

**THE IMPACT OF ACCREDITATION ON INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT OF
STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES: A CASE STUDY OF HISTORICALLY
BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

The accreditation of an institution is one of the most important functions provided by accrediting agencies. All institutions must experience the accreditation process in order to be accountable. Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are challenged by accrediting agencies. However, HBCUs have a legacy of creating great leaders who have contributed talents and ideas that generate a significant impact on the American society.

The purpose of this study was to explore accreditation problems involving four HBCUs and to evaluate the strategies they used in solving these problems. Emphasis is placed on the management of academic programs and the improvement of student learning outcomes and assessment. This study also embarked upon the mission statement that fosters lifelong learning and academic excellence designed to produce intellectually prepared students. A successful student learning outcomes and assessment program was developed to prepare students for career choices and to improve retention and graduation rates. HBCUs must raise expectations for students to graduate so they can fulfill the mission of the institution and comply with accreditation standards.

This study was embedded in qualitative research inquiry using institutional documents, observations, and the interviewing of 39 participants as a means of gathering data. Each participant explained their role, and the strategies and procedures used during the accreditation process. Eight categories emerged from the factors involved in contributing to the reaffirmation of accreditation. Each institution also

developed shared goals, common themes, and core expectations. All four HBCUs were awarded reaffirmation by either the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC, or SACS) or the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS).

The conclusions and implications of this study revealed that efforts should be made to identify effective and robust strategies that HBCUs can adopt to boost student motivation and enhance student learning outcomes and assessment. These strategies can enhance student learning and improve the validity of outcomes assessment. The results will inform HBCUs of the need for further research in the planning and preparation stages of the accreditation process.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Mrs. Pamela Shelton Lewis and Mr. Donald Ray Lewis. I would also like to offer a special dedication to the memory of my late grandparents, Mrs. Versie Knighton Shelton, Mr. Felix Louis Shelton, Sr., Mrs. Ruth Anna Lewis and Mr. Lawrence Lewis, Sr. The love, support, encouragement, and inspiration from my parents and grandparents has enabled me to pursue this doctoral degree.

This doctoral degree is considered as a special tribute to my maternal grandmother, Mrs. Versie Knighton Shelton, who supported me throughout my childhood. She was the only grandparent that was still living and able to see me enter Texas A&M University. Her love, encouragement, discipline, motivation and prayers will always be a lasting memory.

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University. Unfortunately, Dr. Carter passed away in August of 2017. He served as a great mentor for me, because with his assistance I was able to enter all four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). His expertise and encouragement influenced the gatekeepers to let me enter their institutions.

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I feel very jubilant and excited over my success, because I am the second member of my family to earn a doctoral degree. Therefore, I will now close the pages of my dissertation, and look forward to a new beginning in the competitive world of work experience.

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Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professors Vicente M. Lechuga, and Christine A. Stanley of the Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University, Professor Charles R. Conrad of the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University, and Professor Fred A. Bonner, II of the MACH-III Center at Prairie View A&M University.

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NOMENCLATURE

ACADEMY	Achievement in College Algebra During the Matriculation Year
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation
CLA	Collegiate Learning Assessment
HBCU	Historically Black College and University
IAIP	Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan
MAPP	Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress
QEP	Quality Enhancement Plan
SACS	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
SACSCOC	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
SEF	Southern Education Foundation
TRACS	Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

The process of accreditation review of colleges and universities serves two primary functions in the United States: quality assurance and continual improvement. The experienced educators who voluntarily serve on accreditation teams apply common standards of quality that serve students and meet public accountability expectations and offer suggestions and recommendations for institutional consideration and improvement. In the last decade, regional accreditation commissions and national professional and specialized accreditation agencies have increasingly focused on student learning results and institutional improvement. There has been a corresponding shift in focus from institutional resources, structures, and inputs as the primary indicators of institutional quality, toward increased emphasis on student learning results, which is appropriate to the degree level and mission of the institution (Griego, 2005).

