a full-time faculty member, and an adjunct faculty member. One of these individuals also serves as the chair of the regional accreditation process at the institution. As ascertained during the interviews, the average tenure of the MLSC employees who participated in this study is eight and a half years, with the longest employee working at the institution for 15 years and the shortest for four years.

Institutional Importance Indicators Communicating the Institutional Mission and Purposes

MLSC's mission is to prepare students for success in specialized careers. Its four core values of learning, professionalism, quality, and structure and guidance underlie this mission. At the same time, it explains that the institution is "proprietary," which is another way to describe a for-profit higher education institution. This proprietary mission is fully part of the institutional purpose. While the institution's Board of Governors reviews this mission, explication, and statement of institutional purposes every year, these have been in place unchanged for over 10 years.

MLSC is proud of its proprietary status and ensures that all members of its community—students, faculty, and staff—understand this status as part of MLSC's identity. As an adjunct faculty member noted, "We wanted to make it clear that everybody who was here, students included, that we are proprietary, and it's not a secret . . . It's an identity issue; we're proprietary in our mission." The chief admissions officer similarly noted, "we're not ashamed of it; we are who we are." The open nature of this status generates trust among faculty and staff.

This proprietary focus is evident in the stated institutional purposes. The first stated purpose is to reinforce the accelerated learning culture of the institution, while the second stated purpose is to generate sufficient financial resources to ensure that the institution may achieve its first purpose. By codifying in language the institution's proprietary nature, MLSC informs its constituents that the two purposes are linked: one way to achieve the first goal (on learning) is to ensure the second goal (on making money). As its president noted, "There were two sets of institutional purposes, and it is important to note that it is institutional purpose number two that mentions that the school is proprietary. We're not saying that it is a secondary thing, but it is first and foremost that we have to deliver what we do as an institution. Secondly, we have to try and make sure the institution makes money." The president's comment reinforced the language in MLSC's self-study (2011), which stated that "Institutional Purpose 2 delineates administrative measures necessary to achieve Institutional Purpose 1."

MLSC makes its mission, explication, and institutional purposes clear to students, faculty, and staff. These are prominently displayed in offices and general purpose areas, and students at the institution even "participated in a contest to redesign [the] framed copies" of the mission statement on display throughout the campus (MLSC Self-Study, 2011).

The majority of participants interviewed stated that the president is the chief communicator of what is important to the institution. As one faculty member commented, "I would say the president sort of alerts us as sort of the newscaster of stuff that's coming up." The president himself concurred during his own interview: when asked who communicates what is important to the institution, he said, "Me. We have all staff and all faculty meetings as an institution," during which time he communicates with all members of the community. These faculty and departmental meetings occur on a regular basis, and mandatory institution-wide meetings are also held three to five times per year. One employee shared that the president will usually "have an all-staff meeting at the end of every term." The small size of the institution aids communication at all levels.

Student Success Defined

MLSC places high importance on student success, which it uses to define its own institutional success. Its long-standing presence and good reputation in the community signal to MLSC's leaders that its programs are yielding successful graduates. This reputation is spread primarily through word-of-mouth: as the chief admissions officer indicated, "I don't care how much advertising you do; referrals are huge. Word-of-mouth is huge, and for us, the best advertising we have is successful students." The academic dean shared the same sentiment: "A lot of times a lot of our students come here not because someone actively recruited them; it's because of word-of-mouth." Indeed, families often enroll across generations so that current students might be the third-generation in their family to attend MLSC. And MLSC's strong reputation means that employers in the community continue to hire its graduates, a statistic that is tracked through employer surveys (MLSC Self-Study, 2011).

Of course, faculty members play a crucial role in student success. They do this by determining early on whether the student is meeting course goals and by recognizing the diversity of MLSC students. As one faculty member noted, "we have to be able to get our students ready to go to work. And if they're not ready it is on us. Or if they are not ready or can't make it, it's our job to weed them out. So they don't waste their time and we don't waste ours." At the same time, faculty members also account for the diversity of student backgrounds by adapting their pedagogies to meet individual student needs.

To measure and define student success, MLSC uses both internal and external indicators: internal indicators include retention rates, graduate rates, graduate placement rates and average salaries, and student loan default rates, while external indicators include third-party oversight via accreditation.

Faculty members and administrators both mentioned student success indicators in my interviews with them and in the institution's self-study. To take just one example, MLSC addresses internal indicators directly in the self-study:

By continually monitoring the employment placement rates of its students and graduates, the College learns how well its serving students in the

crucial role of providing effective career preparation. The Director of Placement conducts Graduate Surveys sixteen weeks after graduation to obtain qualitative and quantitative information on how effectively [the College] has prepared alumni to meet their educational and career objectives. (MLSC Self-Study, 2011)

In addition to polling its graduates, the College also engages directly with employers who hire its graduates to determine their level of satisfaction with the MLSC graduates they may have hired. Additionally, all but one academic program requires either an internship or externship. The institution then calculates and measures the percentage of students successfully hired from their externship site after graduation.

In addition to these internal indicators for measuring student success, third-party verification also validates the quality of MLSC's academic programs. Almost half of the programs offered at MLSC are programmatically accredited; these processes review each program, assess how well the institution supports the program, evaluate faculty credentials, and identify outcomes for graduates (such as professional licensure or board examinations). For those programs without external accreditation, MLSC embeds certification exams appropriate to those course offerings in the curriculum.

The implementation of external validation processes serves two purposes for MLSC: first, it responds to the scrutiny that the for-profit sector of higher education is receiving; and second, it ensures ongoing assessment of student learning. For example, when U.S. Senators focused attention on for-profit institutions in 2010, MLSC responded by increasing external evaluation. As the academic dean noted, "we wanted to make sure that our clock hours were correct . . . so we really evaluated that hard across the board with all programs. So in 2011, all programs were pretty much modified in one fashion or another to prepare for whatever was coming our way[.] . . . [W]e wanted to make sure we were ready for it and students were getting what they needed." These accrediting processes also enable MLSC to assure that it "provide[s] best practices in professional preparation" (MLSC Self-Study, 2011). Along with its own internal indicators, external programmatic accreditation allows MLSC to make positive changes to improve outcomes for students and avoid negative feedback from those outside of the community.

Assessment of Student Learning

While some members of the community at MLSC—such as the president, academic dean, and faculty members--were informed about assessment, others seemed less knowledgeable or motivated to learn more. For example, one participant responded, “That really is not my problem . . . I’m not on the education side; I don’t know exactly how they monitor things like that.” Most interviewees spoke knowledgeably about generic assessments, such as graduate placement rates, graduation rates, and professional licensure and board exam pass rates. However, beyond these fundamental metric driven pieces, certain senior leadership does not uniformly understand (or seem to care about) assessment of student learning occurring at MLSC.

The Institutional Effectiveness Planning Committee (IEPC)—composed of the president (who also chairs the group), the academic dean, the director of placement, the director of financial aid, and the faculty member(s) in charge of the programs—is responsible for assessing student learning at MLSC. Created between 2005 and 2007 when MLSC was pursuing initial accreditation with the HLC, the IEPC has a three-fold purpose: to “examine institutional/educational outcomes; identify needed improvements for [the institution]; and to review annually all aspects of the Annual Institutional Effectiveness and Planning Calendar” (MLSC Self-Study, 2011). Since its inception, the IEPC has grown to represent not only the curricular areas of the institution, but also all operational areas.

In addition to the IEPC, three other stakeholders actively participate in cyclical assessment at MLSC: the General Education Committee, the Professional Education Program Directors, and the President, who serves as the liaison to the Board of Governors. The General Education Committee evaluates the assessment process for the institution’s general education objectives, while the Professional Education Program Director’s group evaluates the assessment process for the professional education objectives. The IEPC coordinates the efforts of these two groups, and the president liaises with the Board of Governors to report on the processes. As the president noted:

The IEPC Committee . . . directly informs the strategic planning outcomes. People on the IEPC are pretty much the same people, or somewhat the same people that make up the strategic planning committee. So, there are basically three institutional bodies that are the core of the institution, which are the Board of Governors from the outside guiding the institution[,] [t]he Institutional Effectiveness Planning Committee[,] and the Strategic Planning Committee. Then there are [the] subset[s] of the IEPC, which would include the Gen Ed Committee, [the] Business or Professional Committee, [and] the specific program groups like the faculty meetings for [specific programs].

Most of the students learning assessments for the general education curriculum are “home grown.” The president noted that this process enabled customization:

We knew what we wanted to assess and so we developed assessment methodologies for the core areas like oral communication, psychology, writing, and critical thinking, and we developed and continued to develop and work on those assessment tools, because, sometimes what we see is a result that tells us, ‘Okay, we need to work on something.’ Sometimes we see results that tell us, ‘Well, everybody keeps passing,’ so maybe the assessment needs to be a little harder. It depends, and that’s part of what the IEPC looks at. It will look at both what is the learning outcome and what is the assessment telling us. But it will also, as a committee look at, is the assessment tool in and of itself telling us what we need to know, and that’s been a real growing process for us. So we developed a lot of those because we didn’t feel it was right, being what we were, to try and rely on out-of-the-box assessment tool[s], Compass, or anything else, so we decided to go that route.

MLSC evaluates their student learning outcomes to see if students are underperforming or over achieving certain skill sets. Their evaluations inform changes to the classroom environment. By creating unique assessment tools, MLSC has improved their assessment culture for their general education curriculum.

This home-grown approach also enabled the development of unique assessment measures, such as professionalism. Since professionalism is vital in workplaces, MLSC worked to ensure that students understood these norms and “soft skills” prior to graduation. As one faculty member commented, “. . . everything sets the standard for a certain level of professionalism that we believe will translate into the job for us so that they can carry those skills over when they begin to work.” At the start of a student’s enrollment at MLSC, the career services staff and faculty members assess a student’s skills in this area to establish a baseline; then, at the end of the student’s program, these skills are assessed again to determine progress.

Students are evaluated on their skills in time management, communication with peers, communication with faculty and staff members, and compliance with dress code.

In response to its accumulation of assessment data and its accreditation evaluation, MLSC is enacting several changes. For example, the institution is incorporating student demographics in planning considerations and activities (MLSC Self-Study, 2011). It partnered with Smarthinking, an online writing center, and it implemented new requirements of its faculty, such as the completion of professional development coursework. MLSC also revised its policies to better serve a nontraditional student population: it increased the number of transfer credits accepted and revised its attendance policies. In doing so, the institution directly responded to areas of concern raised during the HLC accreditation process.

Resource Allocation and Budgeting

Recall that Schein's third organizational subculture is the "executive," whose worldview is "built around the necessity to maintain the financial health of the organization..." (2010, p. 63). This role is manifested at MLSC, where the president and other executives determine resource allocation and manage budgets.

Faculty and staff members are not involved in financial matters; they recognize—in the words of one employee—that the "president holds the purse strings." At the same time, day-to-day expenses necessary to departmental or institutional operations are ordered without seeking permission from the president. Only exceptional or unusual expenditures would prompt employees to seek presidential approval. Such requests are informal: faculty members simply meet with him and he decides whether to approve the request. As one employee noted, "It's up to the prince. He handles budgeting; he handles all of that . . . I can't think of one time that I have asked for something that I couldn't have or needed that we couldn't get." The president's accessibility facilitates these interactions, as another employee noted "being a small college, it's [sic] not like we have to really hunt down the boss, you know he is just right next door." Each department at MLSC develops detailed budgets annually, which the president reviews by

comparing with historical spending. If increases seem unusual, he will meet with departments to learn more.

MLSC's president reinforced his employees' perceptions of budgetary decision making and resource allocation:

I would say [this is a] dictatorial, tyrannical institution, and I am the tyrant. I handle all of the budgeting processes. I don't like people to be distracted by concerns of 'Do I have enough money to do this, that, or the other thing'...anybody who works here understands that we need to make money to continue to exist and that separates us from other learning institutions. . .So they don't ask for things that are unnecessary and I don't turn down requests that are necessary to fulfill the outcome. So, if we need something to do what we are supposed to do, we go buy it.

The proprietary nature of the school makes such decisions relatively simple for the president, who noted that "Our ownership is a fairly well-off family and there's always money in the account. So, I have the luxury of [knowing] the check's not going to bounce and nobody is screaming 'Oh, you just went over budget.'"

The majority (70%) of MLSC's expenses support its academic programs and student services, including placement and admissions: "The heavy investment of financial resources [is] in education and student services. The historically successful fiscal management of the institution . . . allows for the strategic insurance of the College's high educational standards" (MLSC Self-Study, 2011). The remaining expenses relate to physical plant and building operations. Since over 85% of building occupancy expenses can be traced to classrooms, offices, and other educational resources, almost all (95%) of the 2012 fiscal year expenses were devoted to the academic mission of the College.

Parent Company Ownership and MLSC's Profit Motive

MLSC's parent company owns other for-profit, career-focused colleges, which enables it to provide resources to MLSC more efficiently and at a lower cost. MLSC's self-study recognized the benefits the scale of the parent company offers:

The size of [corporate owner] as a whole, allows the company to deploy resources on a substantial scale and with a subsequent degree of efficiency that

would be impossible for its affiliated institutions to execute on its own. [The institution] thus benefits directly from the resource base of its parent company. (2011)

For example, the parent company can “scale up” its IT resources for all of its colleges, and it does so by outsourcing to a third-party company all IT support. MLSC then pays a monthly fee for this service. The parent company also provides computer systems for student databases, financial aid information, and accounting processes, among other programs. It even provides assistance for real estate development and decisions. As the chief admissions officer commented, “That’s corporate too. We have a guy who comes out who basically does [real estate transactions].”

The parent company offers centralized support for all of its colleges, and MLSC may access any of its “sister campuses,” just as they may access MLSC. The purpose is for the commonly owned campuses to learn from one another. For example, one of MLSC’s sister campuses achieved better results than MLSC in its admission process for one academic program as shared by the chief admissions officer. One of MLSC’s admissions staff members visited the sister campus, met with its team, observed its processes, and brought back a plan for improved results.

The parent company thus provides support for all of its academic programs that share a centralized curriculum. MLSC’s self-study reported:

Through the resources of its parent company, [the corporate owner], the College enjoys powerful means to achieve its Mission of providing a quality education and to improve its programs of study. Specifically, [the institution’s] parent company takes the following actions to support the College’s plans for maintaining and upgrading its educational programs:

- Offering [institution] access to the centralized resources available to [corporate owner]
- Encouraging the College to share knowledge with [institution’s] sister schools
- Investing directly in [institution’s] infrastructure, learning resources, and educational curricula
- Researching and implementing potential programs of study[.] (2011)

However, if any of the campuses proposes a big change, campus leaders must solicit input and receive approval from the parent company before making the change. To take one example provided by the chief admissions officer, MLSC's recruitment efforts initially involved visits to local high schools, where admissions staff members would conduct presentations and solicit information from the students. Admissions representatives would then follow up with students who submitted information, but they soon learned that these students were not particularly interested in attending MLSC. Once MLSC leaders reviewed this program and determined to terminate it, they still needed approval from the parent company before they could enact the change.

The parent company's most critical involvement, though, is perhaps through financial aid processing for the various campuses. As described by the director of financial aid, while MLSC's own financial aid staff members meet with students and prepare documentation, the director of MLSC financial aid then forwards all files to the parent company's centralized financial aid department, which manages the disbursement of funds. This centralized department also conducts student file verifications above and beyond what is requested by the U.S. Department of Education. As the president shared in describing the parent company's involvement in MLSC's day-to-day financial aid operations,

The biggest thing for us is financial aid. One of the ways that they take a weight off of all the [company] schools is they have a centralized financial aid office, which does all quality control, handles all professional judgments[.]

Since the parent company handles all files, financial aid staff members on campus avoid personal involvement with individual student requests. Moreover, the centralized process provides comfort to campus leaders that the processes are done correctly. Finally, it reduces the number of staff members working on this issue at MLSC.

The parent company takes a long-term view of the potential return on their investment in MLSC and its other colleges. An adjunct faculty member noted the company's support of educational innovation and institutional success without special regard to cost: "if we're going to try something new and different, we're going to make sure you have the resources to succeed.

And so, throughout the accreditation process we were afforded the consultants who been down this path, who knew how to get people through.” When MLSC reported negative and small profits from 2006 through 2009, the company was nevertheless “supportive of [its] small total profit during its years of growth and expansion” (MLSC Self-Study, 2011). Perhaps most important, the parent company invested in new academic programs, an additional location, and student learning resources, all of which eventually paid off in subsequent years in the form of increased revenues and profits. In 2011, MLSC submitted to the U.S. Department of Education a financial responsibility composite score of 1.9, and in 2012, it submitted a score of 2.1, demonstrating a solid financial footing.⁶

Employees recognize the importance of this solid financial status, while the administration retains flexibility and awareness of long-term returns. As one employee noted, “We have to make ends meet and we have to thrive.” At the same time, the chief admissions officer emphasized implicit flexibility in meeting revenue goals: “We’re not super numbers-driven. I don’t think any admissions rep has ever been let go because they didn’t meet numbers, or they missed goal. It would be maybe, lack of motivation, or work ethic, or something like that.” Thus, while the institution reserves the right to cancel programs due to insufficient enrollment, it will not terminate employees for failing to meet a single goal.

Despite the importance of a balanced budget to any institution’s survival, the proprietary nature of for-profit colleges means that this sector of higher education is often disrespected and misunderstood. According to one employee, “any school has to make a profit,” but in the case of for-profit institutions, the general public judges them negatively for this aim. Another employee acknowledged this negative perception and emphasized how the institution might turn it around: “I think that from the beginning we start with this kind of a cloud over our head that because we

⁶ The Higher Education Act of 1965 requires for-profit and non-profit institutions to annually submit audited financial statements to the U.S. Department of Education to demonstrate they are maintaining the standards of financial responsibility necessary to participate in Title IV programs. It utilizes a composite of three ratios that reflect the overall financial health of the institution: these range from -1.0 to +3.0, where a score greater than or equal to +1.5 indicates financial responsibility (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

are for-profit, we must be this. I think that what we do is embrace who we are and go out of way to ensure that not only are we not misleading anybody, but there's no chance of them misunderstanding either."

Employees at MLSC are eager to point out that it is no different from many other higher education institutions, especially those that are "tuition-driven." The president expressed this point of view most clearly:

I mean when I look at the profit motive issue in relationship to education, I have worked at state schools as an instructor, I have worked at private, non-profit, I have worked at private for-profit. So, I've worked in the expanse of all of it and I have worked for private for-profit that were publicly traded versus private for-profit that were not. I don't think that profit in and of itself is an issue as far as quality education. I think that the balancing of those things is usually only difficult when the short term overrides the long term as far as the view set of an institution or its parent organization. But I think that exists for both for-profit and not-for-profit private that are tuition-driven institutions because tuition-driven institutions have to make money, they have to stay in the black.

Nevertheless, negative perceptions mean that for-profit institutions must deliver solid results. In the case of MLSC, its size positively impacts its results, since no one can hide or slip through the cracks:

A reality of a proprietary institution is that you're always moving, and that is not necessarily true in other institutions. There's a differential there about the requirement of movement and I've worked in other institutions, where you can hide and stall a long time. You can try that here, but it really won't last very long, all right? There's value to that, and there's value to everybody knowing that and it makes you feel good about – dang it I am on top of stuff, because I have to be.

As indicated in the above quote, MLSC holds its employees accountable for performance. That focus on performance reinforces a sense of purpose and accomplishment for employees.

External criticisms also motivate for-profit institutions to improve so that they can address these criticisms head on. An employee noted the ensuing pressure of having to defend the institution: "There is a constant need for the institution to prove itself and receive credit for the academic rigor of the curriculum." Accreditation is one way to address these negative perceptions. MLSC also utilizes its admissions process and "trial period," as well as its focus on graduate placement, to set students up for success.

Accreditation

As explained through MLSC's self-study (2011) and in the president's interview, prior to pursuing regional accreditation with HLC, MLSC was nationally accredited with the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS). MLSC was initially founded as a business school offering certificate and diploma programs. When it developed its own degree programs in the 1980s and '90s, MLSC had to develop general education courses, which they aligned with state academic transfer standards. MLSC eventually received approval from ACICS to offer associate's degree programs.

However, as MLSC students graduated and applied for admission to baccalaureate programs, they were often denied admission at those regionally accredited institutions because their degrees were earned under the national ACICS accreditation. According to MLSC's academic dean,

[I] think the biggest impact and one of the reasons why we wanted to pursue regional accreditation was because . . . when we were nationally under ACICS, so many of our students would complete our program with an associate's degree and wish to pursue—as we outline in the mission statement for them—. . . higher learning, but they would get stopped in their tracks because other institutions said, 'well, if you are not regionally accredited, we have no use for any of your credits.

As a result of this misalignment with MLSC's mission for continued education and the frustration of students unable to transfer their education to the baccalaureate level, MLSC began pursuing regional accreditation with HLC. Such accreditation would also enable students to secure state grant funding, which is unavailable to institutions that only have national accreditation.

MLSC has since achieved regional accreditation and now has formalized articulation agreements with non-profit, baccalaureate-granting colleges. Moreover, "[s]ince achieving Initial Accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission, [the institution] has been eligible to participate in the [state's grant program]. Through this program, the College is able to award state financial aid funds to students in need" (MLSC Self-Study, 2011). According to one of the

faculty members, pursuing and achieving regional accreditation “gives the institution and me credibility.”

