Differing Administrator, Faculty, and Staff Perceptions of Organizational Culture as Related to External Accreditation

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There is an inherent tension in the U.S. system of accreditation. Historically, the system has been one of self-regulation (Brittingham, 2009). As access to higher education has grown, however, and the concomitant flow of federal money to colleges and universities has increased, the federal government and the taxpayers it represents have called for more and more external reporting of measures of college quality. Critics of the current system would like more external oversight to create what they have termed variously a “culture of quality” or a “culture of evidence” (Bardo, 2009; Crow, 2009; Kelderman, 2009; Understanding, 2001). The most dissatisfied would like to remove regional accrediting approval as the imprimatur that authorizes federal funds; those critics would delegate the power to authorize spending public funds to some branch of the federal government (Graca, 2009). Defenders of the current system point to the power of self-regulation to establish an ongoing culture of improvement in colleges and universities more effectively than external regulation can achieve (Kelderman, 2009; Oden, 2009). For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that both critics and defenders predicate their arguments for being the better path to achieving educational quality on the belief that it will take transformed organizational cultures in higher education to sustain any real overhaul of educational outcome attainment. This article considers both sides of the accreditation debate and uses Glaser, Zamanou, and Hacker’s (1987) Organizational Culture Survey (OCS) to create a unique data set to explore the question: to what extent does participating in regional accreditation affect perceptions of organizational culture for members of those cultures?

The accreditation climate in the United States is changing. American accreditation evolved as a self-regulatory process to ensure quality in higher education (Understanding, 2001). As Barbara Brittingham’s (2009) historical overview of U.S. accreditation points out, America’s peer-review accreditation process (which focuses on colleges evaluating their own and each others’ performances) reflects American cultural values. She points out the voluntary nature of the system, the use of the organization, the belief in goal setting and attainment, and even the entrepreneurship of the current system are all American values extolled as early as de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America (p. 11). The system also responded over time to changes in access to higher education and increased government funding to colleges and universities. There are six major regional accrediting associations today, each made up of member institutions and governed by representatives from those institutions. Staffs at the accreditation agencies are relatively small with volunteers from member schools doing a tremendous amount of the work of accrediting (McGuire, 2009; Brittingham, 2009). Accreditation offers higher education “a self-regulatory system, relying on member institutions to form, adopt, and adhere to standards and policies” (Brittingham, 2009, p. 20). In theory, accreditation and submission to the approval of regional accrediting agencies is a voluntary process. But, as Thomas Graca (2009) notes, because of the necessity of accreditation to receive federal funding, most colleges and universities have no choice but to participate in the process if they want to remain open.

Because of that financial tie to taxpayer dollars the peer-review, self-regulatory accreditation system in
the United States is under intense scrutiny. The U.S. Congress’ Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (Reauthorization Act) paved the way for greater public access to accreditation reports and more transparency in accreditation decisions (Graca, 2009; McGuire, 2009). The Reauthorization Act also significantly increased colleges’ reporting requirements in the areas of graduation rates, grant aid, and teacher-training programs (Kelderman, 2009). In some ways, accrediting agencies were pleased with the results of the bill given the alternative. In September 2006, a commission appointed by then Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings issued a report entitled “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education.” Among other changes, the Spellings report called for the “transformation of accreditation” (p. 15). At the heart of the report’s criticism of accreditation lay the belief that the current system fails to focus on student learning outcomes but instead values “process, inputs and governance, which perpetuates current models and impedes innovation” (p. 21). The 2008 Reauthorization Act did not expand government oversight of higher education to the levels advocated in the Spellings report, but increased scrutiny by the government is likely if accreditation agencies cannot convince Congress and the larger public that the current system of peer review and self-regulation guarantees an effective use of taxpayer dollars.

To spark the kind of innovations the Spellings commission saw as necessary to maintaining quality higher education amid increasingly global competition, the commission recommended a number of changes including urging “America’s colleges and universities to embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement” (p. 5, emphasis added). Ironically, accrediting agencies claim that very ability to establish a culture of continuous quality improvement as one of the primary benefits of the current system. In September 2006 the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), an umbrella agency that coordinates the efforts of the six regional accrediting commissions, issued “Talking Points” in response to the Spellings report. The points open with ten specific benefits of the current accreditation system and build to the conclusion that additional federal control of accreditation is unnecessary because, as currently configured, accreditation is “[a] highly successful and well-tested system of quality assurance and quality improvement” (CHEA, n.d.). Indeed, organization-wide continuous quality improvement and innovation is central to the missions of each of the regional accreditors. Consider these excerpts from the various regional accrediting agencies’ mission statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excerpt from Mission or Values Statement</th>
<th>Regional Accreditation Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“quality assurance and improvement”</td>
<td>Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“educational improvement”</td>
<td>New England Association of Schools and Colleges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“core values of quality, integrity, innovation”</td>
<td>North Central Association of Colleges and Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“self-regulatory process of quality assurance and institutional improvement”</td>
<td>Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Central to the core mission of each accredditor is the desire to foster ongoing institutional effectiveness through assessment and improvement.