Student learning outcomes are rapidly taking center stage as the principal gauge of higher education's effectiveness. Employers and elected officials have never been clearer in their demand that the graduates of America's colleges and universities should possess an increasingly specific set of higher order literacies and communications skills (Ewell, 2001). Colleges and universities are designed to help students learn, progress, and complete a degree that will prepare them for successful employment. While learning

This dissertation follows the style of the *Journal of Higher Education*.

outcomes for courses should be the first priority of accountability, states can also hold institutions accountable for adopting practices that, in turn, lead to desirable student outcomes. Focusing on these areas has the added benefit of providing guidance for improvement, by helping colleges understand how to better serve their students. Accountability systems should not simply point out where universities are falling short; they should also help them to become more accountable in serving their students (Aldeman & Carey, 2009).

Accrediting Organizations

Accrediting organizations want institutions to be accountable. Therefore, they have responded to the growing salience of learning outcomes in a variety of ways. The initial accreditation of an institution is one of the most important functions provided by accrediting agencies. The accreditor provides a teaching/consulting role as the institution makes the necessary changes to comply with accreditation standards that are new to the institution. Accreditation is considered a privilege. After it is granted, the institution is required to comply with various processes to maintain the level of quality that justified the initial accreditation (Ewell, 2001). Accreditation in the United States is more than 100 years old, emerging from concerns to protect public health and safety and to serve the public interest. Accreditation is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations that review thousands of programs in a wide range of professions at colleges and universities in all 50 states (Eaton, 2008). There are three types of accrediting agencies. They are: regional, national, and specialized agencies (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002).

In the United States, the accreditation process is governed by six regional organizations. The six regional accrediting organizations are:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
The Higher Learning Commission (NCA-HLC)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission
on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities
(WASC-ACSCU) (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2011).

Since black colleges and universities are found almost exclusively in the South, most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are beholden to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) for official endorsement. SACS has recently been the most active of the regional associations in its public sanctioning of institutions (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, Tudico, and Schmid, 2007).

The Black College and University Act defines an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) as one that existed before 1964 with a historic and contemporary mission of educating blacks while being open to all. An HBCU must either have earned accreditation from a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association or be making reasonable progress toward accreditation (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

Student learning is a fundamental component of the mission of institutions of higher education, and accrediting agencies consider assessment to be an essential component of institutional effectiveness (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2005). Student learning outcomes are commonly defined as changes or consequences occurring as a result of enrollment in an educational institution and involvement in its programs. Whereas, assessment is the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development (Lubinescu, Ratcliff & Gaffney, 2001).

Learning-outcomes assessments have been a long time coming and are, in many ways, a welcome and necessary change (Wellman, 2000). Numerous national meetings, books and articles, workshops, and speeches have addressed it. All of the regional accrediting agencies have incorporated some level of effectiveness or student learning outcomes assessment activities into their criteria for accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation. In addition, a majority of the states have also mandated some form of effectiveness assessment activity (Erwin, 1991). Thus, unlike many initiatives and reforms in higher education that tend to rise up and then disappear relatively quickly, the assessment movement seems to be gaining rather than losing strength (Seybert, 2002).

Most accrediting agencies require institutions or programs to examine student achievement or "institutional effectiveness" as part of their self-study and review process, usually in the form of some kind of "assessment." For accreditation purposes, the most common meaning of assessment refers to the collection and use of aggregated

data about student attainment to examine the degree to which program or institution-level learning goals are being achieved. But the term assessment is also commonly used to describe the processes used to certify individual students or even, in some cases, to award grades (Ewell, 2001).

The *assessment of student learning outcomes* is also used for the purposes of judging (and improving) overall instructional performance (Ewell, 2001). From students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum (Ramsden, 1992). Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. If you really want to change student learning, then change the methods of assessment (Ramsden, 1992). Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been trying to change their methods of assessment, because they have not been able to achieve the learning goals that were established for the university.