Since the transition from a nationally accredited institution to a regionally accredited institution, MLSC has discovered that ACICS is a very prescriptive form of accreditation. According to MLSC’s president, “HLC allows the institution the ability to find yourself a little bit more and have a little bit more control.”

In maintaining its regional accreditation, MLSC is on the Standard Pathway, the model required for those institutions that have received initial accreditation with HLC for fewer than 10 years. The Standard Pathway requires institutions to create a self-study and participate in a comprehensive evaluation and site visit. At MLSC, completion of the self-study took approximately one year. As an adjunct faculty member—and the self-study steering committee’s chair—shared, “Well, we started with the steering committee. The president drove a lot of the ability for us to spend time with [the self-study] and make sure . . . there was time allocated for faculty to talk.” To write the self-study, committee members reviewed the previous document to identify important changes and evidence of improvements. MLSC’s senior leadership noted that the self-study process “reinforced what we were already doing was good.” Furthermore, the self-study process enabled the institution to develop its institutional purposes and to reinforce its mission. The president noted that at this time, “It was important for the institution to define itself.”

Applying for and achieving regional accreditation has not changed what faculty and staff do on a daily basis at MLSC with respect to their mission of preparing students for success. What has changed, however, is the need for more documentation “to prove” or show as “evidence” that the institution is doing what it says it is doing. For example, one MLSC director noted that departmental meeting minutes are an important aspect of building evidence for HLC. While there is the need for more evidence, the work is not overwhelming to the institution. As a faculty member noted, “Yeah, it definitely impacts our daily processes. It goes back to our culture; it goes back to our mission statement; it goes back to who we are definitely. I’d like to

think once again it impacts us in a positive way, but I don't feel negative like I'm walking on egg shells or anything like that all because of accreditation."

Indeed, many recognize that HLC's focus on assessment and data collection has had a positive impact on the daily operations of MLSC. For example, prior to HLC accreditation, the institution did not assess students after they found employment, but HLC pushes the institution to find out whether students are learning what the institution has set out for them to learn. To assess student learning, MLSC measures students' skills at the start of their programs through pre-testing, and measures their skills at the end of the program through post-testing. Faculty and staff are also assessed along different measures, including financial planning, strategic planning, competitive analysis, benchmarking, and tracking data. While keeping track of these data is complex, the president notes that it has resulted in overall improvement at MLSC:

I think in the old days . . . , the notion was, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,' and, if it is broke, if you're suddenly have trouble placing these students, you would just talk to the employers and ask, 'What are we doing wrong? What do they need to learn that we're not doing right now?' and you can go back and change it. In other words, people did what they did with a focus on an outcome, but [they] didn't necessarily question if what they did was successful beyond that given outcome, so HLC forced us to be more cognizant of what we're doing and to collect a lot more data than we've ever collected before.

Regional accreditation is not without negative effects, however. The process has slowed down reaction time for MLSC because of additional bureaucracy and more staff members involved in decisions. For example, when modifying or implementing new academic programs, MLSC must seek and receive approval from four separate entities: the relevant institutional committees, the MLSC Board of Governors, the state agency responsible, and the HLC. The president admitted: "the process of change becomes more difficult. More people are involved, so . . . it slows reaction time because there is the necessity of recognizing that we shouldn't make change without looking at why we are making change, which has its plusses and its minuses. . . . It's probably made us a little bit slower to react."

In addition to regional accreditation, MLSC pursued and achieved programmatic or specialized accreditation in all programs for which such accreditation is available. As stated in

MLSC's self-study and in interviews with the academic dean and faculty members, the purpose of seeking such accreditation was to provide students with a competitive edge and keep the institutional focus on students' success in careers beyond college. Thus, MLSC enabled students to sit for licensure or other certification exams, signaling their achievement of a certain mastery level of knowledge in their field of study and preparing them for immediate employment upon graduation.

Participation in programmatic accreditation further enables the institution to access best practices in curriculum and instruction for individual fields of study, since the accrediting agencies can provide comparative data and expertise regarding the development of new programs.

Institutional Distinctions and Influences

Many factors define and influence MLSC. Perhaps most important is its origins as a family-owned business. Founded over 75 years ago, it was only purchased by its current parent company within the last 10 years. Consequently, a number of values remain from its founding: for example, MLSC supports an ideal that "family comes first," with "family" in this case indicating its own students, faculty, and staff. This family mentality also means that senior leaders are approachable and that an informal style characterizes the culture. In fact, to promote interaction between leaders and faculty and staff members, and between leaders and students, administrative offices in at least one location are situated near the main entrance to campus, which means that students, faculty, and staff walk by these offices daily.

The parent company and the senior leadership also support rank-and-file faculty and staff employees. The president and academic dean travel to both campus locations daily and share an office at one of the locations. And one of the owners made an effort to be present during an important regional accreditation visit: an adjunct faculty member remarked, "he said [he would come,] and he did. That meant the world to me and the people who had done the work . . . it was a big deal . . . and he came, and so I always respected . . . and appreciated that."

MLSC's small size also contributes to its success. With a student to faculty ratio of 1:17, faculty members know their students as individuals. Faculty and staff members assist one another. And, with a Board of Governors with only five members, decision-making is easier.

MLSC's long history means that it can rely on a solid reputation in its home community. It takes pride in the generations of students from the same family who choose to attend the institution. MLSC also cultivates town-gown relationships by engaging with the local community: students routinely participate in fairs and fund raising efforts to give back.

Finally, MLSC's academic program offerings define the institution as one committed to its students' career success. Originally focused on preparing students for administrative positions in the business world, MLSC has now expanded this foundation to additional business, health care, and professional programs. When employment opportunities shift, they alter program offerings. For example, MLSC once offered a degree in graphic design, but it discontinued that program when its graduates were unable to find work or unable to find high-paying work. As the president commented, "I stopped teaching Graphic Design last year[;] [I] taught the cohort that I [already] had and did not start a new [group] in the fall. We had been teaching it for five years and we had a really good instructor, but we had never had an enrollment that was great and we didn't have retention in the program, so we decided to end it." The chief admissions officer continued:

We've had opportunities to expand into different programs and the first thing that we've always looked at is if we start that program here, can we get our students jobs? Well, yeah, we can get them jobs, but the average salary is like \$10, \$12 an hour. Well then, we're not doing it. We would increase our students in population, but in the long run, it wouldn't do us any good because we'd have a harder time placing them, or wouldn't be able to place them at all, or they'd be placed in jobs that they could get now.

Chapter 5: Midwestern Midsize City College Site Analysis

The Midwestern Midsize City College (MMCC) is located in a midsized city in the Midwest. MMCC currently enrolls approximately 600 students, all from within the state. Seventy percent of the students are white and 23% are black. Students are mostly adults 25 years or older and represent 77% of the student population. MMCC offers 18 different academic programs in the fields of business, legal, technology and health. Eight of the programs are offered at the associate degree level, six at the bachelor degree level and four certificate programs. The majority of students (87%) are enrolled in either a bachelor or associate degree program. The institution also offers an online component to their curriculum in all of their program offerings. Seventy-two percent of their students take some online courses while 13% of the student population is enrolled entirely online. Adjunct faculty comprises most of the faculty representing 65% of the faculty on staff. The student to faculty ratio is 8:1 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). MMCC is an open enrollment institution. Students take an entrance assessment as part of the admissions process. For 2012, 90% of the students who applied were admitted (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Of those students who enrolled, only seven percent are considered first time, full-time students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

MMCC participates in Federal Title IV financial aid programs. Seventy percent of the students enrolled received Pell grants. The institution also reports three-year cohort default rates of 19.5% in 2009 and 13.6% in 2010. Reported retention and graduates rates for first time, full-time students is 50% and 43%, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), “retention rates measure the percentage of first-time students who return to the institution to continue their studies the following fall.” Additionally, the graduation rate “tracks the progress of students who began their studies as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students to see if they complete a degree or other award such as a certificate within 150% of “normal time” for completion the program in which they are enrolled.”

Interviews were conducted with seven individuals: president, academic dean, chief admissions officer, senior level director, another senior level director, full-time faculty member and an adjunct faculty member. All interviews were conducted on-site with the exception of the president, which was conducted over the phone. One member of the team interviewed serves as the liaison of the regional accreditation effort at the institution. The average tenure of the team interviewed is 15 and ½ years, with the longest serving employee working at the institution for 30 years. The shortest tenure of an MMCC employee was one year. The institution is classified as a baccalaureate/associate's college according to their Carnegie Classification (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). MMCC is a family owned, privately held for-profit corporate entity and has been in the family for three generations.

Institutional Importance Indicators Communicating the Institutional Mission and Purposes

MMCC's mission, in part, is to provide education that emphasizes skills and knowledge needed for a productive society to pursue professional and educational goals. Published in their academic catalog and self-study documentation, the institutional mission statement focuses on the student as a whole person and the contributions they make as an educated citizen. Their nine institutional objectives supporting the mission focus on providing an education to students, creating an environment for faculty and staff to contribute to the student's overall growth as a person and learning new skills and a focus on the student's professional growth and employment potential. MMCC was founded over 75 years ago with the purpose to educate veterans to allow them to become successful in their civilian lives. Since that time, the institution has continued to grow and expand on its original foundation of educating people for new careers. MMCC also publishes a Code of Ethics, which they refer to as their values, which focus on integrity, innovation, continuous improvement, customer focus and diversity. Their mission and Code of Ethics are displayed prominently in public areas of the institution.

There are three main areas of institutional importance to MMCC. These areas revolve around students, employees and the community. Through employee interviews, the student

population at MMCC is a diverse set of students that cover the spectrum of recent high school graduates to students in their 40's and 50's returning to college to retool their careers. As one of the directors noted, we have students with their "...nose to the grind stone and work with no problems to the student who really wants to do it, but is being sabotaged at home because he or she is going to be the first one that's ever, ever broken that mold." MMCC's traditional student is a non-traditional student and defined as the single mother of two by the president and chief admissions officer. As shared in interviews with employees, the majority of students are first generation college students who need more support from the institution. Students are balancing many facets of their lives that pull them in many different directions from working while attending college, taking care of families at home, single parents, some students in relationships. Some students have previous college experience while others are looking to retool a career or need a career. The majority of the African American student population comes from less desirable neighborhoods and low-income areas. While there is no reported crime that occurs on campus, faculty and staff must work to close the gap sometimes of what is considered appropriate behaviors among the student population as shared by the academic dean. Often times, MMCC is the only positive motivator in the students' lives. As the chief admissions officer commented, "our adult learners...go home and their family members are asking, 'Why are you paying so much to go? Why are you going back to college? You're spending a lot of time on this. We have kids, you have a job; we have other things to do.'"

As a diverse institution, a faculty member noted that the student population at MMCC is more diverse than the metropolitan area in which they are located. This particular faculty member serves and has served on a number of boards in the area and one challenge to the area is the low number of sustainable minority owned businesses.

Serving students is critical to MMCC. From the moment they step on campus during new student orientation, students are considered and told that they are part of the family. One of the directors who plays a role in new student orientation reinforces the message by ensuring that everyone is "part of our family." Another employee commented, "[the institution] appears to have

a high value and accountability to how you treat their students.” The chief admissions officer who shared, “The most important thing at the end of the day is serving our students,” echoed this sentiment. Employees pride themselves on the family atmosphere that exists on campus and how that atmosphere includes students. MMCC places a high value and accountability to how students are supposed to be treated. For example one of the faculty members shared in their interview,

It has been communicated to me over and over again and I am little bit surprised because I have another job, this is my little part-time thing here, I am supposed to be on [the institution’s] email five days a week out of seven really, okay, wow, I think that’s impressive. I was teaching one class with 10 students and you need to be on email on five days a week. We need you communicating with your students within 24 hours. They need to be able to reach you and contact you and this was a whole bunch of faceless people to me in e-learning.

Additionally, faculty is required to take daily attendance and turn that information in to the academic department. If students are absent, they receive phone calls from the institution. As one of the directors shared, “We follow up [which is] sometimes unrelenting to them” and receive responses of “...would you please not call me again or the hang-ups...” Moreover, staff is available to students and has personal conversations to provide assistance when students are struggling in the classroom. The director continued by sharing, “And that communication with students is absolutely essential.” Beyond the classroom environment, the institution ensures that the “family” environment permeates by having stacks of student birthday cards for faculty and staff to sign. As one director noted, “...taking care of our students is very important, but also taking care of our employees is – I’m not going to say that it takes a second place to the students – we want to take care of both.”

Employees are a significant area of importance to MMCC. As one employee noted, MMCC is “higher on human relations than most organizations.” The organization takes care of their employees and works in positive ways with them first. For example, as noted earlier, faculty is required to be on email regularly and turn in classroom attendance. However, a new faculty member did not know or understand these requirements. As the faculty member shared, “...I never did attendance for three weeks because I didn’t know I was supposed to do it. I got this

email, [person's name], we haven't received your attendance, and I write back everybody has come in to all three classes, we are having a really good term." Instead of assuming that the faculty member was doing something wrong, the team member who needed the information contacted the new faculty member and asked if they knew or understood this procedure. The team member trained the new faculty member on the proper procedure. Additionally, MMCC holds an annual Christmas party. One of the employees commented that, "I have never seen a Christmas party where people are inviting people who used to work here who have moved on and people are being invited back, which is that esprit de corps, it's that family knitting that I see."

In addition to students and employees, the community is a high level of importance for MMCC. This importance stemmed from their foundation of training veterans to become an active part of the community again. They see their niche in their geographic area and hold the philosophy that they play a critical role in the community and contribute positively to it. As one employee shared, "[the] President does very well, she's very active in the community and has her hands on a lot of different programs and projects that are – that she's spearheading that don't benefit [the institution] directly..." Another employee echoed the importance of community for MMCC by sharing,

The way I see the role of [the institution] is to really answer to the needs of the community at large. What do we need out there, or what does the community need in terms of employment factors? How can we meet the needs of the community and then turn that around and how can we meet the needs of our students in meeting the needs of the community and then it branches out even further, because we are very proud to say that we have students employed all over the state..., all over the United States and some abroad, but I think it's that community feeling where we have got needs we have to meet and we meshed them all together and I think that's the way I see it.

The quality of their graduates is important especially as they contribute to their community and the workforce. Relationships with MMCC's community and workforce are crucial. As the president noted, "It's important that we have the relationship that we have with the community and it's important that we have a forward focus in continuing to adapt, to meet what those needs are going to be with the workforce in our region..." Moreover, this importance of community was noted in their self-study document (2011), "Additionally, the creation of a dedicated community

outreach position has improved communication between the college, area employers, and members of the community.” The president is very active in the community and co-chairs their local chamber of commerce’s education and workforce committee. As noted in their self-study document, other employees engage regularly with the local chamber of commerce and other community organizations. While the geographic region in which MMCC is located is a midsized urban environment, there are only a handful of post-secondary institutions to foster and grow the connection between education and meeting the needs of employers.

MMCC views students, employees and the community as interconnected. You cannot have one of this triad without the other. Consequently, because of the interconnectivity of this trio and the purpose upon which the institution was founded, MMCC has an open enrollment admissions policy. As the chief admissions officer shared when asked about their admissions process and their selectivity, “It’s pretty open, we do have certain criteria – they pay an application fee.” Students must pay a \$25 application fee. The ultimate purpose of this application fee is to “weed out people who aren’t actually interested” in applying to the institution, according to the chief admissions officer and reinforced in their academic catalog. Students must prove high school graduation or equivalency, complete an application and pass an entrance exam. MMCC does not evaluate ACT or SAT scores, grade point averages or any other indicators for enrollment. The institution is very flexible on accepting transfer credits and actively participates in the state’s academic transfer program.

Faculty and employees interviewed shared that the message of what is important to the institution is communicated via the president and then everyone else communicates that same information downward and outward from the institution. As one employee shared, “I would say the president.” Another employee echoed that sentiment by commenting, “[President’s name] is always there saying, this setting out the thought...comes from the top.” MMCC’s president reinforced what the employees shared. The president, when asked about what is important to the institution and who communicates that, responded, “I would be the one to communicate that in my administration.”

Student Success Defined

MMCC defines student success in two ways through external, metric driven indicators and through more intrinsic or individual student success that is anecdotal and hard to measure. Externally, MMCC measures student success while they are a current student through classroom and program objectives assessments. Additionally, MMCC annually surveys current students with a Student Opinion Survey to measure student satisfaction with admissions, financial aid, academics, and scheduling to name a few as shared through interviews and noted in their self-study documentation. Moreover, MMCC utilizes a Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) Adult Learning Focused Institutional Survey, in partnership with Noel-Levitz⁷, to measure and understand students' needs compared with other institutions across the country. Current students also may participate in an annual Student Focus Forum, which allows students and administrators to discuss and present ideas and information. As the chief admissions officer shared, "And, so sustaining the academic quality is always first and foremost and something that we strive to improve upon through anything that comes out of assessment, anything that comes out from student needs, stakeholder student forums and things like that we hold regularly." One of the directors reinforced this by noting, "There is constant review of the curriculum, constant review of student issues, constant review with students in terms of forums..." The institution noted in their 2011 self-study document, "...we have created a more inclusive student focus forum that allows us to gather feedback from a much larger segment of the student population." As shared by the faculty and staff interviewed and noted in their self-study, MMCC measures student retention rates, graduation rates and program completion rates, graduate employment placement rates, employer satisfaction, graduate satisfaction through a graduate exit survey, advisory board feedback and continuing education rates among the more traditional

⁷ The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to work with higher education, public and private sectors linking education and work. Noel-Levitz is a private consulting firm focused in the higher education environment. Both CAEL and Noel-Levitz offer numerous specialized survey instruments that provides benchmark and comparison information for college and universities that enroll similar student populations.

measurements of student success. One employee commented, “Well, I think we have a variety of ways, the more traditional quantitative way, retention rates and data driven conclusions.”

MMCC also defines student success through student referral rates or “word of mouth” recommendations for other interested students to apply for and enroll at MMCC. As the chief admissions officer shared, “For us referral is the biggest – I guess I would call it a lead source, but word of mouth is huge for us.”

In addition to these traditional and data driven measurements, MMCC defines student success on a more intrinsic basis. Faculty and staff at MMCC care about the personal and emotional care of their students. Often times they measure student success on a day-by-day basis. Students have many external forces such as jobs and families pulling them away and in different directions. Because of these forces, faculty and staff celebrate that a student made it to class for the day. For some students at MMCC, their timeline must be a shorter window. If the timeline is set too far away, such as identifying graduation as the definition of success, students get discouraged and will drop out of the institution. To combat this, MMCC provides drop counseling. Before a student leaves the institution, they must participate in mandatory meetings with certain individuals at the institution. The conversation usually uncovers the real reason why students are making the decision to leave the institution. MMCC will work jointly with the student to find a solution to allow the student to stay enrolled. As such, open communication plays a crucial role to ensure that students continue to find success and help eliminate those obstacles. As one employee shared,

...we are in constant contact with our students. If I get at the office, student calls in and says they are not going to be in class, I got a copy of that. I'm balancing if this student if I have got three or four reports, I'm in touch with the student. Absences, we see absences all the time. We are in contact. We have instructors who have referral forms that we want to see. If a student is not coming to class or having some difficulty, let us know. We want to get in there and try to intercept.

The philosophy of open communication is reinforced with their open door policy as noted in their self-study document. “Open-door policy applies to everyone at the college, and describes our commitment to be available to meet with students one-on-one to address questions and

concerns. The policy allows us to hear student issues or comments in an informal setting and provides a rapid response if necessary.” Two employees shared in their interviews that MMCC has a dedicated Office of Student Success to assist in students’ success with and beyond the classroom environment. The Office provides tutoring, vocational counseling, study skills, test taking techniques, note taking and other information to help the student succeed. MMCC also defines student success when they see a student “blossom.” As one director noted,

Because we see the students that blossom, part of that blossoming comes in just completing the program. Part of that blossoming comes from ... education gets in your blood and they will say, ‘I want more’ and they come back for more. Or, you see them...in the grocery store and they are there and they become a different person, they are proud of who they are and then that is successful for me, for them.

There is a sense of pride when a faculty or staff member encounters a graduate in the community after graduation and sees who they have become. “Our success is their success and we have no success if they aren’t successful – if students aren’t successful.”

From an anecdotal level, student success is defined at the individual student level.

Another director shared a story about a student in one of his or her health programs who needed some dental work.

One of the instructors at the time kind of took her under her wing and encouraged her to go and she got her teeth taken care of. She encouraged her to keep her hair – keep herself groomed very nicely, and I don’t know that the student would have accomplished that on her own but that was, I know she graduated. I don’t know where she went as far as her job goes, but that was a success for that student, because that student, you could tell after she got the dental work done, her whole attitude was – she was more outgoing, she was more open, she was more confident. That’s a student success. That’s not something on paper, and we encourage that.

MMCC also works with students on developing other students’ soft skills that will benefit them in their day-to-day interactions and their careers upon graduating.

Student Learning Assessment

Faculty and staff are knowledgeable about the assessment process occurring at MMCC.