Defenders of self-regulated accreditation often frame their arguments in terms of establishing the right organizational culture as well. Graham, Lyman, & Stow (1995) conducted an exhaustive study of institutional internal assessments for accreditation in response to government pressures in the early 1990’s and contended greater accountability could only be achieved on campuses if they would “nurture a climate of critical self-inquiry” (p. 7). Administrators offer advice to each other on what they need to do if “assessment is to become part of the institution’s culture” (Rodrigues, 2002). Campus leaders explore their role in determining “whether a meaningful assessment culture thrives” (Haviland, 2009). There is no shortage of literature aimed at administrators, faculty, and institutional effectiveness personnel pitching various ways to create a “culture of assessment” that supports accreditation efforts and learning outcomes attainment (see for example Angelo, 2002; Berlanger, 2006; Hill, 2004; Lakos, 2004; Moltz, 2009; Piascik & Bird, 2008; Rothwell & Khera, 2009; Weiner, 2009).

Changing organizational culture, however, is not easy. The sheer volume of “how-to-do-it” articles suggests there is resistance to the “culture of evidence” both internally and externally advocated in the accreditation debate. In response to the increased monitoring authorized in the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act, Bardo (2009) forecasts an end to the old system where colleges and universities would “gear up for a self-study; the accrediting team would visit, the institution would provide final responses, accreditation would be voted; and the institution would ‘return to normal’” (p. 47). He advocates for a sustained “culture of accreditation” to better deal with increased reporting pressures including potentially annual reporting. If institutions would like accreditation to result in “effective, system-wide change instead of only the usual grumbling” Lesa Yawn (2004) insists that the preparation for accreditation be an integral “change-management tool” used to “transform the organization” (p. 50). For accreditation to have what is termed intrinsic value (i.e. value beyond the accrediting agency’s stamp of approval and access to federal student loans and grants), college accreditation leaders are told they must overcome the perception of faculty and staff that accreditation is simply a pro forma hoop through which they must jump every five to ten years (Brittingham, 2009; Oden, 2009; Piascik & Bird, 2008).

Clearly some within higher education resist embracing the accreditation culture. An article in Academe entitled “Accreditation Fatigue” rebukes the never-ending cycle of assessment (one that accreditation culture advocates extol) as an assault on “academic freedom, professional autonomy, and shared governance” (Baez, 2009, p. 55). Writing in The Chronicle of Higher Education faculty member Laurie Fendrich (2007) describes her disillusionment with the accreditation process and ultimately condemns assessment efforts as “bureaucratic baloney” and the province of “second-rate teachers” (B6). Community college philosophy professor Frank Edler (2003) condemns the total quality movement in
higher education as one that makes “systems of education management...more important today than education itself.”

In summary, colleges and universities are under intense pressure to demonstrate their current accreditation system ensures educational attainment and quality. Outside agencies like Congress and the Department of Education want more reporting to ensure there is a culture of evidence. Inside the university accreditation proponents argue that the best response to these outside critics is a sustained culture of assessment permeating all levels of the institution; there are conferences and publications dedicated to achieving those cultures. But there is some evidence that not all constituencies in higher education are embracing the effort.

While a recent study of European business schools examined the relationship between accreditation and effectiveness and organizational culture (Lejeune & Vas, 2009), this study is the first to take an empirical approach to examining how university-wide accreditation is related to perceptions of organizational culture in U.S. colleges and universities. Organizational culture, as demonstrated above, is a term that both sides of this debate have employed. Understanding that term, and the two dominant approaches to studying organizational culture, is imperative to helping colleges and universities and the agencies that fund them begin to find common ground in this debate.