From the interviews, the staff were not be able to speak to the explicit details upon which MMCC

conducts student learning assessment, but they have sufficient knowledge to speak at high levels about the assessment activities taking place at the institution and in more detail about assessment activities within their specific areas of control. As one employee shared, "I know that we have the – I don't have a whole lot of involvement in academics, so it's kind of hard for me to – but I know we have these assessment items that we have, it's the grades, and it's the, those kind of...So I tried to stay too much out of those kind of, that kind of things." MMCC has made significant strides in the past seven years on improving their assessment activities at the institution and have fully integrated assessment into their daily activities. In reviewing MMCC's self-study documentation, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), MMCC's accrediting body, noted,

[The institution] has developed a fully-integrated, mission-driven, college-objective-informed culture of assessment that ensures all students completing its programs which will measure and validate all of its learning and development expectations. The College is confident that the processes, which it has developed since the opportunities noted in its 2007 systems portfolio, adequately provides evidence of the success of its academic programs.

(MMCC Systems Appraisal Feedback Report, 2012)

How MMCC conducted student assessment has changed. As the academic dean noted, "...in the past before assessment was dictated in a particular way, the old school way of doing things was just to make sure that your faculty was trained and that you could have confidence that they knew the subject matter. They had real world experience too to bring in...But that has changed now." MMCC has a thorough and thoughtful approach to assess student learning at the campus and incorporates all facets of the institution.

As noted in their self-study materials, MMCC in the past few years has hired a dedicated staff member to manage institutional research and chief among their responsibilities is student assessment. MMCC's student learning assessment is a home-grown system using the Nichols Institutional Effectiveness Model as shared through interviews with faculty, the president, the academic dean and through their self-study materials. Data are collected, analyzed and results disseminated through the Assessment Peer Review group composed of a cross-functional team of faculty, staff and administration. MMCC uses a variety of direct and indirect assessments to

measure student learning. Some of the direct methods of assessment include course-embedded assessment tools that evaluate student performance on program and course objectives such as exams and assignments. Instructors prepare one self-assessment each term evaluating students' performance on specific course objectives to evaluate student learning at the course level. In addition to program level objectives, MMCC recently developed a General Education Committee to examine and evaluate common learning objectives.

Indirect assessment methods used by MMCC include surveys, focus groups and course evaluations as mentioned by employees interviewed. One of the surveys includes a graduate exit survey that measures perception of employment preparation, perception of success in meeting general education objectives, anticipation of promotion or advancement as a result of their degree, perception of success in meeting program specific objectives. As one employee noted, "...you know the different pieces we've tried to understand how our graduates are doing or how well prepared they are whether it's the feedback from how they are meeting their learning outcomes and their programs, how is placement working, how are employers satisfied..."

MMCC's self-study document (2011) references another survey used by the institution called the CAEL Adult Learning Focused Institution Survey, which allows MMCC to compare their student data with other comparable institutions throughout the country. Students complete a course evaluation at the end of each term. This survey is the student's perspective of whether they are learning. Finally, surveys and direct feedback are received from advisory boards, employers and organizations offering internship and externship opportunities to the students and graduates as shared through interviews and the institution's self-study documentation. For example, one employee noted, "...how do our advisory boards feel about the outcome of those students." when asked how student learning assessment is conducted at MMCC. Student forums and student opinion surveys provide the students with multiple avenues of feedback and communication about their education and experience at MMCC.

MMCC also utilizes programmatic accreditation requirements to assess student learning. These external accrediting bodies accredit four of the institution's academic programs. These

programmatic accrediting bodies are listed in their institutional academic catalog and in their self-study documentation. For example, MMCC notes in their self-study,

The college identifies the needs of accrediting and approval agencies via constant monitoring of accreditation and certification standards at both the program and institutional level. We also remain vigilant in our attention to the changing mandates of all pertinent regulatory agencies. The college places a high strategic priority on ensuring that we meet all of these standards.

Their self-study (2011) also notes the following results related to programmatic accreditation.

“Purpose: increase academic quality; prompt communication and feedback from area employers, program alumni, and existing students. Results: three academic programs are accredited through nationally recognized accrediting bodies; one degree program is in final stages of approval; one degree program is in candidacy status.” Additionally, one of the employees shared, “Yeah, we live and breathe AQIP and the accreditations, both just original accreditation through North Central Association [which is the Higher Learning Commission referenced throughout this study], but also our programmatic accreditations...”

MMCC credits and utilizes their regional accrediting body’s Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) for facilitating the improvement in the student learning assessment processes. All of the employees interviewed commented on the driving force the AQIP process has on their institution. For example, one employee shared,

A lot of it [sustaining academic quality] comes out of our quality improvement program and I’m sure your familiar with AQIP and that’s something that we strive to continue to improve our academic quality through some of the benchmark programs, projects that we have, programs that we start. And, really we are constantly moving forward with something big and because of AQIP we are sort of required to do that regularly.

And I think that that’s something that keeps us on track in terms of the student success side of things, and the academic quality we promise to serve.

Another employee shared their thoughts on how AQIP has continued to push the institution by commenting,

You know, I think that a lot of these systems have been developed through our work with AQIP.

Well, it's impacted, I mean it's a driving force; it's so much that we do especially being part of an academic calling from the program because then everything changed on that, you know how does, how does that – how does this project or this program you know how does that, how do we prove the quality of that, how are we showing improvement, how are we showing that we are engaging faculty and that we are supporting students and all these things I think and then of course the rigor, the learning as well, but all those things that need to continue on – AQIP is set out in the path forth of continued improvement, so it's just a huge driving force in what we do and it, so many of – even just little projects or side things that you want to accomplish end up falling into that overall understanding of how were - an institution moving for quality improvement.

Finally, another employee echoed the same sentiment regarding the importance AQIP has had on assessment and other processes,

With the AQIP, it's been more on the radar all the time, so I think I've probably seen a little more, come along the lines with that. The push for the new budgeting system was definitely one thing that came down from that, which we needed to do, but it just kind of kept getting pushed a little far.

There is a constant review of curriculum, student issues, with students in forums, with faculty, with staff and interaction with local boards about what is needed for the students and academic programs at the institution. The president shares information about these improvements through regularly held in-services throughout the year. The information gleaned from these sources feeds MMCC's strategic planning, financial planning, academic planning and the quality improvement program.

Resource Allocation and Budgeting

MMCC's budget process is something that they are working to improve according to the president, one of MMCC's directors and in their self-study documentation. In the past, MMCC acknowledges that the budget process was nebulous without a lot of structure. According to one of MMCC's directors, MMCC would project enrollments, review historical expenses and "went from there." Faculty and staff are not intimately involved in resource allocation or the budget process and could not provide insight into the process. However, faculty and staff know that

there is data available to drive the institution's fiscal decision-making. For example, one of the employee's commented when asked about their process for allocating resources,

I don't have a good answer for that to tell you the truth...So I don't have insight into the decision making on that and how those resources are allocated. There has to be data to support the decision and so I know that that takes place. I just don't have a good answer in terms of how that process goes.

Despite this, faculty and staff do not go without the necessary resources needed for the positions.

One faculty member commented, "...everything I've asked for has just been handed to me. I just get handed whatever resources and books I need." In addition to office and software supplies that were readily provided and procured, MMCC has had a very liberal continuing education and conference attendance policy. One faculty member shared that MMCC paid for his doctorate degree. It is common for faculty members to attend multiple conferences in the same year. The process for attending conferences, receiving computer software or other items was request, justify and receive.

Financial planning at MMCC has become more structured in the past few years. MMCC received recommendations from their accrediting body that the budgeting process was an area of opportunity and improvement for the institution. As noted in one of their self-study documents, the Quality Visit Check-up Report (2010) the accrediting body noted, "The institution should develop a more robust budget process which is informed by its strategic plan and clearly articulated to all stakeholders." In response, MMCC noted in their self-study from 2011,

In order to create an effective strategic plan that addresses all of the institution's needs and is in alignment with our mission, vision, and values, the college is focusing on the following commitments for improvement:

- Focusing our efforts on sound financial management principles including the reduction of our students' loan default rates, the maintenance of an appropriate 90/10 ratio, and the strengthening of our budgeting process and its alignment with our strategic plan.

According to the president and one of the directors interviewed, MMCC hired a consultant to work with the president on restructuring the budget process over the past few years. The process now entails providing everyone with an opportunity to request physical resources, which goes through

an administrative review where the president makes the decision. MMCC's financial planning has been tied to their strategic plan since 2006. However, in 2011 the financial planning became more decentralized in which departments are now required to align and justify their requests with their strategic goals and needs with annual budget requests. The strategic plan and annual budget are jointly presented to the Board of Directors for their approval each fall.

MMCC is a tuition-driven institution. Faculty and staff recognize that due to enrollment declines over the past few years that they have to be more fiscally responsible. Priority of expenditures is given to those areas or expenses that meet students' educational needs and requirements. MMCC has frozen wages for the past few years. This past year, the institution has been involved in a restructuring project, which resulted in the reduction of staff at the institution. The new staffing levels are now more in line with current student enrollment figures. Despite the changes in staffing and salary freezes, faculty has not left the institution. As one faculty member shared, "We haven't left. We haven't looked for other jobs. We like it here." The changes made in the budgeting and financial planning processes are to make those processes more streamlined and make MMCC a more healthy institution. MMCC has a solid financial status as noted by the most recent financial responsibility composite score submitted to the U.S. Department of Education of 2.5 in 2011 and 2.7 in 2012.

Profit Motive

MMCC's focus is on the mission first and being fiscally responsive second. Their focus is the student and maintaining academic quality first. The faculty and staff at MMCC are focused on serving students, serving them well and to position students to succeed. The institution does not operate in terms of profit sharing and employees do not work for the family, but for the students.

As the chief admissions officer noted,

And making a big decision, it's very rare that they would talk about the amount of money that we would make off of something first as how many students we could serve. And one could argue that the number of students you serve is more money and then that's a true statement. But I would say in terms of growth and in terms of who we serve comes down to the student.

The president reinforced this thought by commenting, “The institution does not focus on profit, however, we have always just do what we do and that we make an affordable profit for us to be in the black.” The institution has to be fiscally responsive to be a healthier institution.

For MMCC to be in the black, the institution operates by being fiscally responsible and responsive and acknowledges that being for-profit is not a bad thing. The perception of institutional leaders by one of the faculty members interviewed, who has over 20 years’ experience working in both not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, is that being for-profit is a tax code structure and is not an intimidating classification. As one faculty member shared,

I can see them paying close attention to that profitability. That’s not intimidating to me because I have worked in both for-profit and not-for-profit and any of us who’ve worked not-for-profit will say, yes, but are we making any profit or we are not coming in tomorrow. I mean it’s tax code, it’s corporate structuring. We used to say at [previous institution], ‘No margin, no mission’ and that’s very true. So being for-profit is not a dirty word to me and not an intimidating classification for me and I believe we have accountability and stewardship.

In being fiscally responsive and responsible, MMCC is constantly changing programs to meet the needs of their students. Part of the process for evaluating academic program offerings speaks to the institution’s adaptability and nimbleness. The institution is committed to quality education and constantly assessing and evaluating themselves for the programs to remain relevant.

However, the decision-making process to be fiscally responsible and responsive is not necessarily easy. MMCC increases tuition annually. The increases do not flow to the institution’s profit margin or to the family. As one employee commented,

Well at the end of the day, I feel comfortable knowing that the family doesn’t – there is not profit margin that affects the family in other words and that’s something that working for a family owned company I would actually be comfortable with...But I don’t get the sense that what we are working toward is to benefit the [owner’s name] family, I’ve never had that sense.

Tuition increases are used to cover costs and keep the student/faculty ratio low. When the institution recently restructured and laid off employees, faculty wanted to know what it could do to help. As one employee commented,

I have seen where some of these tough decisions have to be made and I have seen the anguish that they have gone through to make those decisions, and I think it's because they feel that pain and the anguish and that I am not sure, which decision is going to be the best decision that we have been able to weather some of those, and to keep that balance going of making sure that we have the profit to be viable, but making sure that the students are given every opportunity that they can be.

As the chief admissions officer shared,

I guess maybe without repeating myself over and over, but I would say the profit motive barely exists. I really genuinely get that from the family, the Board of Directors and at the end of the day, I think the profit motive actually means a solid bottom line. And, that's covering the cost. That's not going in pockets anywhere. That's my impression of it, and something I know to be true. So, it's an interesting balance being a for-profit college, and not making decisions based on profit only.

Profits are not going to the family, but to ensure the financial viability of the institution. As one employee commented, "One of the things that brought me to [the institution] is the fact that there wasn't the greed that I saw at the other school where I worked. There wasn't a flashiness of, you know, there's not a \$10,000 picture in our president's office or the previous president. He drives a pick-up truck." This same employee continued to share that the family gets in and helps. The president still teaches to ensure that they are in touch with the students.

The faculty and staff at MMCC believe that they serve as a model for others in higher education. They believe that due to their fiscal awareness, they could serve as a guide for public institutions on how to be fiscally responsible. Additionally, MMCC acknowledges their for-profit status, but makes it a point to state that they are not a conglomerate. They see themselves in-between for-profit institutions and not-for-profit institutions.

Ownership Involvement

MMCC is a third-generation family owned private college. Faculty and staff see the ownership involvement in day-to-day operations in two ways – leadership style and family participation. MMCC faculty and staff have a long tenure with the institution. MMCC's current president, while working at the institution in various positions for over 15 years, has only been president for three years. Due to the long tenure of the faculty and staff and the relatively short

tenure of the current president, faculty and staff compare the two institutional leaders. According to one employee, the second-generation family president is described as an early riser that was constantly looking at the bigger picture. The president was a creative leader that would walk around and talk to everyone in the morning. During these “mini-meetings,” the president would share his insights for the day and ideas. Sometimes, these ideas would crystalize and be implemented. Those ideas that did not were referred to as “morning thoughts.” People appreciated his creative infusion and his habit of connecting with everybody.

According to employees, the creative energy has been passed on to the third generation president at MMCC. Connecting with faculty and staff has moved forward with the technological advances of the current times as the ideas and insights are shared through email communication and text messaging based on interviews with the staff. As one employee commented, “Now, President [name], has a little bit different way of doing things. It’s more texting and emails that her ideas and things come through. So, it’s a different way, but it hasn’t stopped.” MMCC executive leadership is very involved in the day-to-day activities at the institution and is very accessible to faculty, students and staff. The president drives operations and decisions from the top but communicating with stakeholders throughout the process. Students are able to interact with the president on a more regular basis because of the small size of the institution and the institution’s open door policy. According to one of the staff when commenting about the family, “Education is in their blood.” The flame passed from the first generation owner to the second and now on to the third generation.

Family participation is evident throughout the institution. Many family members, including extended family, work or have worked at MMCC. According to the institution’s catalog, six family members work at MMCC. In addition, the Board of Directors is composed of ten members, four of which are family. Staff and faculty commented that while MMCC employs many faculty members, there is no preferential treatment. Employees are held accountable for their work and work issues are addressed if performance is not at the appropriate standard. Additionally, if there are family issues, those issues are left at home and not brought into the workplace. As one

employee commented, “I saw that in other businesses where the family dynamics were not left at home, but it’s not here, but the feeling of family is here. And, that’s definitely a thing that has kept a lot of us here, it’s the family.”

While the “family” influence has kept the many faculty and staff at the institution, there is some consternation at the number of family members employed by MMCC. These concerns were exasperated with the recent downsizing and that none of the staff who left the institution were family members. However, despite these concerns, there is strong loyalty from the faculty and staff to the institution and the family. As one employee noted, “But the loyalty is because they have been loyal to us, you know. They treat us like we’re at Princeton, you know. They do. They respect us...They trust me. And you can’t find that in a paycheck. They like us, we like them. We trust them and they trust us. We support them, and they support us.”

A third generation family member is leading MMCC. Despite the longevity in senior leadership on campus, some employees have a concern about succession planning based on interviews. The current president indicated that working at MMCC was not their intended career path. The president was planning on working in education, but not at MMCC, became involved as adjunct faculty, and stayed taking on different positions within the organization. While some concerns have been expressed about succession planning, the president has created an executive committee at the institution, which has transferred some institutional power and authority to senior leaders within the college. This committee has alleviated some of the fears about continuity of leadership and knowledge at MMCC.

Accreditation

MMCC is a regionally accredited institution with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). They have been regionally accredited since the early 1980’s and believe to be one of the first for-profit institutions to be accredited by HLC. MMCC follows the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) Pathway with the Higher Learning Commission. They have been on this pathway for over ten years. Institutions need to be invited to participate in the AQIP Pathway for

reaffirming accreditation. The institution meets the accreditation criteria or standards by focusing on improvement projects at the institution. Projects may take as little as one year or multiple years for full implementation. Prior to participating in AQIP, MMCC was on the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) Pathway. The PEAQ Pathway is a traditional method for evaluating institutions for accreditation and consists of a self-study, a team visit and the Commission's decision. PEAQ as an approved pathway with HLC will be phased out by 2015.

Regional accreditation serves as way to hold the institution accountable and serve their students in the best way possible. As one director noted, accreditation "holds our feet to the fire. Our institution is involved in the accreditation process on a daily basis." Part of those daily activities include the specific accrediting categories and criteria the institution must meet as well as the how certain decisions made at the institution will align with strategic initiatives designed to improve the institution. Additionally, accreditation provides a level of transparency to students and the public. MMCC is required to report certain pieces of information, data and student performance outcomes. Because of these reporting requirements, the institution keeps these metrics and performance indicators at the forefront. The institution ensures that not only is the information accurate, but ways to improve the results and when new programs or curriculums are launched, those outcomes become part of the decision making process.

In addition to providing a level of accountability and transparency, HLC accreditation serves to provide the institution with a competitive advantage by placing the institution on a level playing field with the other local post-secondary institutions. The other institutions within the area are also regionally accredited. Because a significant portion of students brings in transfer credits, by participating in the state transfer credit agreement program, students are able to reduce their time to graduation.

Everyone at the campus level is involved in the accreditation process. A core team, which consists of the senior leaders in the institution, organizes and moves the process forward. Faculty, staff and students sit on the various committee and subcommittees. Adjunct faculty are just as involved in the accreditation process through subcommittee participation as full-time

faculty. The full-time faculty member interviewed shared his experiences on the general education committee for accreditation purposes. New faculty receive the AQIP manual at orientation. As one faculty member noted, "Faculty orientation for me was incredibly weak and that's how I stubbed my toe on not doing forms and stuff. It was totally impressive from a legal and employment standard. Every form, every document, every manual including the AQIP manual, I was given that."

Maintaining regional accreditation at MMCC has not changed what occurs on a daily basis for some of the faculty and staff. As one employee noted, "I don't know that the role of accreditation has impacted what I would do or how I would do at all other than the fact that in education, in academia, we all realize how important accreditation is..." Another employee noted that accreditation had no impact until the institution moved to the AQIP Pathway. Prior to AQIP, when MMCC was on the PEAQ Pathway, "accreditation wasn't something most people thought about until we had to do a self-study. And then, it was about a year of scramble of, 'Oh my goodness, do we have all these data?'" Another employee stated, "Oh yeah, well it's totally changed from the self-study type of thing where you put accreditation on the shelf and you do not deal with it until you have deal with that self-study when you have a visit." Since moving to the AQIP Pathway, accreditation, the need to have ongoing committee meetings and discussions, moving projects forward and having a focus on continuous improvement is in the forefront of everyone's mind. Accreditation is formally addressed on a weekly basis and in the president's in-services. The in-services provide the president with an opportunity to update the institution on strategic planning or other items of high importance. Time is always provided for break-out sessions for faculty and staff to work on the nine category sections of the AQIP model. These in-services are held three times a year.

The AQIP process focuses on nine categories that cover all aspects of the institution's operations. They are helping students learn, accomplishing other distinctive objectives, understanding students' and other stakeholders' needs, valuing people, leading and communicating, supporting institutional operations, measuring effectiveness, planning continuous

improvement, and building collaborative relationships. Some of the recent projects that the institution has recently undertaken respond to these categories to improve the institution. All of the projects contain a way to measure the outcomes and effectiveness of the project. One of the projects recently undertaken was a new academic degree program offering. By utilizing the AQIP Pathway, the entire institution supported the new program, research was conducted to validate the need for this program in the community, interest level is high and a cross-functional effort made it happen. Additionally, the AQIP Pathway was utilized to improve the budgeting process at the campus as previously noted and based on faculty feedback, faculty orientation is now an action project, which is documented in their self-study materials.

One of the more recent projects that was completed was a faculty ranking system. Faculty and employees interviewed discussed this project, which was also included in their self-study documentation. New projects and initiatives are not only top-down, but bottom-up and the faculty ranking system was a faculty-led project. Faculty wanted to be taken more seriously when submitting letters of recommendation for their students. An AQIP project was created to develop an extensive criteria to review and evaluate faculty credentials. Some of the criteria included tenure (years of service) at the institution, publications, committee work, highest degree held and how many speaking engagements held over the course of one year. Faculty submit the application and the newly created Faculty Senate reviews the applications, submits their recommendation for title changes to the president for her approval. The entire project took one year.

AQIP has made an impact on the institution's decision-making processes, strategic planning, financial planning, academic planning and improved communication. The biggest impact the AQIP Pathway has had on the institution is in a culture shift at the institution. Over the course of time MMCC has been an AQIP institution, they have fully developed a student learning assessment model that captures both the program specific and general education learning. AQIP has infused the questions that faculty and staff ask with respect to the academic curriculum and other projects, such as, "how do we prove the quality, how are we showing improvement, how are

we showing that we are engaging faculty, how are we supporting students.” HLC commented on the institution’s progress noting, “…[the institution] demonstrates a strong culture of and commitment to continuous improvement, especially through (but not limited to) the requirements of the AQIP process, by which these processes are continually informed.”

As with any shift, there are some unintended consequences. On a positive note, the AQIP accreditation process has helped create a more effective team. As one employee noted, “The family atmosphere promotes the ability and the freedom to be able to talk and yet I think everybody here is so conscious, we are very proud of our accreditations.” The accreditation process has also served as a mechanism of legitimacy as a baccalaureate degree-granting institution. On the down side, the accreditation process has become more proscriptive regarding faculty credentials. As one faculty member commented, there is an expectation that teaching assignments are based on their terminal academic credentials versus the number of practical years in the field. Additionally, the accrediting body views faculty with doctorate degrees more highly than other qualifications for teaching.

In addition to being accredited by HLC, MMCC holds specialized programmatic accreditation with four different organizations as noted in their academic catalog. These programmatic accreditations serve as additional indicators of quality because of required minimum student performance levels. The programmatic accreditation also provides MMCC with a competitive edge for the institution to enroll students and for graduates when applying for entry-level positions. Many of the programmatic accreditations allow the students to sit for specialized exams, which reinforce the students’ knowledge level and skill competency.

According to the faculty and staff, regional accreditation serves as a mechanism to improve institutional performance on a continuous level, hold the institution accountable and provide a level of transparency to stakeholders and the public and provide a competitive advantage for a level playing field in the institution’s geographic region.

Institutional Distinctions and Influences

MMCC is a stalwart in their community. They have been in existence for over 75 years and are owned and operated by a third generation family member. As a private, for-profit institution of higher learning, their age, reputation in the community, small size and family culture define this organization that has withstood the test of time and excelled at educating students.

The family ownership has a set of defined values that focus on educating students and always asking the question, "What is in the best interest of the student." Based on the interviews conducted, there is a passion for education that permeates the day-to-day environment.

Community involvement is a critical component of how MMCC defines itself. Faculty, staff and senior management serve on various board and committees in the community and private sector as noted in their self-study documentation. MMCC recently celebrated an important birthday since its founding and the community came out in force to recognize the institution and the contribution it makes to the community based on the staff interviews and the news clippings hanging on the walls in the room in which interviews were conducted. State and local elected officials, business executives, alumni, students, faculty, staff, neighbors and community members were on hand to commemorate this anniversary. MMCC is working diligently to assist the region to improve workforce conditions and MMCC executives have been recognized for their efforts.

MMCC's size is a contributing factor to their success as an institution. They maintain an open door policy that encourages student, faculty and staff interaction. They pay close attention to the size of their student population to meet the academic and counseling needs of their adult learners to create an environment most conducive to academic success.

Chapter 6: Southwestern Midsize City College Site Analysis

The Southwestern Midsized City College (SMCC) is located in a midsized city in the Southwest. SMCC offers associate, baccalaureate and master's degree in the technology and design fields. Twenty programs are offered at both the associate and baccalaureate degree level and five programs are offered at the master degree level. The institution also offers an online component to their curriculum in all of their program offerings. SMCC enrolls approximately 1,000 students from throughout the United States and is approved to enroll international students. Ninety-five percent of the students enrolled are pursuing undergraduate degrees. The majority of students are 24 years old and under and represent 65% of the undergraduate student population. SMCC provides residential housing for their students and requires freshman students to live on campus for their first year of college. SMCC's undergraduate population is mostly male representing 89% of the student population and is diverse with 63% of the population White, 13% unknown; 8% African American and 8% Hispanic. SMCC has an admissions enrollment process whereby students are evaluated for admissions based on ACT/SAT scores, high school grade point average, proof of high school graduation or equivalency and an institutional fit evaluation. Seventy-eight percent of the students who applied were admitted and of those students, 21% enrolled. About half of the entering students in 2012 were considered first-time, full-time students. "According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), "retention rates measure the percentage of first-time students who return to the institution to continue their studies the following fall." Additionally, the graduation rate "tracks the progress of students who began their studies as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students to see if they complete a degree or other award such as a certificate within 150% of "normal time" for completion the program in which they are enrolled." SMCC relies heavily on an adjunct faculty base, which represents 86% of the faculty on staff and posts a 19:1 student/faculty ratio (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

SMCC participates in Federal Title IV financial aid programs. Forty-four percent of the undergraduate students enrolled received Pell grants. The institution also reports three-year

cohort default rates of 16.6% in 2009 and 12% in 2010. Reported retention and graduation rates for first time, full-time students is 48% and 32%, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Interviews were conducted with six individuals at this location: president, academic dean, chief admissions officer, senior level director, full-time faculty member and an adjunct faculty member. One member of the team interviewed serves as the liaison of the regional accreditation effort at the institution. The average tenure of the team interviewed is 10 years, with the longest serving employee working at the institution for 26 years. The shortest tenure of an SMCC employee was one and a half years. The institution is classified as baccalaureate colleges – diverse fields according to their Carnegie Classification (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). SMCC is a family owned, privately held for-profit corporate entity and has been in the family for two generations.

Institutional Importance Indicators Communicating the Institutional Mission and Purposes

SMCC's mission is focused on technology and innovation. Their vision is committed to advancing global society. SMCC's five institutional values focus on integrity, quality through continuous improvement, lifelong learning, teamwork and family. The institution was founded less than 50 years ago to capitalize on the emerging technologies in fields where everything had been completed by hand. Credentials offered at the time were focused on certificates and professional development training. Since that time, SMCC has grown and expanded its curriculum offerings to associate, bachelor and eventually master degrees. Because technology plays such a crucial role in their mission, SMCC has a strong virtual presence. Their mission is prominently displayed in public areas throughout the institution and via their electronic media due to the importance of technology.

Employees interviewed were very succinct in identifying and stating the areas of importance for SMCC. There are three main areas of institutional importance to SMCC. The first is fulfilling the institution's mission. As one employee stated, "The mission is what seems

important.” SMCC was founded by taking advantage of a shift in certain professional fields with the introduction of various new technologies. Realizing there was a need to educate professionals in the arena, a new organization was created to provide this education. As new technologies began to emerge, the institution continued to capitalize on those innovations and expanded their offerings and the student to whom this type of education appealed. Included in this philosophy is to ensure that institutional values are met such as quality through continuous improvement, teamwork and family. For example, other post-secondary educational institutions in the United States are copying the uniqueness of this educational institution. As the president shared,

So preserving what makes us work and what makes us different and leveraging that is important because [of what] you’re doing ... the chances are they stole it from us anyway. I don’t mean that just to be arrogant, but they told me that they stole it from me; it’s not as if I know that. So that’s important; it’s really understanding who we are; what we do to keep you in driving that forward; that’s number one.

Consequently, the institution must focus on continuing to be innovative.

A second focus for the institution is advancing SMCC’s strategic plan. Their strategic plan is a road map for the future of the institution. One of the goals in the 2017 strategic plan is to ensure that the institution continues to grow in student enrollment. This philosophy is reinforced as one of the employee’s commented, “staying in business is difficult because of the economic climate.” The president echoed the focus of advancing the strategic plan. By focusing on the mission, the staff and faculty ensure that the institution continues to exist and grow.

Finally, the last focus for the institution is their students. Turning students into graduates who are producing new and innovative work is also at the heart of the institution’s mission. As one employee shared, “We love our students.” Another employee, in response to the question of what is important shared, “We want to make sure that our students are happy.” Faculty and staff at SMCC rejoice in seeing what their students have been able to create. The institution craves and celebrates their students’ work. SMCC celebrates student work at their in-services, publishes their work on the institution’s website and in print publications that are disseminated widely.

The president is the individual who communicates these areas of importance to the institution. Faculty and staff then echo this messaging. While the participants interviewed were not as succinct as the president in presenting the information, the content was the same. As one employee noted, "That is a top down message and I don't know that the messaging would occur bottom up if given the chance." The president reinforced this communication strategy by commenting, "I certainly communicate pretty regularly." Faculty and staff look to the president to know what is important to the institution.

Student Success Defined

SMCC defines student success through internal, institution-specific measurements and through industry standard metrics. Defining student success begins with the president in forming and communicating the vision and mission at regular intervals. After the mission and vision, is an institutional specific measurement for defining student success. Employees shared that SMCC requires each of their students to complete a Student Innovation Project (SIP). The SIP is required for graduation. For this project, students begin to identify an idea in their freshman year that, using technologies, advances society. Students will work continuously on this project throughout their tenure as a student and present this information prior to graduation. Evidence of SIPs and their level of importance to the institution were shared via interviews, self-study documentation and an institution published magazine showcasing SIPs. SMCC recently launched a new academic program. A definition of student success for this program, as explained by the president, includes requiring students graduating from this program to use the product created from SIP to apply for a patent.

Additionally, students will participate on outside projects working with organizations and companies producing work that will be used in the field. Students at SMCC also have the opportunity to participate in team competitions and work on special projects. In recognition for winning a team competition on an outstanding project, students may attend and network at industry conferences. As one employee noted, "We have students that have the opportunity to

go to the GDC [Game Developers Conference] conference, the developers' conference in San Francisco, because they put together a project, they did a presentation and now they have the opportunity to go out to the industry and explain what they built while they were students here." Students have also attended Black Hat DefCon, which is a network security conference.

From a more empirical perspective, SMCC conducts student surveys each semester. Data captured from the surveys include students' perceptions of their instructors and if the class contributed to students meeting their performance objectives, as examples. Another industry standard measure SMCC uses to define student success is their student persistence or retention rate. SMCC also measures graduate placement rate. As one employee commented, "Our placement rate is definitely a measurement of student success...We also do student surveys at the end of each semester that ask, you know, their perceptions of the instructors and do you think that the class contributed to your meeting the student performance objectives?" Another employee echoed the perspective on student employment by noting, "Actually the other things are ability to get a position...Students are coming here because they want to get jobs in this field." Moreover, as noted in SMCC's self-study (2009), "As an initiative to ensure this [positive economic force and are satisfied with what they achieved through their education] outcome, [the institution] has set a graduate placement goal of 95% for classes graduating in 2008 and 2009."

Anecdotally, SMCC defines student success by the feedback received from alumni. As an example, the president shared, "...I go to a security convention and I meet one of my alums, and he comes to me and he talks about the school project he worked on when he was here. He asks me if he can hire any of my grads and he is extremely excited about the current project he's working on at work." Defining student success is focused on the project based work and the more innovative the project, the better.

Student Learning Assessment

Assessment of student learning at SMCC is evolving on a daily basis. Faculty and staff spoke at a very high level of how student learning assessment is conducted at the institution.

Faculty and staff spoke about the indirect methods and direct methods in which assessment is evaluated. The institution's most recent self-study confirmed that these assessments are occurring at the institution. However, the more detailed information and improvements in and about assessment in response to their previous accreditation visit were not mentioned in the interviews.

SMCC conducts indirect assessment of student learning at the institution as shared by employees and noted in the self-study documents. Some of those indirect methods include surveys of internal and external constituencies. Internally, SMCC utilizes student course and faculty evaluations, which are conducted each semester. In response to the most recent accreditation visit to campus, SMCC now evaluates this information on a longitudinal basis as noted by the academic dean. The institution conducts anonymous electronic graduate surveys that measure, among other things, educational experiences and departmental satisfaction. SMCC also surveys industry members and employers including receiving feedback from Internship Sponsors. The Internship Sponsor surveys solicit feedback on the level to which expectations of the internship were exceeded, the level to which internship skills were exceeded and professional conduct.

Direct assessments also serve as a mechanism with which to improve student learning at SMCC. The main assessment used by SMCC is the Student Innovation Project (SIP) and the associated Portfolio presentation. The employees and faculty spoke in-depth about the SIP program. Faculty designed a specific rubric to evaluate students' progress on this project. SMCC's Faculty Council is responsible for designing classroom assessments. As confirmed in their self-study (2009), "Accordingly, learning outcomes are assessed against pre-defined rubrics that have been developed by the Faculty Council for all Degree-specific, Core, and General Education learning expectations. This process assesses learning through a student's portfolio and Senior Innovation Project (which represent two graduation requirements)."

Each term, SMCC creates institutional and educational assessment reports. The Institutional Effectiveness Plan (IEP) is created to report on "Board Ends." The academic dean

and president shared this information about their term reports and meetings. SMCC's self-study notes the same information, "The institution will review program outcomes through the Institutional Effectiveness Plan (IEP), which is produced each semester" (2009). The institution's Board of Directors has established a set of "Ends" that can be defined as outcomes to determine if the institution is fulfilling its mission. The Academic Assessment Report (AAR) was developed to report on educational assessment and processes. Finally, the Student Evaluation Summary reports on the teaching and learning environment.

Resource Allocation and Budgeting

SMCC has a solid budgeting process that considers economic realities and is mission based. The budget is developed annually and is a participatory process. As one employee shared, "We'll have a budgeting process yearly. So yearly, the officers and managers work on budgets together and some of the managers bring in stuff as well." SMCC's Board of Directors sets the parameters, which is mostly about ensuring that sufficient buffers exist. These buffers are put in place to ensure institutional sustainability during economic downturns and having capital for future investments. SMCC sets aside three percent of their revenues annually into reserves for these purposes. As the president noted, "It's a fairly participative budget. It kind of depends on the year. So we've used a lot of different methods..." When the economic landscape is more positive and the institution is in a "growing year" the budget process will be more participatory. During harder economic years, the budget process will be more proscriptive. In this case, SMCC executives will hand departmental managers their approved budgets. Sometimes, SMCC executives will direct managers to free up additional resources to meet goals or participate in restructuring activities. In these cases, decisions are fairly easy as the group making the decisions is fairly small.

SMCC's executive team will be the decision body of how the institution will narrow down the decisions and determine the final budget allocations. As the president stated, "We do some ratio analysis to some extent based on what we see out there in the field and in the world, but a

lot of it's really informed in what we're trying to do in the year." SMCC links its financial planning to their strategic planning. Additionally, they do run rate analysis to extrapolate future financial performance. As the president continued, "So in this year, we're trying to launch a new program and we see the recession easing up and it's time to re-invest in growth, whereas in the last couple of years, we've been hunkering down and not burning money on them." For example, as SMCC noted in their self-study, the 2008-2009 timeframe was a financially tough year for the institution. Consequently, the executive team made a decision to impose compensation and hiring freezes. The president also noted the use of compensation and hiring freezes in his interview. Additionally, SMCC participates in monthly financial reviews. These reviews are conducted monthly with departmental managers. Each semester, the team also participates in a quarterly financial check-in.

Faculty are aware that SMCC utilizes a budgeting process, but do not know the intricate steps in budget creation. Faculty's classroom and academic needs are filled when requested. As one faculty member noted, "Well, I mean basically, it's a very simple system of just asking for it." Another faculty member shared that there was an event that faculty wanted to attend. They requested the funds for the passes and the request was granted.

SMCC also balances increased revenue and academic quality. As one employee stated,

This is a for-profit business. We have to make a profit to run this business. No students, no money, no money, no school. No school, no students so you have to make the profit, but it's how you are investing or reinvesting those dollars back into the university. You don't have to get new computers every three years. You don't have to replace a third of our computers every year. We like to [do these things] because we know that benefits our student body. We don't have to give – we don't have to have a resource fee that covers books and all of their suppliers. We could charge them for books and we could charge them a fee for everything they needed to finish a project. We've elected not to do that.

Additionally, SMCC has instituted a tuition lock program. When a student makes a decision to enroll, tuition stays the same until the student graduates. This puts the student and their family at ease and in a better position for planning. As the employee noted,

From the time that they make the decision to come; that means if you do it as a junior, you've locked your tuition in regardless of where tuition goes during that time. So, if you're not balancing things, you don't do

things like that. You don't create an opportunity for a family to be able to budget their money for their education if profit's your sole motivation. There is that balance of you've got to do what makes sense for the university but it can't come at the expense of the students and the education that they receive and it starts with the leadership. If a leadership is not visionary that way, the university will go the direction of the leader.

Another employee commented that when the institution discusses budgeting, they are talking about allocation. The executives do not discuss growth of the student population for size purposes. However, they do manage their expenses to their revenue. As the president commented,

...if revenue is on or off we do that because as a tuition-driven organization, you have to manage your expenses to your revenue. No one lets you lose money." He continued to reinforce his point by stating, "I don't think people realize to what – I think profit motive is kind of a false motive because any tuition-driven organization is going to be like that. The issue – everybody's got to balance their budget. Everybody is actually not just got to balance their budget; they have got to generate more cash than they spend. One of the big things there, is that the banks make you... There is only one publicly traded school that I know of that actually distributed any profit and that's DeVry, the rest don't distribute anything. The owners get nothing, so it's just --- it's interesting, but the banks make you make money. They won't let you go. Your lenders will not let you get away with that.

SMCC has a solid financial status as noted by the most recent financial responsibility composite score submitted to the U.S. Department of Education of 2.1 in 2011 and 2.2 in 2012.

Profit Motive

Profit motive at SMCC is focused on students first followed by being fiscally responsive. As the institution grows and changes, the needs of students change as well. SMCC will provide resources on campus necessary for students to be successful. One example shared by a director of a recent change was the addition of counselors on staff to assist students being away from home, dealing with anxiety and specializing in working with people ages 16 to 24. The director noted, "...Everybody says, 'What do we need to do for the students?' It is very rare that I hear somebody say, 'Oh, that just doesn't make sense cost wise.'"

SMCC focuses on being fiscally responsive. Everyone at the institution understands that SMCC is a business. According to the chief admissions officer, his statement reinforces the employees' business understanding, "no students, no money, no money, no school." The Board of Directors works with the institution to ensure that sufficient financial reserves exist to assist the institution through good and bad financial times. As noted in their self-study (2009), "The Board established a policy in the spring of 2004 to maintain deposits into the University's reserves. 3% of tuition revenues are maintained in segregated, single purpose accounts." Each year, SMCC allocates a portion of their revenues to a reserve account to ensure that funds are available if needed. As the academic dean shared, "In the 25 years [I've been here], we are profitable enough to be fiscally responsible... There's only been a handful of years where we go, wow, we're actually really profitable; and even then it was like 15%. Most years, it's just minimum board parameters, and just making sure we've got enough buffer, you know to make sure that we're responsible with our students."

To ensure that SMCC is being fiscally responsive, the institution has realigned staff to make better use of resources. One example shared by an employee is that full-time ground faculty was not teaching full course loads. In an effort to align resources, that same ground faculty was assigned popular online courses to teach. SMCC, in times of economic struggle, have instituted hiring and compensation freezes. According to the president, "You have to manage your expenses to revenue. No one lets you lose money. Profit motive is a kind of false motive because any tuition-driven organization is going to be like that." For SMCC, growth is equivalent to stability. Expenses increase annually. In order to cover those expenses, growth needs to occur.

At SMCC, the family ownership has little influence on profit motive. The family ownership is more about preserving the founder's legacy. As the president shared, "...It's not like we're using the institution as this big cash cow kind of environment. We don't take a lot out. I put a lot back. We take enough to pay the government's taxes...I have a pretty thin expense structure. I just put a lot – keep a lot in the organization."

According to the president, institutions in higher education are following the same business model, but may be following different business practices. As he explains it, state schools receive their tuition from students, the federal government and the state. Private, non-profit institutions receive tuition from students and the federal government. Private, for-profit institutions receive tuition from the same place as the non-profit. What people do not understand is the subsidy level and true cost of education at state funded institutions and the role of alumni giving and foundation support of private, not-for-profit institutions. The public misinterprets and misunderstands this business model.

Ownership Involvement

SMCC is a second-generation family owned and family led post-secondary institution. Family is part of the organization's culture, defines what they consider important and how they handle some of the day-to-day operations. In the beginning, family and non-family members needed to pull together to make the institution successful. That legacy of family continues and is alive today at the institution. The foundations of family, such as helping each other out, being there for one another, getting to know each other, building rapport and loyalty are important to the faculty and staff at the institution. Students who enroll at SMCC lean toward being introverts as shared in interviews with staff and faculty and noted in their 2009 self-study. Faculty sees the family values as an important mechanism to provide an environment for the students to become part of the academic community at SMCC. As one faculty member commented,

And one of the things we do is we discuss, you know, what can we do or what are we doing to help bring in these family values into the classroom. And you know, one thing I have said is when you are looking at family, you know, you look at culture, what is important to family, you know, what being there for one another, helping each other out, and so forth.

When faculty get to know students better, communication improves and faculty are able to help the students be more successful.

When SMCC had their most recent accreditation visit, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the regional accrediting body, commented on the amount of family and family influence in the institution's operations. Specifically, they noted:

...there remains both the perception of and potential for a conflict of interest in that several shareholders are university administrators, and some are also members of the [institution] 'founding family.' Hence, there is an abundance of family control at several levels of the institution. In such a situation it is particularly important to ensure that the organization both is perceived to act and actually acts with integrity by putting in place clearly articulated policies regarding nepotism and possible conflict of interest regarding the operations of the organization.