Organizational culture has been defined as an organization’s shared beliefs and values (Harris, 1990), the “social glue” that holds a group together (Baker, 1980, p. or even simply “the way things get done around here” (Goffee & Jones, 1998, p. 9). Researchers into organizational culture generally take one of two approaches (Smircich, 1983): the functionalist approach is concerned with identifying the elements that constitute organizational culture for the purpose of controlling those elements to achieve certain ends. The interpretivist approach focuses on understanding the shared meanings of an organization and how those meanings come to be (Bormann, 1983). The review of the literature on creating a culture of assessment or accreditation conducted for the present study reveals that most authors writing in this area are college presidents or accreditation leaders, not organizational culture scholars. As a result, they have used the term “organizational culture” in a rather loose way. Moreover, their approach has been decidedly functionalist. That is, without rigorously evaluating the cultures of various higher education institutions as an interpretivist would, they have jumped right into offering advice for changing existing cultures, as if doing so were wholly within the power of senior campus leadership. As organizational theorists Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo put it, however, “culture is not something an organization has; a culture is something an organization is” (p. 146). Changing campus culture is more complex than simply instituting new policies (Atherton, 2002; Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Denison, 1990; Jaskyte & Dressler, 2005). If either the external reforms or the standard practices of accreditation are to have an effect on student achievement of learning outcomes, organizational communication theory posits that such effect will take place not in meticulous measurement of myriad metrics but through the transformation of organizational culture (Hodges & Hernandez, 1999; McLean, 2005).

So what is a culture of accreditation? Six factors emerge as salient to the current analysis. One theme that emerges in the culture of quality literature surrounding accreditation in higher education is the necessity for (1.) teamwork and buy-in for accreditation to reach its full organizational potential (Brittingham, 2009; Gose, 2002; Oden, 2009; Piascik & Bird, 2008; Rodrigues, 2002; Weiner, 2009). Shera’s (2008) case study of how one department at the University of Toronto successfully created a
culture of research found more than just effective leadership was needed; it takes a team: “Creating a coalition for change requires consultation and collaboration with faculty members, students, and community partners” (p. 280).

Related to teamwork is the idea that change leaders must have strong (2.) morale and quality relationships with members at all levels of the organization. They must be able to motivate while treating organization members fairly in an atmosphere of trust. There must be good (3.) information flow to and from all parts of the institution concerning the mission, the vision, and the activities of other units within the college or university (GAO, 1992; Shera, 2008). Indeed, a review of all six regional accrediting agencies’ criteria for accreditation finds each agency requires (4.) involvement from all college or university constituents (e.g. faculty, staff, students, alumni, board members, and community members) in the self-assessment process. Central to achieving a quality culture is “[a]n inclusive process that allows participants to assess the current situation and develop a feasible plan for change” (Shera, 2008, p. 280). Elman (1994) sees the freedom for faculty to consider the organization through the lenses of their own expertise in an honest and open fashion as a foundational requirement of a quality accreditation culture.

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools experimented with an alternative form of accreditation designed expressly to cultivate an accreditation culture on participating campuses. The Academic Quality Improvement Project focused on creating a total quality culture through (5.) effective meetings, involvement at all levels and within all units, and through (6.) effective supervision of the process and day-to-day activities (Goes, 2002). These six elements are touted as the path to establishing the kind of organizational culture accreditors and their defenders see as integral to learning outcomes attainment and institutional quality.

Given the volume of literature by college presidents on overcoming faculty resistance and creating “buy-in” to a culture of accreditation, it seems reasonable to attempt to verify empirically if faculty, staff, and administrators experience their organizations’ cultures in similar ways. Accordingly, research question one is offered.

RQ1: Are there significant differences in perceptions of organizational culture depending on institutional role?

A second area of analysis is what this author terms the “gear up and forget it” question. A number of voices in the culture of accreditation conversation make reference to a phenomenon where assessment is viewed as a special occasion event trotted out to write a self-study, secure reaffirmation, and placed on a shelf to be forgotten until the next site visit in a decade (e.g. Gose, 2002). If critics of accreditation’s failure to establish a culture of real quality improvement are correct, organizations that are in the midst of a reaffirmation effort should experience culture differently than those for whom the last accreditation visit is a distant memory and the next visit a future event still years away. Accordingly, research question two asks:

RQ2: Do perceptions of organizational culture vary with temporal proximity to the process?

Finally, given the efforts to involve every constituency on campus in the continuous quality culture advocated by external forces and accreditation leaders alike, a successful culture of accreditation should reach all members of the college or university without regard to role in the formal accreditation
process. Accreditation steering committee leaders should perceive the organization in similar ways to members and non-members of the accreditation effort. Research question three addresses perceptions of organizational culture as they relate to one’s role in the on-campus accreditation efforts.