In response, the institution did not put a policy in place. Instead, the Board of Directors and the institution had conversations about what family meant and what was important to SMCC. They believed that a policy would not accomplish what HLC was recommending. Consequently, the Board of Directors modified the institution's values and added family. SMCC's "Family" value speaks to family principles. One employee commented that,

...you could have an HR policy, to make sure you're treating people fairly; but that's not the deep issue. The deep issue is how do we look at the institution?...There is something that's uniquely family-ish about being a college; and we wanted to put it there. It wasn't just a policy about, 'don't behave badly'; and so yeah, it's been actually a pretty healthy process....It's that kind of a thing that's behind those words. It's different, the value statements written mostly by the Board, which isn't family...the Board's been with us a long time. A lot of those [Board] members, especially at that moment had been with us almost since the initial independent Board. They said, 'This is what I see you doing. That's the good part of family.'

The original founder has since retired from SMCC. The transition to new leadership was a thoughtful process. According to the academic dean, "The founder did a really good job of incrementally stepping away. He [the first university president/founder] was very deliberate and incremental about staging out and developing the team that followed..."

In addition to the family values, the original founder left additional legacies. One of those legacies is the Feng Shui philosophy. When SMCC built their new campus in 1998 (SMCC Self-Study, 2009), the campus was designed using Feng Shui principles. The references made by one employee about the founder's interest in Feng Shui principles are also mentioned in the institution's academic catalog. The land for the new campus was purchased for that reason.

Another example shared by the same director is the cable color-coding. “The cables in our walls are color coded depending on the different area that they are going to.” If the color-coded cables are not used correctly or at all, staff are directed to recable the equipment. One of the other legacies still in existence at SMCC is their in-services. The in-services are meetings that include all faculty and staff and occur at regular intervals throughout the year. As one of the faculty members commented,

...as long as I’ve been here, the model has never changed. And so, like in-services sometimes. But, other times, an in-service could be something that I just – I would rather have not [attended] – I’d rather be grading, or you know, finishing this document or, you know, rather be at the park or whatever. But, it’s such a sacred institution and possibly because of the legacy that you just can’t get out of it. And so, there is a rigidity that comes with legacy, right?

The family legacy may also inhibit change at the institution according to one employee. Because there are so many tenured employees at SMCC, it is sometimes difficult to institute new things. Some of the tenured employees still hold to the vision established by the original founder. The executive leadership would like to implement new projects or move the institution forward, but some of the employees still cling to what was in place previously.

Family is important to SMCC. Many extended family members such as spouses, grandchildren, siblings and friends work at SMCC. Faculty and staff interviewed commented on the extended family members at work at the institution. Two of the employees interviewed for this study have spouses working at SMCC. Employee accountability has increased over the years since the institution was founded. Assessment of a person’s performance is the more critical factor instead of the familial tie to the organization. Family values are still in play in evaluating an employee’s performance as the institution strives to fit the right fit for someone when they are struggling. As one employee stated, “If you are a good employee and they work hard and they really care about the students, we want to find the right fit for them, however on the other side, if they are not a great fit or we didn’t hire [well], we want to terminate those as quickly as possible.”

Family is one SMCC's values. Even so, it is an institution of higher learning. As the institution has grown and changed over the years, so has the meaning of family to and within the organization. As one of the faculty members commented, "Lately, so much of the family's been removed. When I say removed, they're retired. I mean, I know it's family owned conceptually, I don't feel it's family owned. It's just now how it's run. It's an organization...So what I mentally know, it's family owned, I guess it's not something that you see on a day-in-day out basis."

Accreditation

SMCC is regionally accredited through the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Prior to being accredited with HLC, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) and the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges accredited SMCC. SMCC achieved regional accreditation within the past 10 years and is on the Standard Pathway with HLC. Their most recent accreditation visit was held in 2009.

In the minds of faculty and staff interviewed, pursuing, achieving and maintaining regional accreditation has benefited the institution. Regional accreditation has provided legitimacy to SMCC within the institution, within their geographic area and within the country. Since 2000, SMCC has embarked on a path to transition into a different type of for-profit post-secondary institution. The intent during the 2000-2010 timeframe was to build a more traditional college. During this timeframe, SMCC pursued regional accreditation, built a residence hall, changed their academic model, changed their acceptance process from an open access career-ed model to recruiting high school students. According to one employee, SMCC moved away from being a "daytime TV watching Career Ed school" to a more traditional school. Pursuit of regional accreditation was the lynchpin in that pursuit. As one employee noted, "I believe when you have an [regional] accredited university like ourselves, the curriculum speaks for itself." Even though the institution has altered many of their operations to become more like a traditional institution, many distinctions similar to for-profit institutions are still in existence at SMCC.

Additionally, regional accreditation with HLC has provided a competitive advantage for the institution. As explained by the academic dean, SMCC works very closely with the local community partnering with them to provide local cultural activities. They want the geographic region to be known as a destination that has all the facets of a large metropolitan city – business, art, museums, post-secondary educational institutions and other cultural benefits. SMCC is accredited by “one of the major, major accreditations, HLC.” In the eyes of SMCC, HLC accreditation puts them in the same pool as to the major state-funded universities in the state.

SMCC has discovered that by pursuing and achieving regional accreditation, there is more prestige and a validation of their institution. Regional accreditation has allowed the institution to access more financial aid dollars for their students that was not available when they were nationally accredited with ACICS. Faculty interviewed noted anecdotally that there seems to be a better quality incoming student. SMCC has been able to enter into agreements with governmental agencies that have evaluated their curriculum and recognized the quality of the academic programs. SMCC devised a new synchronic learning model that HLC validated in their review of the institution. As stated in their catalog, “Synchronic Learning is a hands-on, real-world experience allowing individual students and multidisciplinary teams to work side-by-side with professors and industry leaders to create innovative, complex projects” (2013). As one faculty member noted, ‘I think that the quality of our pursuits has become more academic, you know, we do try to maintain that sort of traditional university value that accreditation really plays into it. It has also validated, I think, the methods that the university was using.’

The biggest impact the pursuit of regional accreditation has had on SMCC has been in the area of continuous improvement. According to SMCC’s academic dean at the time when SMCC started the process of pursuing regional accreditation, “HLC stated that we’re not going to tell you what good looks like for you. It was really flipping hard.” HLC promoted those conversations at the executive level and throughout the institution for SMCC to define what “good looks like for them.” HLC was pushing the institution to ask and answer a variety of questions such as “What role do you serve that’s unique? Can you talk about what you specifically do that’s

relevant to you? Who are you serving? Why are [you] serving them? How do [you] serve them better?" The regional accreditation process forced the institution to re-examine their values on such important elements like family and reinforced their value of continuous improvement. New ideas on how to do assessment and new ways to measure things that are important to the institution is a benefit to being regionally accreditation. SMCC now reviews institutional effectiveness each semester, which includes results on assessments. HLC pushed the institution to spend more time to reflect and identify where the institution's focus and energy should be. HLC encouraged uniqueness and innovation.

SMCC's self-study process to achieve and maintain regional accreditation has involved all stakeholders of the institution. The chief admissions officer shared that he "had been at other institutions where the president did the whole thing." The process at SMCC has been much more participatory. He went on to explain SMCC's implementation of the regional accreditation process as "We're guiding it, but they're the ones doing it. If they don't know what they're supposed to be doing, then it's our fault for not getting them involved." SMCC used their in-services as the mechanism for training faculty and staff on all aspects of the regional accreditation process and allowed time within these in-services to have conversations about pertinent issues of the accreditation process. As the academic dean noted, "Now, the first draft of that typically will happen in a room of mixed staff members, which is really kind of interesting. And, you'll get all of their opinions and it's brainstorming. There's no judgment on any of the staff. And, then that will go to a review and then that's where the top-down decisions are made." The self-study process has required more manager and officer meetings and many committees to produce the materials required for regional accreditation.

SMCC's academic dean acknowledged that the Standard Pathway model that the institution is on for HLC is very time consuming and is looking forward to the time when SMCC may be invited to choose another HLC Pathway. SMCC is interested in the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) Pathway with HLC. In this pathway, institutions focus on projects that last anywhere from one to multiple years in length. The cycle for reaffirming accreditation is

a seven-year cycle and does include a team visit to the campus. The critical component of this process for the academic dean, however, is that in this pathway there is more bandwidth to work on projects and allows for “more real-time [review and response] as you do your incremental assessments.”

Prior to becoming regionally accredited, SMCC was nationally accredited with the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS). Multiple SMCC staff members interviewed served as peer reviewers or evaluators for ACICS. ACICS’ accrediting methods were described as prescriptive, focused on inputs and teaches institutions to be compliant. The academic dean noted that when SMCC was beginning as an institution,

What national [accreditation] did for us was – when you’re just starting out as a school, and you don’t know where to begin, national [accreditation] is awesome. They give you a guideline, it’s a playbook, you need these many books in the library, have your files kept in a fireproof cabinet. It is so prescriptive that to get through the standards you just follow the cookbook...Where it tails off is after you get up and running as a school, we found was – there wasn’t a dialogue about how to be a better school. There was dialogue about how to be a compliant school.

As one director commented, “ACICS cares a lot more about process and how you do things. NCA [HLC] cares about outcome and what our students are saying and what they are receiving.”

As an example, SMCC is evaluating the need for an on-campus librarian. When SMCC was creating the library collection, it was important to have an expert coordinate the acquisition of those materials. Since that time, materials used by the students are mostly accessed through on-line databases, which are increasingly more expensive to purchase each year. If the institution were accredited by ACICS, SMCC could not even have this conversation. HLC may not approve a decision to forgo a librarian on-site, but it will engage in the conversation with the institution. SMCC faculty did not see the institution as accredited when SMCC was nationally accredited by either ACICS or ACCSC.

On the flip side, SMCC’s president did note that “ACICS is better than HLC because it made you look periodically at the regulatory world. It created more lines of sight into the Code of Federal Regulations.”

Institutional Distinctions and Influences

SMCC is a relatively young private, for-profit post-secondary educational institution in the Southwest. They are a family founded and second-generation led institution. Family has always been an important element of definition within the institution. Family members related to the founder have always been employed at the institution. While there are less members of the founder's family working at the institution, family members of current employees has increased. The philosophy of family has expanded such that the Board of Directors added "Family" as one of the institutional values.

As noted in their self-study documents, the institution was founded to provide professional educational opportunities by taking advantage of emerging technologies. That foundation led SMCC to expand their curriculum offerings from professional education to certificates, associate degree, bachelor degree, and now master degree offerings. However, the initial program on which SMCC was founded is no longer offered at the institution, according to the president. SMCC learned from this and has a strong process with which they use to continuously evaluate their program offerings. They solicit feedback from faculty, staff, students, advisory boards and the employer landscape. As one employee noted,

We do a thorough review of our program offerings, we involve obviously our advisory committee, our students, get their feedback. We look at industry, we look at from a working standpoint what's the right name. We look at from our career services standpoint what kind of jobs are out there, does our degree fit. There's always it's the degree title, does the degree title make sense to the industry.

They consider their program offerings to that of a stock portfolio. As the president shared, "We look at our portfolio of majors like a stock portfolio, you got some things are rising and declining and that kind of thing. We always want to have some in the hopper that are potentially going to curve up in an S curve." Because their mission is focused on technology and innovation, program revisions are evaluated regularly and classified as emerging, potential emerging, mature and declined, but reinvigorate. As the president continued to share, potential emerging programs are those that SMCC has identified as having the potential for being a program. Special courses are added to the current curriculum to investigate the potential for the discipline becoming a

program. Emerging are full majors offered by the institution, but the curriculum is still emerging. Mature programs are a long-term program that has been fully formed and developed. Reinvigorated or declining programs no longer align with SMCC's mission or the brand and the institution decides to revamp the course offerings to update them to the new technology or how they plan to be used in the future. Another director reinforced this notion, commenting, "A lot of times what we do is keep the name, change to more classes."

SMCC's educational offerings and student demographic are very unique and narrowly defined. They consider themselves equivalent to the traditional liberal arts institutions, but focused on innovative technologies and learnings in the technology and design fields. As one employee commented, "I mean our role is to demonstrate that you can have specific colleges kind of like the liberal arts college but in different areas. But we really want to demonstrate that it's possible to be a real school and offer just technology offer [or] just medical and not just be a career school that people kind of dismiss." The campus has a residential component and strives to create the faculty/student academic interaction where learning becomes organic in team environments. The creative and innovative thought and ideas are celebrated and the physical plant supports that as the campus is open 24 hours a day.

While SMCC is a for-profit, private institution, SMCC does not publicly display or acknowledge their for-profit status to students. However, SMCC does acknowledge the business requirements of being an organization and uses those business principles to ensure continuity and stability for the organization.

Chapter 7: Cross Case Analysis

Three regionally accredited institutions participated in this study. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (HLC) accredits each of these institutions. All three of these schools are located within the geographical boundaries of HLC. Two of the institutions are located in the Midwest while the third institution is located in the Southwest. Two of the three institutions have been educating students in their communities for over 75 years old, while the other institution is less than 50 years old. Their Carnegie classifications for all three institutions are different: associate's private, for-profit, baccalaureate/associate's college and baccalaureate colleges – diverse fields. All three institutions are private, for-profit institutions.

Shared Institutional Characteristics

Mission, Vision, Values

All three institutions are private, for-profit institutions with significant family influences. Two of the three institutions are second and third-generation family owned and led. A family owned the third institution for over 70 years prior to being acquired by a corporate entity. This corporate entity is a family owned and operated corporation with ownership control of over five other post-secondary institutions. Each of the three institutions began by filling a void in the educational arena that was unmet or ignored by traditional higher education. For example, MLSC was founded to provide specialized education in the secretarial fields. MMCC was founded to educate veterans returning from war. SMCC was founded to take advantage of new and emerging technology to educate individuals. One of the institutions, MMCC, is older than the local community college established within their geographic influence and the other, MLSC, was founded eight years after the creation of their community college. The third institution, SMCC, is young by comparison. The mission statements for the two older institutions focus on assisting students with specialized career opportunities, while the third institution focuses on technology and advancing society. MLSC's mission statement, in part, includes the following language: "that

prepare motivated students for success.” In comparison, MMCC’s mission statement, in part, states, “to provide education that emphasizes skills and knowledge needed for a productive society to pursue professional and educational goals.” These two institutions are student focused, while the third has a more global perspective. SMCC’s mission is focused on technology and innovation. All three institutions have modified their mission statements over the years to reflect the institution’s purpose and educational realities. Only one institution, SMCC publishes and promotes a vision statement for their institution.

The philosophy of continuous improvement is an important value for all three institutions. While all three institutions have a set of core values, each of the sets are different. Two of the institutions’ core values contain similarities. Integrity and continuous improvement are two of the core values that are the same for MMCC and SMCC. Continuous improvements become part of each of the institution’s strategic planning, financial planning and academic curricular improvements as evaluated by student learning assessments. Each of these three institutions is as diverse as the landscape of higher education.

Proprietary Label

All three institutions are for-profit institutions. All three institutions embrace this moniker at varying levels. One institution, MLSC, includes their proprietary status in their literature of their mission explication and institutional purposes and is prominently displayed throughout their institution. According to MLSC’s president, “...There were two sets of institutional purposes and it is important to note that it is institutional purpose number two that mentions that the school is proprietary. We’re not saying that it is a secondary thing, but it is first and foremost that we have to deliver what we do as an institution. Secondly, we have to try and make sure the institution makes money.” The president’s comment reinforced the language in their self-study (2011) that “Institutional Purpose 2 delineates administrative measures necessary to achieve Institutional Purpose 1.” Purpose one’s focus is to reinforce the accelerated learning culture of the institution. MMCC recognizes that proprietary is one way to explain their institution, but does not include the word in any of their literature. MMCC’s president reinforced this thought by commenting, “The

institution does not focus on profit, however, we have always just do what we do and that we make an affordable profit for us to be in the black.” The institution has to be fiscally responsive to be a healthier institution. SMCC does not include proprietary status language in any of their literature and does not advertise it. According to the president, “You have to manage your expenses to revenue. No one lets you lose money. Profit motive is a kind of false motive because any tuition-driven organization is going to be like that.” For SMCC, growth is equivalent to stability. All three institutions see their proprietary status as more of a business model than a description of their institution.

All three institutions participate in Federal Title IV financial aid programs. Two of the three institutions participate in state grant funding. Beyond that, financial resources to operate the institution are tuition-driven. None of the three institutions has an endowment fund or endowment group to assist with funding resources that may be needed to achieve balanced budgets. Because of their participation in federal funding programs for their students, all three institutions are required to achieve certain federally dictated financial composite scores that are indicators for the financial health of the institution. The most recent 2012 figures for all three institutions are 2.1 for MLSC, 2.7 for MMCC and 2.2 for SMCC.

To ensure that balanced budgets are achieved, all three institutions pay particularly close attention to the fiscal resources, revenue and expenditures. While the three institutions all have different day-to-day management of their financial resources from, participatory to dictatorial to loose, they routinely make changes to ensure that budgets and financial stability exist at their institutions. MLSC’s president reinforced what the employees said about the budgeting process. The president, when asked about resource allocation and budgeting, responded,

I would say dictatorial, tyrannical, institution and I am the tyrant. I handle all of the budgeting processes. I don’t like people to be distracted by concerns of ‘Do I have enough money to do this, that, or the other thing’ because, if you go back to the mission statement and you go ‘Okay, well this proprietary thing’ anybody who works here understands that we need to make to money to continue to exist and that separates us from other learning institutions because my people are cognizant of that. So they don’t ask for things that are unnecessary and I don’t turn down requests that are necessary to fulfill the outcome. So, if we need something to do what we are supposed to do, we go buy it.

One of MMCC's employees shared, "We actually in the past had a very loose kind of budgeting system." As SMCC's president noted, "It's a fairly participative budget. It kind of depends on the year. So we've used a lot of different methods..." Every facet of the organization comes under scrutiny to ensure that the financial wherewithal of the institution is solid.

Role of Admissions

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC are tuition-dependent institutions. The admissions department plays a critical role in the ongoing financial continuity of the institution. However, each institution utilizes their own admission processes for enrolling new students. MLSC and SMCC utilize a selection process in admissions, while MMCC has an open enrollment admissions philosophy and practice. MLSC's admissions department manages the dissemination of institutional information, provides college tours, answers questions regarding the admissions process and manages the application paperwork. The academic dean decides which students are admitted to the institution. Identifying which students have the potential to succeed is the most critical component of the decision.

MMCC is an open enrollment institution and admits 90% of the students that apply (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The institution uses an application fee as a way to qualify or "weed-out" applicants who are not serious about obtaining a degree. Unlike MLSC, the admissions department makes all entrance decisions regarding student admittance.

SMCC utilizes a technological approach in their admissions decisions. The institution has written a computer program that evaluates the answers prospective students submit via an online application process. An admissions committee evaluates all students who receive a denial score or are near the cut score for denial.

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC utilize different admissions decision-making processes. They share a similarity, however, in the management of their admissions personnel. Institutional management holds their admissions representatives accountable for their job performance. Their performance is not judged solely on the number of students admitted. As one director shared,

“Like with everybody, we have goals. If we’re close, we’re not super numbers driven. I don’t think any admissions representative has ever been let go because they didn’t meet numbers, or they missed goal. It would be maybe, lack of motivation, or work ethic, or something like that.”

Role of Faculty

Faculty’s main focus at MLSC, MMCC and SMCC is teaching. MLSC, MMCC and SMCC faculty shared that they enjoyed freedoms to fulfill their academic employment obligations. Faculty at all three institutions noted that they had flexibility in how and where their work hours were spent. Academic freedom is honored and supported by academic and executive leadership at all three institutions. All faculty felt welcomed at their institutions and believe they are part of integral component of their campus communities.

In addition to teaching responsibilities, faculty at MLSC, MMCC and SMCC serve on various committees. Committee work may be internal or external to the organization. Faculty at MMCC and SMCC are afforded some time for original research and working on publications. MMCC values faculty committee work, original research and publications and evaluates a faculty member’s annual work product as a mechanism to provide faculty promotion opportunities. These promotional opportunities are in title only, such as promotion to associate professor or professor. The title promotions are available for full-time and adjunct faculty, but do not come with any increase in monetary compensation.

Committee work at MLSC, MMCC and SMCC is varied and extensive. The committee work includes faculty promotion review at MMCC. All three institutions have faculty representation on committees for accreditation self-study work, academic assessment and faculty growth and development. However, only MMCC and SMCC have a faculty council or senate. Moreover, this faculty council or senate serves in an advisory capacity. Decisions that have significant impact on the financial or academic direction of the institution are made at the executive level.

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC rely on a different faculty base in providing instruction to students. At MLSC, there is a stronger commitment to full-time faculty members. Full-time faculty members comprise 77% of the overall faculty staffing level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). This is in contrast to faculty staffing levels at MMCC and SMCC who rely on a larger adjunct base to provide their student instruction. At MMCC, only 35% of faculty is full-time and SMCC's full-time faculty base is even lower at 14% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Over the past few years, both MMCC and SMCC have made a significant effort to improve the faculty credentials at their institutions. But, MMCC and SMCC have approached how to obtain these credentials differently. MMCC has asked their current faculty base to continue their academic development by pursuing doctorate degrees and has paid for the faculty to do so. In contrast, SMCC has utilized their hiring process to add faculty with terminal degrees to their staff.

Campus Culture: Who Are We?

All three institutions share the same similar campus environments that employees consider part of a normal day's activities and environment. As Schein notes, to understand an institutional culture, you must "observe and interview regular members or 'old timers' to get an accurate sense of the deeper-level assumptions that are shared" (2010, p. 19). The average tenure with each of the organizations was eight and a half years, 10 years and 15 years. While each institution had relatively new members participate in the interviews, tenured employees also participated. Each institution's mission is different. They are located in different parts of the United States. In addition, they enroll different student demographics. However, each of their campus cultures had similarities in defining their organization's campus cultures and, by their definition, an extension of what it means to be a family.

The notion of family is evident at all three institutions. Family ownership plays a role in all three institutions. For example, at MLSC the institution was founded and held under family

ownership for decades. As noted in their self-study (2011), when the institution was sold by the founder to an instructor and long-time colleague of the founder, "...the College began its evolution from a highly respected, family-owned post-secondary operation to an institution of higher learning." The institution was sold in 1999 to a corporate entity that is a family owned enterprise. At MMCC, the institution's president is third-generation ownership. Finally, a second-generation family member is managing SMCC on a daily basis.

Family is evident in other areas of each of these three institutions. For example, at MMCC and SMCC, multiple family members work at the institution. At MMCC, six family members work at the institution as noted in their academic catalog. Additionally, one of the MMCC employees commented, "I mean you have to look at the phone directory to see how many people with the last name of [owner's name] work here, otherwise you won't know." SMCC has multiple spouses and relatives of employees not related to the founding family working at the institution. As one of the SMCC employees noted, "The biggest things that I see day to day is, to an outsider looking in is that there is an awful lot of family in the building. There's a cultural piece where [another employee's name] husband works here and my wife works here." There was so much family working at the institution that the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the regional accrediting body noted this as an issue. In response, SMCC evaluated the matter and the Board of Directors added "Family" as one of their institutional values. Even though there are significant numbers of family members working at these two institutions, each family member employee is still held accountable for their performance. As one MMCC employee noted, "They have the same standards as everybody else even though some of the family does work here." A SMCC employee shared,

It's definitely different when I started. When I started, it was more of a mentality of you are family. If you are not pulling your weight somebody else will jump in. We definitely have much more accountability...It's really easy to see, yes, you are a family, but you are the weakest performer. We don't have as many family members anymore, but we do have a lot of family members of employees that work here.

Family values continue to show through in other areas at MLSC, MMCC and SMCC. For example, in the welcome letter from MMCC, the president refers to faculty and staff as family and

welcomes the student to the family. “You are so much more than a student to us. You are a member of our family.” At SMCC, one of the faculty members commented that faculty and staff come together as a family to support one another by sharing, “What does [the institution] mean to me? I look at it being in a capacity where you have professional experience with, you know, my faculty members right, with professors and so forth. And having them actually come together, you know, as a family, work with one another, whether it is us, IT, Admissions to get an end goal.”

Members of each of these institutions discussed openness. The employees shared ‘open-door’ policies and that faculty, staff and students had the ability to discuss issues with executive leadership and each other. Senior leadership listens to the employees. Ideas that are brought forth from faculty and staff are not dismissed. For example, at MMCC, faculty was concerned about their titles and how external parties perceived their current titles. They proposed a new ranking system that was studied, debated and ultimately approved by the president. The new ranking system became a project that MMCC incorporated into the institution’s accreditation improvement projects. Students have access to the president as well with an MMCC employee sharing,

[the president] is very accessible and same thing goes with the [previous president]. It’s really an open book when it comes to the family and I think one of things that our students really enjoy is that they interact with their president regularly and that’s something that at other colleges, bigger colleges are – I guess I’ll just be honest and say stuffier colleges. They’re not going to have that opportunity to interact with the president.

Another faculty member at a different institution discussed that they “feel very comfortable” around their campus. Communication is open at the institution. All three institutions have regularly scheduled meetings held three to four times a year that bring together all of the faculty and staff in one location. Information is shared, projects are worked on and people, projects and students are recognized and celebrated. At MLSC, one of the employees commented on the accessibility of the president by stating, “...it’s not like we have to really hunt down the boss, you know, he is just right down the hall, so everyone pretty much having an open door so it’s pretty easy.” Another MLSC employee echoed that sentiment by stating, “...with our president, I do feel very comfortable knowing pretty much I have access to him at any time.”

Additionally, members of the three institutions commented on the solid financial footing of each of their institutions. They understand the financial requirements of their organizations and that their purpose for being there is for the students, not for the owners. Executive leadership at all three institutions has created an environment where employees are not worried that the doors will be closed when they come in to work. The employees understand that their institutional leadership faces tough challenges to keep the doors open. As one SMCC faculty member commented, "So, that's a tough 21st Century challenge is having to keep doors open and maintain respect and academic integrity, you know, or respect for your students and your staff and everybody that works here and have the academic integrity."

Moreover, faculty at all three institutions commented on having the academic freedom to teach in the classroom. One MLSC faculty member shared that her institution provided a lot of "...moral support when you needed something, you know encouragement, things of that nature. But, I didn't feel like they were telling us what to do. I felt like we had the freedom to follow the guidelines for our program and focus on what do we need to be a successful program." In response to a question as to why faculty stay when they haven't had raises in a few years, a faculty member at MMCC shared, "We're given complete academic freedom for one thing." Finally, a faculty member at SMCC commented, "There's respect here, academic freedom, respect, all sorts of mobility that we could come and go as we please. They don't monitor any of that, you know. And we're allowed to do our jobs with little or no interference at all. I mean, I'm not preaching Marxism in my classroom, they know that, but they trust me, you know."

Academic freedom, openness and a having a solid institution to work at have created a sense of loyalty and trust among the employees. Employees acknowledged that leadership holds employees accountable, but provides them with the resources to be successful. Each of the institutions will find a way for their employees to be in a position where they contribute positively to the institution. For example at SMCC, if the employee's current position is not the right fit, the institution will find another position within the organization for them. The trust that is created among the faculty and staff flows down to the students.

To achieve this sense of trust and loyalty among the faculty and staff, senior leadership has created a caring environment. They care about the faculty and staff and their students. As one SMCC employee noted, "We can go in there and bring in the family value, the way we are kind of cultured to actually care for one another." Faculty is able to connect with students, to motivate them and is encouraged to do so. That is one of the reasons why the faculty/student ratio is so important at MMCC. MMCC wants the faculty to be able engage with the student. As one MMCC employee commented, "They like us, we like them. We trust them and they trust us. We support them, they support us." Mutual caring, support and respect are not built overnight. We worry about each other.

Finally, the employees recognize that their executive leaders' jobs or positions are not easy. As one SMCC employee commented,

I think it's a tough balance, it really is...First of all, it's a small place and you do have people who have their interest at heart and they have to, you know. Certain person goes into business and runs things, so they have families and legacies to support. They don't want to start a university in the hopes that you're going to retire from it and it's going to close down. You start the university thinking it's going to be here forever. And, that's a heavy burden.

In managing the day-to-day environment, faculty and staff understand that it is a symbiotic relationship between the faculty, staff, leadership and students and that certain positions are under different stressors. As a result, employees understand that the leaders within their organizations oftentimes struggle with doing the right thing for the institution. In the case of MMCC, the president made a decision to restructure due to enrollment size. After the announcement was made, one of the faculty members understood the rationale for the decision and that it was a difficult decision.

Quest for Legitimacy

Despite the age of MLSC, MMCC, and SMCC, all three institutions are still on the quest for legitimacy. Their students have been denied access to state funds prior to being regionally accredited, acceptance into graduate schools or baccalaureate degree programs or the ability to

transfer credits. Regional accreditation brings legitimacy in state policies, access to funds and recognition among employers, parents and students of a quality of education. Each of these institutions pursued regional accreditation as a means to increase the value of their institutions to someone – other institutions, state agencies, parents, students and/or employers. They pursued regional accreditation to increase that value and recognition. A MLSC employee commented about pursuing regional accreditation, “It gives the institution and me credibility.” Another MLSC employee shared,

...so many of our students would complete our program with an associate’s degree and wish to pursue as we outline in the mission statement for them to continue a higher learning, but they would get stopped in their tracks because other institutions said well if you are not regionally accredited we have no use for any of your credits.

At MMCC, regional accreditation meant increasing faculty credentials. As one MMCC faculty member shared, “They want to make sure that they have people on staff with terminal degrees, with Ph.D. and they’re fully aware of that. And so, I was asked to go back to school.” As one SMCC employee noted, “I believe when you have an [regional] accredited university like ourselves, the curriculum speaks for itself.” SMCC is accredited by “one of the major, major accreditations, HLC.” In the eyes of SMCC, HLC accreditation puts them in the same pool as to the major state-funded universities in the state. A member of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) confirmed why for-profit colleges and universities pursue regional accreditation, “But I think that – look, for-profits want a certain respect and regard, that’s why they go get regional accreditation.”

However, for all of these institutions, regional accreditation has not been enough for others to recognize the quality of education provided at their institutions. These institutions have looked to third parties to validate the institution’s work in the classroom. As a result, two of the three institutions, MLSC and MMCC, have pursued programmatic or specialized accreditation. Programmatic accreditation has its own set of academic curricular and graduate outcome requirements an institution must meet. Additionally, two of the three institutions incorporate licensure or certification exams as another measure of the quality of their educational programs.

For some of the programs, licensure is required to be able to work in the field. The Higher Learning Commission accrediting body looks favorably at these additional outcome metrics to verify the student learning assessment outcome measurements beyond what the institution reports. Moreover, one of the institutions, SMCC, has entered into agreements with certain governmental agencies that recognize the rigor of the academic program similar to programmatic accreditation, but from a governmental agency.

In the continued quest for legitimacy, all three of these organizations have participated or promoted agreements or student accomplishments for life after graduation from their institutions. As an example, MLSC secured better articulation agreements with other colleges and universities that will recognize a degree from their institution. Both MLSC and MMCC participate in their state's transfer credit program. MLSC and MMCC want their students to internalize a philosophy of lifelong learning. They track and promote the accomplishments of their students who apply for and are accepted at other institutions for continuation of their college careers in pursuing other degree programs, including graduate school. Top employers who hire graduates are important to each of these institutions. All three institutions provide a focus on their successful graduates. Two of three institutions include alumni testimonials in their advertising and the other institution includes alumni employment information and testimonials on their website.

To validate the education received by students and to understand the workplace environment, all three institutions use surveys. All three institutions use a variety of homegrown and third party survey instruments to assess student life, student learning, student satisfaction, employer satisfaction, graduate satisfaction and employee satisfaction. At MLSC, according to their self-study, they incorporate climate, student satisfaction, graduate, employer and instructor surveys to capture data relevant to institutional performance. MMCC uses student opinion, graduate exit, employer, Noel-Levitz and CAEL Adult Learning Focused Institution Survey (ALFI), and alumni surveys to assess performance and institutional climate as noted in their self-study. According to their self-study, SMCC also uses graduate satisfaction and student evaluations of classroom experience to evaluate institutional effectiveness. Many of these surveys were

implemented to meet regional accreditation requirements. The institutions had many of these surveys in place. The institutions have made improvements with their current survey process and added survey instruments to their portfolio.

In their ongoing quest for legitimacy, all institutions have put additional focus on upgrading their faculty qualifications. All three of the institutions, are upgrading their faculty with higher credentials. MMCC and SMCC have been focused on bringing in more doctorate-credentialed faculty. At MMCC, the institution requested that some of their full-time faculty members pursue these terminal degrees and paid the associated tuition costs. As an MMCC faculty member commented, “Well, for me personally and that’s the only thing I could think of, is I was asked to pursue a Ph.D...I talked with her [the president] further about this and it was for accrediting reasons. They want to make sure that they have people on staff with terminal degrees, with Ph.D.’s and they’re fully aware of that...There are two or three others on staff who have been asked to go back and get their degrees and they’re almost done as well.” SMCC’s dean shared, “Like right now we’re in a place where we’re investing a little bit more in full-time faculty with higher credentials.” The regional accreditation process has pushed the institutions to upgrade their faculty base. Additionally, two of the institutions are considering offering degree programs one level up from their current offerings. That move would require additional faculty credentialed at terminal doctorate degrees for both institutions.

The regional accrediting body recently modified its criteria in January 2013 to focus on the public good (Fain, March 12, 2013). The specific language is “The institution’s educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a related or parent organization or supporting external interests” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The intent of the new criterion is to ensure that education is for the public good and prioritize the education of students instead of focusing on money or other concerns. Half of the participants shared information on how their institutions are complying with this new criterion. Some of the examples included the community events, fundraising for various charities, public use of campus facilities, internship/externship work,

community board membership. One MLSC employee commented, “Our public good is making sure students don’t waste their money and get a job and contribute to the economy. That’s our public good and so that’s the part of our DNA all along so there’s nothing new about that. That’s how we define public good.” A MMCC employee shared, “We serve the public. Honestly, that’s something that we do very well. President [name] does very well. [The president] is very active in the community and has their hands on a lot of different programs and projects that are – that [the president] is spearheading that don’t benefit [the institution] directly...” The other half of the participants were not aware of the criterion change or if their institution was meeting the new criterion.

Admissions processes are often used by institutions to manage their enrollment and prestige by limiting access. All three institutions have admissions processes to assess their students prior to enrollment. For two of the institutions, their process is more selective. MSLC’s admission decision process is centered in the academic dean’s office. Students applying to MSLC must provide proof of high school graduation or equivalency, high school and/or college academic transcripts, admissions application and pay a \$50 refundable application fee. The institution strongly recommends an interested person take a campus tour. The academic dean makes all admissions decisions, with the exception of one program. This program, due to programmatic accreditation, requires an admissions board, which is comprised of the academic dean, program director and president. Decisions are focused on the student’s ability to finish. According to the academic dean, “We try to accept students who we think will succeed...Now we are not highly selective when it comes to that, but we do have a criterion that we look at and we try to make that determination on whether or not this individual will succeed. If we don’t think so, then they are not going to get accepted.” The purpose of this process is focused on strong outcomes for the institution as measured by their graduation and placement rates.

MMCC has an open enrollment admissions process. According to the chief admissions officer, “The process for helping students select programs rests largely within the admissions department. During the course of their admissions interview, prospective students provide

interests, work schedule and their family situation, which leads to recommendations for a specific program. This is followed by the entrance exam, which helps to determine if the student is academically prepared.” Their process does require the student to pay a small application fee of \$25. As the chief admissions officer shared, “It basically just weeds out the people who aren’t actually interested.” ACT or SAT scores are not required, but proof of high school graduation or equivalency is required. MMCC has some, but little competition with other institutions within their local geography. Additionally, MMCC provides students with an opportunity for online learning.

SMCC, similar to MLSC, has an admissions process that evaluates students for admission into the institution. According to one of the employees, “The [institution] bases admissions acceptance on a composite score that considers both a history of academic success and what the [institution] broadly refers to as a ‘cultural match’ with the institution. Academic history is determined by traditional measures, such as one’s grade point average and ACT or SAT scores. However, students are also evaluated based on certain traits that are considered key to the identity and mission...” These traditional academic measures account for 40% of the overall admissions rubric. The remaining 60% is based on a cultural match determined from application questions and looks for key traits. SMCC also provides an online learning presence and their online learners are required to complete an additional evaluation to measure potential success as an online learner. The decision process is automated in that the institution wrote a computer program to evaluate the responses and make the admissions decision. The admissions committee reviews all students denied acceptance or if the decision to admit or deny is close. SMCC’s current admissions process aids the creation of an even more aligned student population to the institution’s mission, which in turn, helps create the learning environment at the institution. SMCC also publishes their acceptance rate on their website.

In speaking with a representative from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) on how institutions balance profit motive and student success, they shared a comment about admissions. “I think for-profits are moving toward more selective admission. And that will help them frankly.” The representative continued by stating,

You can't – and I worked at community colleges for 20 years, all right? I was proud to be in democracy's colleges. But you can't take an open admission student population and get the success that you get at Penn, no, or a whole bunch of other places. You cannot do it. So what are reasonable expectations of success? We've never resolved that by the way. And community colleges are treated in a similar way to this way.

All three institutions are utilizing the admissions process to manage their student base. In focusing on incoming students to achieve greater student outcomes, MLSC, MMCC and SMCC are striving to improve public perception about the quality of their educational offerings. Graduate outcomes and success, survey results, increased faculty credentials, and programmatic accreditation, are mechanisms used by each institution to further legitimize their institutions to the community.

Economic Realities

Profit Motive

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC as privately held, for-profit higher educational institutions are not structured to provide economic wealth for their owners. For all three institutions, their mission as an educational institution comes first, followed by the financial motive to provide financial stability and viability as an organization. The presidents of all three institutions understand their organizations are businesses. In order to continue to exist as a business or an institution of higher learning, the institutions must be financially viable. In order to be financially viable, executives must understand the basics of accounting and finance and must control revenue and expenses. Revenue for these three institutions is from student enrollment. An MLSC employee shared, "And we have to make ends meet, and we have to thrive. Because that's the nature of a proprietary institution. It has to make money. If it makes money, we get paid. So the economic realities are a part of the decision making process." Another SMCC employee commented, "This is a for-profit business. We have to make a profit to run this business. No students, no money, no money, no school. No school, no students so you have to make the profit, but it's how are you investing or reinvesting those dollars back into the university." A representative from the national

accrediting body, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) shared about profit motive and understanding the business side of for-profit higher education, "...if you think about it in terms of business practices and finance, it's really not profit motive. It is what do the institutions do to demonstrate to their investors on a quarter-to-quarter or a year-to-year basis that the investors are, in fact, getting some kind of return for the money that they've put at risk in serving these students." However, he provides a different perspective on the profit motive and motives of for-profit institutions.

What motivates them are the smaller incremental elements of answering that question not long-term necessarily profitability. You know, a lot of these schools, the small or medium sized ones hope that they can demonstrate, if not a profit, at least the ability to attract and grow their cash flow, attract and grow their enrollment base, so that if a larger institution comes along and says, "We would like to acquire you," that acquisition price reflects an embedded ability to attract and grow enrollment and therefore grow cash flow. So, the opportunity to make a profit would be at the time they liquidate the school, not necessarily the quarterly or even the annual financials.

And I think there's nothing that I know of that's sinister about that, that is not American about that. This is the way the high tech sector operates obviously, that's why there are so many – there are so many venture capital providers for high tech and for medical. It's because there is an understanding that if we provide – we take the risk in providing some of the financing upfront and you become successful. You find a way to create a recurring cash flow and control the expenses that go with that cash flow. You suddenly become a very viable entity that is probably going to get purchased and acquired and integrated with a larger business model.

For MMCC and SMCC, this is the motive within their institution. Both of these institutions are family led institutions and their motive and long-term vision is ensuring the viability of the previous generation's legacy.

The Business of For-Profit Higher Education

As for-profit higher education institutions, they manage their business models. As SMCC's president noted, institutions of higher education follow the same business model, but may be following different business practices. The ACICS representative, however, commented

that these same business models upon which for-profit institutions utilize is changing and that we may not know what that new model or models represent,

But those specific business models they developed are changing all the time. You know, three, four, five, seven years ago, the primary impetus was grow enrollment, attract enrollment at all cost. Then, the cost started to manifest on the back end and they changed to a different model, which was focus more on the quality of the enrollment that's going on, that there is some additional screening of prospective students, that we're looking for some factors in admitting students, in enrolling students that reduce the cost of serving those students over the trajectory of their program and increase the chance they will graduate, they will be placed; and if necessary, they'll pass the licensure exam. And so, that business model, for a lot of the institutions, has changed just in that brief time. And some of them are probably changing to other business models that we don't even know about. But they are all premised on, eventually, you have to return some kind of benefit back to your investor.

All three institutions have modified business practices as the ACICS representative notes. For example, MLSC and SMCC do not have open enrollment practices. They have a specific screening process in place to ascertain if the student is a right fit for their institution and if they will ultimately succeed by graduating from their program. Additionally, MLSC has a trial period for their students in which a student or the institution may cancel a student's enrollment during the first two weeks of classes if there are concerns about the program.

In understanding the business of for-profit higher education, you need to understand the decision-making structures. Decisions are made quicker and by a smaller group of individuals within the organization. Individuals involved in those decisions are at the presidential level, and in some organizations, expanded to include the senior leadership group of the organization, such as the academic dean and the chief admissions officer. The president makes all budget and expense level decisions at MLSC. For all three institutions, the board overseeing the institution approves all annual budget planning and in some cases, like at SMCC, requires certain reserves to be set aside.

Executives at all three institutions evaluate all aspects of their business to ensure continued financial viability. Examples of decisions they have made regarding financial viability include restructuring staffing models, reducing staffing levels, compensation and hiring freezes,

creation and elimination of academic program offerings. Moreover, institutional facilities are designed for academic learning purposes. Campus facilities do not include spaces that do not directly relate or promote the academic environment. Consequently, you will not find gyms, climbing walls or student unions. For these three institutions, faculty share office space.

Resource Allocation/Budgeting

Each of the three institutions manages their budgets and allocating their resources differently. The president at MLSC controls all spending. MMCC has a budgeting process that they defined as “loose,” while SMCC has a participatory budget depending on the economic realities. In leaner times, SMCC’s budget process may be more prescriptive. Despite these differences, all three institutions ensure that their faculty and staff have the resources needed to educate the students and do their work. Faculty and staff need to request the resources, but the managers and senior leaders rarely deny these requests. Faculty and staff, however, understand the nature of working in a for-profit institutions and do not make unnecessary requests.