**RQ3:** Do perceptions of organizational culture vary with involvement with the accreditation process?

**Methodology**

To explore the research questions above, this study focused on a single accrediting agency, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS). A single accreditor was selected to prevent any bias that might be caused by being under the auspices of different accrediting agencies from interacting with dependent variables. SACS provides a list on its website of all member schools and the dates of their most recent and next-scheduled site visits (SACS, 2007). Using university faculty development grant funds the researcher was able to employ student workers to gather email addresses from the websites of thirty-eight colleges and universities divided into two cohorts according to their proximity to the SACS reaffirmation process. Cohort one was randomly selected using nth sampling from schools whose reaffirmation visit took place that year (2008). Cohort two was randomly selected using nth sampling from schools whose reaffirmation visit would take place in five years (2013). Accreditation experts have argued that “to determine whether an assessment culture exists” researchers must “look at the attitudes and behaviors of individuals” within institutions (Weiner, 2009). Accordingly, student workers collected email addresses of SACS steering committee members along with randomly selected email addresses of faculty from universally occurring departments (mathematics, English, history, biology, and business departments), staff in human resources and student affairs, and administrators within each selected college or university.

A total of 1,369 emails were collected. Eighty proved undeliverable, leaving a total of 1,289 usable addresses. These addresses were used to contact potential respondents with an email directing them to a web survey. A follow-up email was sent in one week. A total of 177 people responded to the web survey creating a response rate of 13.7%. While the response rate is not as high as traditional survey methodologies generally yield, it is not unusual for an Internet survey (Sheehan, 2001) and given the use of college WebPages (which are slow to be updated in many instances) to generate the sampling frame, it is possible that more than the eighty emails that were flagged as undeliverable were not received making the actual response rate somewhat higher.

An analysis of the respondents (see Table 1) showed the demographics of the sample mirrored the make-up of U.S. colleges and universities: there were more men (57%) than women (43%). There was a distribution of institutional roles with faculty (52%) making up a larger portion of the sample than administrators (33%) and staff (14%). There was some skew toward those who played a major leadership role (30%) in their campus accreditation process perhaps reflecting more willingness to take a survey on accreditation if running a self-study effort had been a salient area of interest in the first place. Just as many respondents, however, reported participating minimally (30%) in the accreditation process. Eighteen percent of respondents were members of their college’s accreditation steering team – a percentage that may be a little higher than the typical percentage of campus that participates in a steering committee, but the sample reflects the relative scarcity of those positions with most respondents (82%) indicating they did not participate in a steering committee.
The online survey consisted of Glaser, Zamanou, and Hacker’s (1987) 36-item Likert-type Organizational Culture Survey (OCS) accompanied by appropriate demographic questions. Each item offered a statement (e.g. “People I work with are good listeners.”) scored on a 5-point scale (from 1 = “to a very little extent” to 5 = “to a very great extent”). Higher scores reflected more favorable perceptions of organizational culture. The OCS is a validity-tested instrument that asks about the six elements of a quality organizational culture described in the literature review above. Teamwork (eight items) measured perceptions of honesty, directness, openness to criticism, conflict resolution, considerateness, confrontation of problems, listening, and concern for each other. Climate-Morale (seven items) measured perceptions of quality of working relationships, motivation, respect, fairness, feeling like family, atmosphere, and desire to be productive. Information flow (four items) measured perceptions of receiving enough information to understand the big picture, why changes are made, what is happening in other areas of the organization, and how to do one’s job well. Involvement (four items) measured perceptions that one has a say in decisions, and whether one is asked suggestions about doing jobs better. It also measured perceptions that ideas from employees at every level are valued and that “my opinion counts.” Supervision (eight items) measured perceptions of supervisors’ success at making job requirements clear, praising work well done, taking criticism, delegating responsibility, being approachable, giving criticism positively, being a good listener, and offering feedback. Finally, Meetings measured perceptions of the effectiveness of organizational meetings including whether decisions at meetings were put into action, everyone took part in discussions, discussions stay on track, time at meetings is well spent, and meetings effectively tap the creative potential of those present.

Table 1 shows the averages for each factor of organizational culture for the entire sample. Respondents rated organizational teamwork (3.7) and effective supervision (3.7) highest. They rated effectiveness of meetings (3.2) lowest.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of the sample</th>
<th>Number Responding</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement in Accreditation Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Employed Here At Time</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely Uninvolved</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated Minimally</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated Actively</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Leadership Role</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Member of Accreditation Steering Team</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>81.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Culture Factor</th>
<th>Number Rating All Items in Factor</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate-Morale</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Flow</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

RQ₁: Respondents indicated significant differences in their perception of organizational culture depending on their institutional role.
One-way ANOVAs were used to explore the relationship between job role and perceptions of organizational culture at accredited colleges and universities. As Table 2 indicates, perceptions of four areas of organizational culture differed significantly across the three types of positions in the sample. Administrators and staff reported more positive feelings than their faculty counterparts in

Climate-Morale: F (3, 158) = 3.66, p = .014;

Information Flow: F (3, 157) = 7.27, p = .000;

Involvement: F (3, 157) = 10.3, p = .000, and

Meetings: F (3, 158) = 3.384, p = .02.

Administrators were consistently the most positive in their evaluation of each element of organizational culture. Faculty members were consistently the least positive.

RQ2: Temporal proximity to an accreditation site visit was only significantly related to one aspect of organizational culture perceptions: meeting effectiveness.

Two different measures of the relationship between years until a SACS team was due on campus revealed little to no influence on perceptions of organizational culture. A correlation of each of the six aspects of organizational culture and reported years until the next on-campus reaffirmation visit from an accrediting agency revealed no statistically significant relationships. Conducting a t-test of differences on the six variables using temporal distance (visit within the year versus visit five years away) as the grouping variable confirmed this finding. While respondents at colleges with site visits five years away reported greater levels of satisfaction on every measure of organizational culture, as Table 3 shows, the only statistically significant difference in the two groups’ perceptions of organizational culture occurred in perceptions of the utility of meetings t(160) = -2.25, p < .05. Interestingly, respondents at schools for whom an accreditation site visit was imminent expressed less conviction that time at meetings is time well spent (M=3.4) than those for whom the visit was five years away (M=3.1).

RQ3: Perceptions of organizational culture vary significantly with involvement in the accreditation process.

One-way ANOVAs were used to analyze perceptions of organizational culture by five potential levels of involvement in the on-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teamwork</th>
<th>Climate-Morale</th>
<th>Information Flow</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Supervision</th>
<th>Meetings*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means on a 5 point scale with higher values showing greater satisfaction. *p<.001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Culture Variable</th>
<th>Mean score for Institutions Expecting a Site Visit within the Year</th>
<th>Mean score for Institutions with a Site Visit 5 years away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate-Morale</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Flow</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings*</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means on a 5 point scale with higher values showing greater satisfaction. *p<.05
campus accreditation process including:

1. Not employed here at the time,
2. Completely uninvolved,
3. Participated minimally,
4. Participated actively, and
5. Had a major leadership role.

As Table 4 illustrates, there were statistically significant differences in perceptions of each of the six organizational culture variables based on level of involvement with the accreditation process: Teamwork: F (4, 160) = 3.24; Climate-Morale: F (4, 158) = 3.08; Information Flow: F (4, 157) = 5.4; Involvement: F (4, 157) = 4.77; Supervision: F (4, 157) = 4.25, and Meetings: F (4, 158) = 3.95.

If one conceptualizes the categories of involvement as an ordinal variable that can be scaled (as the Likert scale typically is) from least involved to most involved, Figures 1 and 2 reveal an interesting curvilinear relationship between level of involvement and satisfaction with organizational culture. Not too surprisingly, those respondents reporting major leadership roles in the accreditation process are most positive about each aspect of organizational culture. Interestingly though, respondents who were not employed at institutions at the time of accreditation or who were only minimally involved report the next most satisfaction with organizational culture. Those participating actively and minimally are the least pleased with the various aspects of their organizational cultures in most categories.

Conducting a t-test using membership on an accreditation steering committee as the grouping variable yielded similar results. As Table 5 shows, steering committee members reported greater satisfaction with information flow, t(157) = -3.19, p = .002, involvement, t(157) = -2.37, p = .019, and supervisor abilities, t(157) = -2.535, p = .012, than their non-steering committee counterparts.

Discussion
The results of this study indicate institutional role and involvement in accreditation processes influence perceptions of organizational culture while temporal proximity to a reaffirmation site visit does not. As Table 2 highlights, administrators are more satisfied than staff and, especially, than faculty when rating organization climate (e.g. motivation, respect, fairness), information flow (e.g. knowing enough to do one’s job, understanding other areas), involvement in decisions, and utility of meetings (e.g. enacting decisions, tapping creative potential of those present). These findings suggest institutional role is an important variable to consider in any effort to affect organizational culture through accreditation buy-in.