Academic Program Offerings

One of the mechanisms that for-profits institutions utilize to ensure financial viability is their academic program offerings. Since their founding, all three institutions have expanded their academic program and degree offerings. Moreover, all three institutions have reduced or eliminated program offerings that were no longer viable. Matrices used to make those decisions include enrollment numbers of a sufficient size to support the expenses of the program, outcome measurements such as graduation rates and employment outcomes such as placement rates and starting salaries. Additionally, as markets and technologies change, so do the academic program offerings at these institutions. For example, SMCC no longer offers the program upon which the institution was founded. However, had they kept the program and retooled it, they would have a program would be relevant and exceptional. Now, they continuously evaluate their programs and, if needed, will reinvigorate the program by introducing new technologies or changing the

program content. One such example is their video game curriculum. Previously, the video game curriculum was a stand-alone program of designers. However, the gaming industry is more complex and includes experts in design, art, programming and networking. Consequently, SMCC modified their curriculum to ensure that crossover exists between design and technology majors and students from different disciplines are taking the same courses and working together.

MLSC takes into consideration the potential starting salaries of graduates when considering which new programs to offer. They have identified new programs, but the starting salaries are just above minimum wage for these positions. The institution believed that the students' return on the tuition investment would not be worth offering this program and decided not to submit the program through the approval process. Program offerings allow the institution to be nimble and meet the needs of the employment community and student interest.

Economic Perceptions

Students and the public often misunderstand the economic realities of how a for-profit educational institution is managed. Certain signals – such as layoffs or other employment shifts and status symbols associated with campus leaders – seem to prioritize profit over educational imperatives, but that interpretation is usually false. As one institution shared, when they terminate a well-liked faculty or staff member for cause, students often misinterpret the dismissal for budgetary purposes. Because the termination is a human resource related matter, institutional leadership is precluded from saying anything to refute or correct the misinterpretation. The true understanding of the operational requirements is further clouded because for-profit higher education institutions utilize restructuring and reductions in staff to ensure financial viability of an institution. In the recent situation at MMCC, eight staff members were laid off to right size the institution to previous student enrollment levels. The faculty levels were unchanged, but the changes signal to all employees the importance of balanced budgets.

Students and staff also observe certain status symbols of institutional leaders as an offshoot of the success of the institution. For example, employees at two of the institutions commented on the cars that the presidents drive. Students, faculty and staff do not have insight into the personal financial decisions of executive leadership, but come to conclusions about the leadership motive based on the car they drive. As one MMCC employee shared, "...there wasn't the greed that I saw at the other school where I worked. There wasn't a flashiness of, you know, there's not a \$10,000 picture in our president's office or the previous president. He drives a pick-up truck." Another SMCC employee commented, "How come the president still gets to drive a BMW when I have an old computer in front of me?"

The public also does not understand the economic realities of managing a for-profit school. A solid understanding of finance is required in managing businesses. As the president of MMCC shared, "Increased revenue generates better resources and spend on students. In a school, I think it's commonly misunderstood it's [expenses associated with the educational offerings such as faculty wages, software and hardware] not a variable expense. You have huge hits to expenses so they have to clear in order to generate more variable expense that you can do on things." Accounting principles dictate how you classify revenue and expenses. For example, marketing dollars must be expensed in the year they are spent. You cannot capitalize marketing dollars. As one of the presidents explained,

Okay so what's weird about marketing and advertising in our sector is let's say you're a school making, it's a 10 million dollars a year school and you – someone gives you five million bucks, gives it to you and you want to spend it all on marketing this year. It will show as we lost money because all your other expense you have to expense all that but you don't get to show it necessarily; it's revenue offsetting and it will show that even though it's free money you spend 50% of your budget on growth. So now you look like a jerk that's not spending enough on education etcetera.

Such account details are generally not made available to students or to the public, and, as a result, institutions often appear to short-change educational imperatives when in fact they are not.

Long-Term View

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC take long view approaches to managing the financial resources and budgets of the institutions. MLSC shared that they take a long-term approach to their planning cycle and reported little or no profit in recent years. SMCC shared similar information.

The thickest our profit margin has ever been – ever was 15% which of course you spend 7 ½% of that or 50% of that straight back to the Fed [in taxes]. So I'm in bad debt and the rest of my investments... the stock market schools ... have to record and show earnings on quarterly and annual basis...I mean we report on it but no one cares so much, so you can take longer term strategies.

SMCC also sets aside revenue to ensure continued viability as an institution. Their most recent self-study document included information on these reserves. “The Board established policy in Spring 2004 to maintain deposits into the University’s reserves. Three percent of tuition revenues are maintained in segregated, single purpose accounts to be used only for unforeseeable financial events, such as shortfalls in revenue or expenses.” These strategies ensure stability within the organization.

Balancing Longevity with Nimbleness

Human resource implications exist when ensuring the continued viability of an institution. MLSC, MMCC and SMCC understand the importance of the continuity and tenure of their employees. All three institutions have seasoned employees with significant tenure. However, changes in student enrollment may require the institution to make certain decisions. At MLSC and MMCC, admissions representatives are not terminated for missing enrollment goals. Tenured employees are critical to the ongoing success of the institution. SMCC spends time on recruiting individuals who will fit into the culture of their institution. As one SMCC director shared, “we really do like referrals because people understand our culture, know their family member or friend and they will fit well in our culture.” Additionally, SMCC spends time to ensure that employees are in the right position for success.

We do a lot, not just for family members, but for other employees to make sure they are in the right position. So they are having people and family members included, that we said, you are not excelling here, we

are moving you over here I'm going to try it over here and this is where you need to succeed...If you are a good employee and they work hard and they really care about the students, we want to find the right fit for them, however on the other side, if they are not a great fit or we didn't hire, we want to terminate those as quickly as possible.

Employees are also reassigned to ensure that the amount of work is equal to the position. SMCC recently reassigned ground faculty who were not teaching full course loads to teach online classes. Staffing changes occur as a last resort. All three institutions have utilized, at one time in their history, reducing staff, compensation and hiring freezes to ensure continued financial viability of the institution.

Student Complaints

Student complaints at the institution do not revolve around an institution's for-profit status. Complaints focus on the cost of tuition and tuition increases. As one employee commented, "It just has to do with the program's expense. I think it has more to do with us being private than for-profit, they perceive our tuition as very expensive...I think it's based more on just strictly tuition cost and the fact that we're private, so I think if we were, even if we were private non-profit, we'd get the same complaint." The cost of tuition is shared with the student upon enrolling. However, for some students, they do not understand the expense. The employee at MLSC shared that all students sign an enrollment agreement that detail the estimated cost. And, estimated costs for attending the institution are typically estimated above the student's final total tuition costs. A faculty member shared her experience with a student complaint about tuition.

When I started teaching here complaining about the amount of money they were paying and they felt the quality of education was not there based upon them, not displayed in the program...Tell me what makes you feel this is not quality and so using once like allow them to maybe to share, we can walk away realizing that it's probably not as bad as we think we just don't like what happened in the moment.

Oftentimes, complaints about tuition are also a smoke screen for other concerns or issues a student may have.

Student Success Defined

MLSC, MMCC, and SMCC use internal and external indicators to define student success. The external indicators retain the national accrediting body standards for performance such as student retention and placement results. Additionally, all three institutions conduct surveys and solicit feedback from students, graduates and employees regarding satisfaction with the educational quality of the institution. Furthermore, advisory boards are utilized by all three institutions to provide programmatic specific feedback regarding industry trends and future direction. Two of the institutions rely heavily on programmatic accreditation and licensure and pass rates associated with those academic programs required for successful employment placement.

The data collected by the institutions then informs student learning assessment at the institutions. Data are analyzed and improvements are made to the academic core and general education program and course offerings at the each institution. All three institutions utilize different student learning assessments to improve the educational environment at their institutions. Each have created home-grown assessment indicators, models and committees to review the information, make recommendations and adjustments.

One of the institutions, MMCC goes beyond the metric driven indicators to evaluate the success of their students. These intrinsic or personal success indicators are hard to measure, mostly anecdotal and focus on individual faculty or staff experiences with students. MMCC speaks about changes in students' confidence levels, self-esteem and pride after completing a course, program or even a day of classes. MMCC also provides detail on the obstacles their students must overcome to be successful at their institution such as family obligations, work obligations and small or non-existent role models and support for attending college.

Some external entities evaluate a college or university's performance through their graduation rates. As defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), "the graduation rate tracks the progress of students who began their studies as full-time, first-time

degree- or certificate-seeking students to see if they complete a degree or other award such as a certificate within 150% of 'normal time' for completion of the program in which they are enrolled.”

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC all have posted graduated rates above the graduation rates for reported institutions. MLSC's 2009 graduation rate was 72% compared to 62.8% graduation rate for all students at 2-year for-profit postsecondary institutions (United States Department of Education, 2014b). MLSC outperformed public institutions when you compare MLSC's graduation rate of 62.8% against public institutions' graduation rate of 19.8% in 2009. MLSC performed at the same level as non-profit 2-year postsecondary institutions, which posted a 62.3% graduation rate in 2009 (United States Department of Education, 2014b). MMCC and SMCC had higher graduation rates of 43% and 32%, respectively, compared to the graduation rate of 22.8% for all students at 4-year for-profit postsecondary institutions (United States Department of Education, 2014c). MMCC's graduation rate of 43% was better than the 4-year public graduation rate of 32.8%, but lower than the 4-year non-profit graduation rate of 52.9%. SMCC's graduation rate of 32% equaled the graduation rate performance of 4-year public graduation rate, but significantly worse than the 52.9% graduation rate posted by 4-year non-profit postsecondary institutions (United States Department of Education, 2014c).

Institutional default rates are another mechanism with which to evaluate a college or university's effectiveness. MLSC's three-year cohort default rates for fiscal year 2009 and fiscal year 2010 were 8.5% and 3.5%, respectively. MLSC's cohort default rates were significantly lower than the rates for private for-profit institutions during the same period of 14.8% in 2009 and 12.1% in 2010. Additionally, MLSC's cohort default rates were significantly lower for all 2-year institutions, public 2-year institutions and private nonprofit institutions in 2009 and 2010. In 2009 and 2010, 2-year institutions posted cohort default rates of 12.9% and 12.8%, respectively. Public 2-year institutions posted 12.0% and 13.4% default rates while 2-year private nonprofit institutions posted 10.0% and 8.6% cohort default rates (United States Department of Education, 2012).

MMCC's cohort default rates in fiscal year 2009 were higher at 19.5% than all categories of 4-year institutions and performed at the same level as other 4-year private for-profits in 2010 at 13.6%. The cohort default rate for 4-year institutions was 7.3% in 2009 and 7.8% in 2010. Public 4-year institutions posted cohort default rates of 5.2% in 2009 and 6.1% in 2010. The cohort default rate for private 4-year nonprofits was 4.5% in 2009 and 5.2% in 2010. Private 4-year for-profit institutions posted the highest cohort default rates of 15.4% and 13.6% in 2009 and 2010, respectively (United States Department of Education, 2012). SMCC posted a higher cohort default rate than institutions in all categories of 16.6% in 2009. However, SMCC posted a lower cohort default rate than other private 4-year for-profit institutions in 2010 of 12.0% (United States Department of Education, 2012).

Institutional Improvement

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC are working to continuously evaluate their institutions and implement strategies for improvement. All three institutions spoke of the positive influence the regional accreditation process had on improving their organizations. Accreditation forced the institutions to evaluate every aspect of their institution including their mission statement, institutional priorities and values, student learning, planning, community engagement, fiscal responsiveness, academic program offerings, resources, teaching and learning, faculty credentials, and overall institutional effectiveness. Conversations were held at all levels of the organization about how the institutions met accreditation requirements and areas of opportunities. Faculty and staff were active participants in these conversations. All three institutions have created institutional effectiveness committees, which meet regularly and review routinely captured data to measure performance. Data review has been expanded to look longitudinally to gauge improvement.

MLSC and SMCC are on the Standard Pathway for reaffirming and maintaining their accreditation status with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The Standard Pathway is required for institutions that have achieved initial accreditation with HLC less than ten years ago.

The Standard Pathway requires institutions to prepare self-studies and participate in comprehensive campus team visits. MMCC has been accredited with HLC for over 30 years and is on the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) Pathway. AQIP accreditation cycles last seven years and focus the institution on identifying improvement projects that last one to multiple years. Institutions must be invited and approved to be on the AQIP Pathway. MMCC has acknowledged that their institution has made tremendous strides in improving the institution and creating an environment focused on continuous improvement because of the AQIP Pathway. They have made significant strides in student learning assessment and financial planning because of feedback from HLC. And, institutional improvements are not only top-down improvements. One example MMCC shared was regarding a faculty-led initiative was a new faculty ranking system. With this new system, faculty may apply for an evaluation to receive a new title. A faculty member's academic credential statuses, committee work, public speaking engagements, tenure with the organization, publications, to name a few, are evaluated. Committee recommendations are then forwarded to the president for approval. Rank and title changes do not come with any monetary reward at MMCC.

Schein simply defines an institution's culture as a way to solve problems. He goes on to note,

The methods an organization decides to use to measure its own activities and accomplishments – the criteria it chooses and the information systems it develops to measure itself – become central elements of its culture as consensus develops around these issues. If consensus fails to develop, and strong subcultures form around different assumptions, the organization will find itself in conflicts that can potentially undermine its ability to cope with the external environment.

The HLC accreditation process has created an environment in which the institution must agree on the measures with which it evaluates their operations. MLSC, MMCC and SMCC have identified similar measurements with which to evaluate their operations. They have also expanded on those measures to include different metrics meaningful to their institutions. The president, senior leadership, faculty and staff agree on these measurements. All three institutions hold regularly

scheduled meetings to present the information and provide a forum upon which to hold conversations and debates about how to improve as an institution.

The regularly scheduled meetings soliciting input from faculty and staff, along with data collected by the institutions are then used to inform strategic planning. As one president shared,

The last one [strategic plan] was 2007 to 2012. We started writing this one in 2011 kind of in the tail of the last run and it took two years to really publish that. The way that process works is there's a lot of different input sessions over a period of a couple of years and a lot of writing sessions. We close six times a year and we have all hands, everybody in one room for a full day...They spent a lot of time in inputting, writing, drafting; draft goals, language, that kind of thing. We take all that voluminous input and we boil it down to kind of like – the metaphor is like making a reduction sauce if you cook. You know the ingredients; there's a lot of ingredients but the final result is this really quite easy poignant sauce. That's what we do to create this. What's the theme we're hearing and then how do we stretch that, make it ambitious.

As another director at the same institution confirmed, "So the employees actually built the strategic plan, it comes to the officer group only for refinement. But it's employee and student driven."

Celebrating Success

Schein notes that in order to understand an institution's culture, one must look deeper into the institution. One of the observable events or underlying forces to understand an institution's culture is formal rituals and celebrations (2010, p. 16). For two of the three institutions, their commencement ceremony is an important avenue with which to celebrate student success, even though all three hold commencement ceremonies. However, at all of the institutions, faculty, staff and students are recognized for various achievements at their institutions' regularly scheduled in-service meetings. Some of those achievements include national exam pass rates above the national average, percentage of students hired from externship sites, graduate employment hires and innovative student projects. Two of the institutions presented information is shared beyond the in-service meetings and is centered around graduate employment hires conveyed via institutional email.

Ownership Interests

Faculty and staff at the three institutions believe that the owner's interest is the same as the institution's --- student success. At MLSC, the corporate owner and the institution do not need to balance shareholder interest and student success because they are one and the same. As an employee at MLSC shared, "Well, I don't think we have to balance when it's the same thing. [The corporate owner] is just as invested in student success as we are so it's not a conflict. We have to justify everything that we do, our very existence now. We can't succeed unless our students do, because numbers don't lie. [The corporate owner]'s own interest coincides with students' success because if our students weren't successful, we would not be around for much longer. And, that's the bottom line and we all know that." At MMCC, another employee commented, "I don't know that there has ever not been a balance. I don't see that there has ever been a time when there has been something that interfered with that." Another employee at the same institution concurred by stating, "There's not a whole lot of balancing that needs to be done, because their main interest is the students, and the employees and making sure that the students and the employees are taking care of, kind of meets their needs, so there's really not a whole lot of balancing that needs to be done."

However, the president of SMCC responded by commenting that SMCC does not balance shareholder interest and student success. He expanded by sharing,

If it wasn't family, I would not be here. I'm doing this because I saw what Dad was doing and knew that his exit, if I didn't take it over would be to sell it to an ITT or something that who knows what it would become -- just another chain in the line. I knew that what he created, his legacy deserves special attention and go out and make it a stand-alone. So that the only reason I'm here is because I'm preserving his legacy and that's the only reason that we, the family, haven't just sold it and lived on that and retired is really to preserve the heartbeat of the institution.

Answering the Research Questions

The research questions first asked the ways in which for-profit colleges and universities acknowledge, address and balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success. The case studies of three, regionally accredited for-profit post-secondary institutions suggest their primary

institutional foci are on mission, student success, core values or institutional purposes and strategic planning. Institutional foci are slightly different for the three institutions yet they all share the primary focus of mission and for MLSC and MMCC, their mission is focused on students and student success. MLSC's sole focus is student success – their mission. MMCC's sole focus is students, which is their mission, employees and the community, which are their institutional purposes and core values. SMCC's sole focus is mission, students and advancing their strategic plan. SMCC was the only institution to also include advancing their strategic plan as a focus in addition to mission and student success.

Profitability is a necessary condition for existence. The institutional presidents, which comprise the executive subculture, hold the responsibility for ensuring institutional viability, stability and financial responsiveness, which supports the financial focus Schein's assumptions of the executive subculture: "Without financial survival and growth, there are no returns to shareholders or to society" (2010, p. 63). Faculty and staff understand and support this responsibility. Profits are used to stabilize the institution and help it to remain viable and grow. Maximizing profits are not the primacy focus for any of the three regionally accredited institutions in this study, which supports Collins and Porras' work (2002).

The second research question asked to what extent accreditation was a constructive force or obstacle in resolving the dilemma of profit motive and student success in for-profit colleges and universities. The regional accreditation process with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) has been a constructive force for all three institutions. The regional accreditation process focus has been on improving all aspects of the educational institution. Additionally, HLC has pushed the institutions to spend considerable time, effort and energy to improve their student learning assessments, continuous improvement processes and various planning processes. In order to accomplish these improvements, each of the institutions had to use data driven mechanisms to provide evidence of these improvements. Moreover, the regional accreditation process involves all of the institutional stakeholders in the institution. Finally, regional accreditation has served as a legitimizing force for the institutions.

One of the institutions, MMCC follows the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) Pathway. This pathway provides a different avenue for collegiate institutions to maintain and affirm accreditation. For MMCC, the AQIP process provides better benefits than the traditional, Standard Pathway process to maintain and affirm accreditation. AQIP allows the institution time to focus on specific projects to improve and further various aspects of the institution in meeting the accrediting body's standards. The process allows the institution time to focus on specific projects that they can see progress in real-time. Moreover, in an effort to improve transparency, all of the AQIP projects are available to the public. Both MMCC and HLC publish the information on their websites.

Part two of the second research question asked how the institutions used accreditation processes to resolve the dilemma of balancing profit motive and student success. Two of the three institutions, MLSC and SMCC were nationally accredited with the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) within the last 10 years prior to seeking regional accreditation with HLC. Accreditation with ACICS is a more proscribed accreditation process and focuses on compliance. HLC regional accreditation pushes the college or university to be a better institution. HLC puts significant focus on student learning and requires that for the institution to be successful all institutional stakeholders must be involved in the accreditation processes.

The third research question asked what other institutional distinctions such as ownership, location, and highest degree awarded factor into how for-profit colleges and universities acknowledge, address and balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success. The one institutional distinction that had the biggest impact in answering this question and shared by all three institutions was the family ownership influence. All three institutions have extensive family ownership in their organizational history. MMCC and SMCC are multiple generations, family owned and led. MLSC was family owned institution prior to being acquired by a corporate entity, which is also a family owned organization. Family values of caring for the students and employees, support, trust, loyalty and legacy are evident at three institutions. Ownership is

focused on the same purpose as the institution – student success. Both the owners and institutional employees understand that without student success, their institutions would not exist.

Location serves as a mechanism of the original founders' desire to create an educational institution. All three founders were living near where their institutions are located. SMCC's aspiration is to become a destination institution. To support this aspiration, SMCC built a residence hall. Freshmen students are required to live on campus their first year. MLSC and MMCC's locations meet the needs of the community where there are located.

For all three institutions, academic program offerings allow the institution to meet the needs of the community and employers. All three institutions that participated in this study have changed their academic program offerings based on the needs in the community and with technological advances in industry. Academic programs change frequently to meet the needs in the community and employers. All three institutions evaluate their programs regularly. Based on their evaluations, all the institutions have eliminated or discontinued programs in the past that no longer met employer or enrollment needs. SMCC, by contrast, will reinvigorate a program, if possible, before making the decision to remove it from its portfolio. All three institutions have added programs and expanded into higher degree offerings since their founding. Program offerings – adding, eliminating, retooling – allow the institutions to remain nimble to meet the needs of the employer community and sustain the institutions' financial viability.