Involvement in accreditation processes affected perceptions of all six aspects of organizational culture. Not surprisingly, accreditation leaders (operationalized as steering committee members) rated every aspect of organizational culture higher than those personnel not on the steering committee with statistically significant differences in those variables most related to information richness (e.g. information flow, perceptions of involvement, and satisfaction with supervision). It is probable that leaders of an accreditation effort receive more information, are more highly involved, and are, in fact, in supervisory roles more than their non-committee counterparts. They may be limited in their abilities to adjust others’ perceptions of these organizational culture variables because they experience them so differently. A review of Table 3 and Figures 1 and 2 shows an interesting and somewhat unexpected finding related to accreditation involvement and culture. While personnel leading the accreditation process are happiest with their organizational cultures, the next happiest personnel are those who were not employed at the organization during the reaffirmation of accreditation followed closely by the uninvolved. Least satisfied are the two groups reporting active and minimal involvement. Reasons for this finding can only be speculated about from the current data. It is possible that leaders feel more in control of their organizational culture and thus rate it more highly. It is possible leaders seek out and/or receive leadership positions because of their positive view of the organization in the first place. It may be that those who were disconnected from the accreditation experience entirely are too new or tangential to the organization to experience frustrations more common to the minimally and actively involved who may see problems but lack the leadership roles to address them. To fully understand the relationship between involvement in reaffirmation/steering committee work and organizational culture, future studies should employ an interview based qualitative design.

The most interesting non-finding of the present study was the general lack of a relationship between amount of time from the site visit and organizational culture. If the defenders of the current U.S. system are correct in asserting that accreditation is the best way to create a culture of continuous assessment
and improvement, one would expect to see some relationship between going through accreditation reaffirmation and perceptions of organizational culture. The current study found only one measure of culture related to temporal proximity of a site visit: perceptions of the utility of meetings. Interestingly, those closest to a site visit rated this aspect of organizational culture lower than those for whom the next site visit was five years away. It is possible that this rating represents a kind of meeting fatigue. As campuses prepare for reaffirmation, committees and subcommittees are inaugurated that do not usually operate and regular committees bring work to fruition and produce reports as part of the accreditation effort. It is possible that the additional meetings in reality and/or in perception do not strike personnel as affording everyone the opportunity to be included in discussions, to tap creative potential, to result in decisions being enacted, or to be time well spent. The general lack of a relationship between temporal proximity to a site visit and positive perceptions of organizational culture could happen because accreditation culture is so embedded in colleges and universities that reaffirmation visits do not result in changed behaviors: the organization already has the culture of accreditation promoted by the many accreditation advocates writing today. However, given the volume of literature dedicated to developing these cultures and shifting away from the practice of gearing up for accreditation and then returning to “business as usual” this explanation seems unlikely. A more parsimonious explanation is that preparation for the site visit does not translate into an organization-wide change in culture.

As the first empirical study of the relationship between accreditation and perceptions of organizational culture at U.S. colleges and universities, the results of this study suggest lines of practical action for higher education administrators, faculty, and program directors. Accreditation will continue to be a major catalyst for college and university planning for the foreseeable future. If college administrators take seriously the challenge of creating faculty “buy in” to strategic planning and accreditation-based assessments, they need to address gaps in their organizational culture.

Faculty need a voice in crafting what they perceive to be a healthy climate, effective information flow, useful meetings, and appropriate levels of involvement. Faculty, too, bear some burden here. They cannot sit on the sidelines of university and college administration and then bemoan the culture. These findings seem to indicate that very high-end involvement yields some satisfaction with the organizational culture, but simply being asked to participate (actively or minimally) in the process by those who lead drives up frustration. This suggests that, while leaders clearly see the benefit of accreditation-driven self-assessment, the faculty and staff asked to execute those assessments do not see their utility. It may be that more useful assessments need to be made. It may be that the improvements that should stem from the assessments are not readily apparent to those engaged in the process. Ferreting out the source of the discontentment is an area for future study. In the meanwhile, campus leaders can begin to build on these findings by promoting conversations about the accreditation process – encouraging administrators to listen to faculty concerns about the organizational culture created in the accreditation process and encouraging faculty to listen to administrators about the importance of accreditation to more than just federal funding – but to the quality of day-to-day processes on campus.

References


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