Chapter 8: Key Findings and Implications

Implications of the Study for For-Profit Colleges and Universities

Research Participation

Higher education is predicated on the philosophy of learning. At the post-secondary level, learning is desired by students who attend institutions of higher learning and faculty and staff who teach and conduct research in those same institutions. Curiosity is a driving motivator to understand a subject matter more deeply. However, when access to information on a particular subject matter is blocked, furthering subject matter knowledge stops. In the case of this study, access to institutions was difficult to secure and necessitated a change in the overall scope. When discussing this issue with accrediting body experts, one of the experts responded by stating,

That we need particularly in confidential research, we need to be robust participants. We need to help inform policy makers with – through more information, more objective information, more authoritative, and scholarly information about what the strengths of these institutions are, where they're contributing appropriately and substantially at a community level. And comparing their – and compare their contribution fairly to other parts of the higher education community and let the chips fall where they may. I think in most cases, they would be pleasantly surprised that given their demographics of who they serve, they do as good a job if not a better job than any other institution out there.

Moving forward, for-profit colleges and universities should consider the value of voluntarily participating in research and data collection opportunities to further the knowledge base of the sector and higher education. Considerable resources for participation may be required and the economic realities of today's environment will play a critical role in those decisions. Research will provide institutions and sectors with information that may be presented to encourage data driven decision making about the for-profit sector of higher education and the entire higher education arena.

Profit Motive and Student Success

For-profit colleges and universities comprise part of the higher education landscape in the United States. The three regionally accredited institutions in this study put students and their success first. This philosophy becomes part of the mission, core values and institutional purposes of the entire institution. Other for-profit colleges and universities may take some of the findings from this research to improve their institutions.

For-profit colleges and universities may want to evaluate their mission statements, core values and institutional purposes. Once those have been evaluated, institutions may want to focus on understanding how deeply embedded these core values and ideologies are within their organization. Collins and Porras found that a core ideology and high ideals existed in companies at times when they were both successful and when they were struggling to survive (2002, p. 49). The executive and senior leadership of organizations should not be the only ones that can speak to these values. All employees within the organization need to be able to speak to these values and see how their organizations are incorporating these values into their daily activities and planning. As Schein notes, “only those beliefs and values that can be empirically tested and that continue to work reliably in solving the group’s problems will become transformed into assumptions” (2010, p. 26). Organizational leaders need to know that faculty and staff at all levels of the organization shares the same institutional beliefs and values. As an SMCC employee shared, employees need to be a good fit for the organization. They rely on referrals from current employees because a cultural understanding of the institution exists of the institution. “We have multiple spouses, brothers and sisters, friends – we really do like referrals because people understand our culture, know their family member or friend and they will fit well in our culture.”

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC all took long-term approaches to profitability in their organizations. They understood and created mechanisms to ensure short-term losses, such as creation of new program offerings, would create better returns for the organizations later.

Reserves are utilized to ensure that financial resources are available for institutions to ensure viability in the case of unforeseen events.

Student, employee and public perceptions persist about what these private institutions do with the profits of their organizations (Best and Best, 2014). For-profit institutions have been criticized for focusing on profit maximization instead of educational quality (Best and Best, 2014). Privately held for-profit institutions, while benefiting from the private status of their organizations, may want to consider additional transparency as it relates to how their organizations manage their profits, shareholders and dividends paid to shareholders, if any. According to a representative from one of the accrediting bodies, the institutions do not pay dividends to shareholders or owners. The only time that owners receive a return on their investment is when they sell their institution to another entity.

You know, a lot of these schools, the small or medium sized ones hope that they can demonstrate, if not a profit, at least the ability to attract and grow their cash flow, attract and grow their enrollment base, so that if a larger institution comes along and says, "We would like to acquire you," that acquisition price reflects an embedded ability to attract and grow enrollment and therefore grow cash flow. So, the opportunity to make a profit would be at the time they liquidate the school, not necessarily the quarterly or even the annual financials.

Legitimacy

All three institutions struggled with legitimacy issues. Even though two of the organizations have been around for over 75 years, their small size precludes them from being taken seriously by other organizations. Consequently, all three institutions turned to external organizations to validate the educational quality and promote their institutions. Legitimacy was the driving force for two of the institutions to seek and obtain regional accreditation. Additionally, all three organizations looked to third party programmatic or specialized accreditors to validate further the educational quality of their academic programs. Additionally, staff and faculty at all three institutions participate actively in external and community board memberships. By participating in these organizations, they are helping those organizations achieve their goals, while promoting their own organizations. Other for-profit institutions may want consider other

entities beyond their own organizations with which to collaborate and provide their professional expertise.

For-profits colleges and universities tend to have open enrollment admissions policies (Ruch, 2001). However, two of the institutions in this study, MLSC and SMCC have admissions processes wherein evaluative decisions are made by divisions outside of the admissions department about the potential success and fit of the student at their institution. MMCC requires students to pass an entrance exam for admittance and works with the student to select the best course of study and self-admittedly considers themselves an open enrollment institution. Since accrediting bodies have and are instituting new criteria requiring minimum performance metrics such as retention and placement indicators, institutions may want to work with accrediting bodies to consider how these new requirements may affect institutions that serve under-represented and under-served students (Fain, March 12, 2013).

MLSC, MMCC and SMCC all credited their regional accrediting body for improving student learning assessment at their institutions. Other for-profit colleges and universities may want to reevaluate their student learning assessments. They should consider institutional outcomes, programmatic outcomes and course outcomes as they devise and revamp their student learning assessments. Additionally, all three institutions created offices of institutional research to provide the requisite data and analysis needed for improving student learning. Furthermore, such assessment knowledge fed the institution's strategic and financial planning processes at each of the institutions.

The for-profit higher education sector is diverse (Kinser, 2006b). MLSC, MMCC and SMCC are regionally accredited institutions accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. The higher education sector's understanding of how for-profit institutions balance, acknowledge and address profit motive and student success would benefit from conducting additional research of publicly traded for-profit institutions. Additionally, the sector would benefit from conducting additional research of profit motive and student success of for-profit institutions in nationally accredited institutions or other regionally accredited institutions.

Family

An unexpected finding from this study was the family connection evident in all three institutions. The family connection began with institutional ownership at MLSC, MMCC and SMCC and continues to this day. As a result of family ownership of the institutions, family values are pervasive in the operations and symbolism at each institution. A high degree of care is afforded to students, faculty and staff. Long-term views and approaches are evident in project and goal planning and implementation as opposed to short-term gains. Admissions operations is not a sales-oriented operation and for MLSC and SMCC is centered on student outcome. The family influence has focused on building a sustaining legacy of existence. These family influences are reminiscent of the traditional foundations found at private colleges in existence today.

Implications of the Study for Accreditors

One of the criticisms leveled at accrediting bodies is that accrediting cycles are too long (Dickeson, 2006; Leef, G. and Burris, R., 2002). Consequently, institutions do not embed accreditation philosophies into their daily life. Accrediting bodies may want to consider how their accrediting activities become part of the institutional fabric of the institution on a more frequent basis as opposed to “just-in-time” accreditation visits.

Additionally, accrediting bodies should evaluate how deep within the institution utilizes accreditation processes. As the chief admissions officer at SMCC noted, he “had been at other institutions where the president did the whole thing.” Faculty and staff at all three institutions overwhelming discussed how their presidents brought together all employees on regular basis to discuss accreditation activities and provide time for faculty and staff to learn, discuss, debate, provide feedback and write materials for institutional improvement and accreditation activities.

Critics of accreditation have commented that institutions focus on inputs instead of outcomes such as the number of volumes in the library (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; Gaston, 2014; Gillen, A., Bennett, D., and Vedder, R., 2010; Leef, G. and Burris, R.

2002; Vedder, 2013). MLSC and SMCC were nationally accredited with the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) prior to seeking regional accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Their experiences with both accrediting bodies provide some additional considerations for ACICS. First, faculty and staff at both institutions noted the difference in level of importance HLC places on student learning assessment. Both institutions shared how their student learning assessment models changed as a result of seeking regional accreditation and improved outcomes. Assessment activities are embedded in the daily lives of the institutions since pursuing regional accreditation.

Second, ACICS may want to consider how to assist institutions with implementing innovative and new ideas for their institutions. SMCC shared an example of evaluating their library services and personnel and noted that ACICS' criteria require an on-site librarian. Because of the change in how students utilize library resources and how the institution acquires resources, SMCC is exploring the need for an on-site librarian. SMCC would not be able to explore this idea if they were accredited with ACICS.

Finally, critics have questioned the transparency of accrediting bodies by keeping certain pieces of information confidential (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2007; Eaton, 2012; Gillen, Bennett, and Vedder, 2010; Hall, 2012; Leef and Burris, 2002; Vedder, 2013). HLC publishes "notification of accrediting actions" and AQIP projects on their website. ACICS publishes Council actions such as institutional closings, institutions that have voluntarily withdrawn their accreditation, new institutions that are applying for accreditation and institutions in which their accreditation status is being evaluated. Both accrediting bodies should consider publishing team reports in an effort for greater transparency.

Research on for-profit colleges and universities is growing, but the amount of research on nationally accredited for-profit colleges and universities is limited. Researchers may want to consider including nationally accredited institutions in future quantitative and qualitative research projects. As a representative from ACICS commented,

That we need particularly in confidential research, we need to be robust participants. We need to help inform the policy makers with – through

more information, more objective information, more authoritative, and scholarly information about what the strengths of these institutions are, where they're contributing appropriately and substantially at a community level. And comparing their – and compare their contribution fairly to other parts of the higher education community and let the chips fall where they may. I think in most cases, they would be pleasantly surprised that given the demographics of who they serve, they do as good a job if not a better job than any other institution out there.

The following are additional research questions as a result of this study that might help us better understand the issues presented. How do for-profits accredited across different accrediting bodies balance profit motive and student success? What is the driving motivator for for-profit colleges and universities to seek regional accreditation or change accrediting agencies? With institutions moving to more selective admissions processes to achieve required performance outcomes, what are best practices to ensure student access of underrepresented and underserved student populations? What are the mechanisms to encourage and support for-profit participation in scholarly research?

Summary

Critics of for-profit colleges and universities' claim that profit motive is the primary driver in their institutional goals (Ruch, 2001; Tierney and Hentschke, 2007). Consequently, student success becomes secondary to the focus of for-profit colleges and universities. For-profit colleges and universities are utilizing financial aid dollars for the purposes institutional profit maximization as opposed to helping students succeed. Students leave for-profit institutions without a degree, high debt loads and insufficient skills to repay their student loans. The accrediting bodies become accessories to degrading student success by failing to effectively oversee for-profit colleges and universities. In studying three high performing regionally accredited institutions, we learn that their institutional cultures are focused on their missions of student success not profit motive. Additionally, this research has reinforced Collins and Porras research that these organizations do not exist to "maximize shareholder wealth as the dominant driving force or primary objective" (2002, p. 55). These three institutions are not representative of the entire higher education sector and on-going research needs to continue.

APPENDIX A

University of Pennsylvania Informed Consent Form

**Title of the Research Study: Educational Values of For-Profit College Presidents:
Balancing the Dilemma of Profit Motive and Student Success in Regionally and Nationally
Accredited For-Profit Colleges and Universities**

Protocol Number: 818581

**Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email) Eric Kaplan, Ed.D., 3700 Walnut
Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, 215-573-9404, ejk@upenn.edu**

**Co-investigator: (name, address, phone and email) Kelly Thumm Moore, 1510 Pine View
Court, Darien, IL, 60561, 708-363-6631, kmoore@westwood.edu**

Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email)

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This is not a form of treatment or therapy. It is not supposed to detect a disease or find something wrong. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if decide to participate. The research team is going to talk with you about the study and give you this consent document to read. You do not have to make a decision now; you can take the consent document home and share it with friends, family doctor and family.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to learn more about how for-profit colleges and universities balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success, how accreditation processes are a constructive force or obstacle in this dilemma and if there are other institutional characteristics that play a role in balancing the profit motive and student success dilemma. This dissertation research is to fulfill my degree requirements for the Executive Doctorate in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania.

Why was I asked to participate in the study?

You are being asked to join this study because you are employed by a for-profit regionally or nationally accredited college or university. As a faculty or staff member, you have insight into your institution's practices in a number of areas such as accreditation, institutional culture and decision making processes.

How long will I be in the study?

The study will take place over a period of 3 months. This means for the next three months we will ask you to spend 1 day participating in this study. The session will last approximately 1 hour.

Where will the study take place?

The study will take place that is private and convenient for your interview.

What will I be asked to do?

- *Answer questions posed during the semi-structured interview.*
- *The PI may contact you via telephone after the interview to ask a follow-up or clarifying question.*

What are the risks?

- *There is minimal risk to you for participating in this study. However, should confidentiality be breached, information you share may be made public and could result in embarrassment.*

How will I benefit from the study?

There is no benefit to you. However, your participation could help us understand how for-profit colleges and universities balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success, which can benefit you indirectly. In the future, this may help other institutions improve their operations.

What other choices do I have?

Your alternative to being in the study is to not be in the study.

What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?

You may choose to join the study or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary.

There is no penalty if you choose not to join the research study. You will lose no benefits or advantages that are now coming to you, or would come to you in the future.

When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?

The study is expected to end after all participants have completed all interviews and all the information has been collected. The study may be stopped without your consent for the following reasons:

- The PI feels it is best for your safety and/or health-you will be informed of the reasons why.
- The PI, the sponsor or the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania can stop the study anytime

You have the right to drop out of the research study at anytime during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so.

If you no longer wish to be in the research study, please contact Kelly Moore at kmoore@westwood.edu and take the following steps:

- *In the body of the email, inform Kelly Moore that you no longer wish to participate in the study.*

How will confidentiality be maintained and my privacy be protected?

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the course of this research study will be kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

The audio recordings will be transcribed by a transcription service who has signed a confidentiality agreement. The recordings will be password protected. Written documentation will be kept under lock and key only accessible to this researcher. The IRB at the University of Pennsylvania will have access to the records upon request. A separate database that is

password protected will be created to identify participants and assign a pseudonym that will be used in the dissertation.

Will I have to pay for anything?

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Who can I call with questions or complaints, or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research subject?

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

Signature of Subject

Print Name of Subject

Date

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Interview Matrix for Institutional Leadership Team

(Campus President/Campus Director/Executive Director, Academic Dean/Director of Education, Director of Admissions/Recruitment, Director of Finance or Director of Student Services, Full-time Faculty and Adjunct Faculty)

Institution:

Interviewee Name:

Position:

Interview Date/Time:

Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore how for-profit colleges and universities balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success and to what extent accreditation is a constructive force or obstacle in resolving this dilemma.

Informed Consent Form Request

Permission to Record Interview

Questions for a 60 Minute Individual Interview

Each question will be followed up with probing questions as necessary. Such question may include:

- *What do you mean by (insert phrase)?*
- *Why?*
- *For what reason?*
- *Why do you think that is?*
- *Can you give me an example?*

Warm-up:

1. What is your role at the college/university?
2. How long have you been with your institution?
3. Please describe your current position at college/university.
 - i. What is your path to your current position?
 - ii. How long have you served at (INSTITUTION NAME) and what other capacities have you served the institution?
4. What is the role of your institution in the bigger scheme of higher education?

(RQ1): In what ways do for-profit colleges and universities acknowledge, address, and balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success?

5. I noticed that your mission refers to X. Can you tell me how that works in your institution's strategic planning and improvement processes?
6. Who is your student population?
7. What is important to your institution and who communicates this information?
8. How does your institution define student success?
9. How do you assess a student's learning?
10. What is the process for allocating resources at your campus?
 - a. How does the process impact which departments have priority over others?
11. If you had to make a major change, how would your institution go about it?
 - a. Who is responsible for implementing the change?
12. Describe the balance between the organizational interests of pursuing increased revenue and sustaining academic quality.

13. Please describe a recent significant change your institution has had to make.
 - a. What tension did this change cause among faculty/staff/students at your institution?
 - b. Describe the process the institution went through to make that change.
 - c. Who was responsible for implementing the change?
 - d. What was the outcome of the change that occurred on campus?
 - e. What there any resistance to that change? If so, why do you think that was the case?
14. How does the institution define a successful year?
15. How are the institutions' successes communicated and celebrated?
16. How do you feel XYZ institution balances shareholder interests and student success?
17. Have students ever complained challenging the institution that their profit motives have taken priority over the student experience or the support provided to students? If so, please describe how that situation was managed on the campus as well as by the corporate office.

(RQ2): To what extent is accreditation a constructive force (or an obstacle) in resolving the dilemma of for-profit colleges and universities' profit motive and student success?

(RQ2a): How are the accreditation processes different for regionally and nationally accredited for-profit colleges and universities?

18. How has the role of accreditation impacted what you do on campus?
 - a. What are some examples?
19. What role does the corporate office play in your accreditation process?
20. Describe the process the campus undertook to prepare for your most recent accreditation visit?
 - a. What was your role? What role do faculty, staff, and students play in the accreditation process?
21. How has the self-study been incorporated into daily life at the college?
22. Describe the processes used to continuously improve your institution? What documents, publications or communications are used in disseminating this information?
23. QUESTION FOR HLC SCHOOLS: HLC recently modified their criteria describing how colleges must first serve the public. How does the campus ensure it meets this new criterion? What changes has the institution made?

(RQ3): What other institutional distinctions, such as ownership, locations and highest degree awarded, factor into how for-profit colleges and universities acknowledge, address and balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success?

24. Describe how corporate ownership influences or drives your institution's day-to-day operations?
25. What role does your corporate office play in the strategic planning and improvement efforts at your campus?
26. Describe the balance between campus-led initiatives versus corporate led decisions? What are some of those?
27. What is the process for determining where X institution is located and who makes that decision?
28. What is the process for determining which academic programs are offered and who is involved in that decision making process?

Is there anything that I have not asked that you feel is important for me to know about how XYZ institution acknowledges, addresses or balances the dilemma of profit motive and student success?

Thank you, (insert name of individual) for participating in this interview. I want to assure you that I will treat your responses confidentially.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol for Accrediting Experts (CHEA, HLC and ACICS)

Agency:

Interviewee Name:

Position:

Interview Date/Time:

Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore how for-profit colleges and universities balance the dilemma of profit motive and student success and the role of accreditation and institutional characteristics play in that dilemma.

Informed Consent Form Request

Permission to Record Interview

Questions for a 45-60 Minute Individual Interview

Each question will be followed up with probing questions as necessary. Such questions may include:

- *What do you mean by (insert phrase)?*
 - *For what reason?*
 - *Can you give me an example?*
 - *Can you tell me more about (insert phrase)?*
1. What is your role with [CHEA, HLC OR ACICS] with regard to the accreditation of for profit institutions?
 2. In what ways did your previous professional roles address similar issues?
 3. What is the role of your organization in the bigger scheme of higher education improvement and policy?
 4. What circumstances would prompt your accrediting body to modify its criteria?
 5. ACCREDITING BODY ONLY: In your opinion, what has been the most important criterion change in accreditation the past five years?
 - a. What was the impetus behind the change?
 - b. What has been the reaction from the member institutions?
 - c. What has been the reaction from entities outside the accrediting body or member institutions?
 6. CHEA QUESTION ONLY: In your opinion, what has been the important change the accrediting bodies (HLC/ACICS) have made in the past five years?
 - a. What has been the impetus behind the change?
 - b. What has been the reaction from colleges and universities?
 - c. What has been the reaction from entities outside the accrediting body or member institutions?
 7. ACCREDITING BODY ONLY: What areas of the criteria or the accreditation process, do [your] schools struggle with the most?
 - a. How do you tabulate this information?
 - b. What are your insights as to the causes of this struggle?
 - c. What has the accrediting body done to improve performance in this area?

8. In what ways, if any, should accreditation change? For example: is the self-study still an important aspect of accreditation?
9. How deep within the college/university, should the self-study/AQIP document be developed, read and understood? How does the accrediting body determine this information?
10. How does your organization ensure that self-studies are incorporated into the institution's daily life?
11. To what extent, if at all, do self-studies inform public knowledge of quality higher education?
12. In conducting my site visits, participants have shared that one of the differences between national and regional accreditation is that national accreditation is focused on "how to be a compliant" institution as opposed to being focused on outcomes. How would you respond to this?
13. My original study design was to compare three HLC regionally accredited and three ACICS nationally accredited institutions. In requesting participation, numerous ACICS schools declined to participate in my study as recommended by their legal counsel, which resulted in no nationally accredited institutions participating. What do you think was the rationale for nationally accredited institutions not to participate?
14. One of the criticisms leveled at accreditation has been focused on the lack of transparency by the accrediting bodies. You publish some information on member schools such as (Honor Roll status, accreditation awarded and renewal dates, withdrawal or revocation of accreditation, initial accreditation or candidacy status, stipulations on accreditation status, AQIP projects, for example).
 - a. Do you track what institutional information on your website is searched?
 - b. How do you track this information?
 - c. How and to whom are website traffic reports distributed?
 - d. What does the agency do with this information?
 - e. What are the agency's plans to be more transparent or include more information on your website?
15. How does the accreditation process improve institutional outcomes?
16. How does the accreditation process resolve the dilemma of for-profit colleges and universities' profit motive and student success?
17. Is there anything that I have not asked that you feel is important for me to know?

Thank you, (insert name of individual) for participating in this interview. I want to assure you that I will treat your responses confidentially.

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