Overview of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are usually challenged through various assessment criteria while learning new skills. Jones (2010) pointed out that the study of general education assessment is important at HBCUs as well as other universities. The role that HBCUs have served in American higher education is based on the success of college graduates. Jones (2010) stated that many of our nation's leaders, entrepreneurs, engineers, physicians, dentists, and teachers have reached their levels of success because of the educational opportunities they received at HBCUs.

Moreover, HBCUs have a legacy of developing leaders who have a significant impact on American society, including Nobel Prize laureates; Pulitzer Prize winners, Tony and Academy Award nominees and winners, business innovators, social justice advocates, government officials and military commanders. Nearly 40 percent of the members of the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus obtained a degree from an HBCU (Richards & Awokoya, 2012).

Even though there are many opportunities for students at HBCUs, the accreditation process has been long and difficult. It is hard to imagine how a college would flourish without being accredited. Both reputation and benefits are tied to successfully navigating the accreditation process. Accreditation has been tied to federal financial aid since the passage in 1952 of the Readjustment Assistance Act. Unaccredited institutions are not eligible to award federal and state student aid, including veterans' benefits, loans and grants (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, Tudico, & Schmid, 2007). Today, accreditation is very important to all degree-granting colleges and universities. Prospective students want to know if they are enrolling in an accredited institution. They want to know if the degree they earn will be recognized and valued by employers, other academic institutions and society in general (Alstete, 2007).

Many people have labeled HBCUs as inferior even though they are responsible for educating the majority of the African American middle class (Gasman, 2010). Most Black colleges take in students when Traditional White Institutions (TWIs) would not take them, with their abysmal grade scores and poor preparation (Collins, 1986). This means that students, too, have an obligation to work twice as hard to master those skills

that they have not already been taught. This also means that many of them will prove that they can become great scholars and contributors to the world (Collins, 1986).

Black colleges in particular have been tapping the potential of young people. Surrounded by a positive and supportive faculty, students at these schools acquire the discipline and determination they need to take them as far as their talents will allow. There is no ceiling on achievement in this environment; students are trained to fully express all of their abilities (Canady, 1986).

TRIO Programs for Student Learning

HBCUs are also well known for the opportunities they provide to students who come from educational and economically disadvantaged circumstances. In doing so, these institutions work hard to provide these students with additional support, guidance, and mentoring that will improve their opportunities to get into and succeed in college. For example, the federal government has long supported increased opportunity for these populations through the federally funded TRIO programs. These programs, authorized under the Higher Education Act, provide a continuum of services from pre-college to pre-graduate level study for the nation's low-income, first-generation, and disabled students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

TRIO allows these students to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013). By the late 1960's, the term "TRIO" was coined to describe three federal programs. They are Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services (SSS) (Office of

Postsecondary Education, 2011c). The term “TRIO” stands for the number three, which means it is not an acronym (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Upward Bound program emerged out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 in response to the administration’s War on Poverty (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011a). The purpose of the Upward Bound Program is to increase the motivation and skills of students so that they can complete a program of secondary education and enter in a program of postsecondary education (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011a). Upward Bound now has a special program for math and science to address the need for a specific learning instruction in the fields of mathematics and science. Also, there’s a Veterans Upward Bound Program which was organized to serve Vietnam veterans and other veterans (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011b).

Talent Search which is commonly known today as Educational Talent Search is another outreach program that was created in 1965 (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011c). This program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to students and encourages them to graduate from high school and continue on to complete their postsecondary education. The program publicizes the availability of financial aid and assists participants with the postsecondary application process (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2014b).

In 1968, Student Support Services (SSS), which was originally known as Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, was authorized by the Higher Education Amendments and became the third in a series of educational opportunity programs (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2014a). The purpose of this program is to help

students stay in college until they earn a college degree. Student Support Services provide academic tutoring, which may include instruction in reading, writing, study skills, mathematics, science, and other subjects. This program also offers information on career options and exposure to cultural events and academic programs that are not usually available (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2014a).

TRIO now includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013). According to the Council for Opportunity in Education, nearly three quarters of all HBCUs have TRIO programs, serving nearly 70,000 students. This compared to less than one quarter of all other colleges and universities. The more than \$ 70 million in support provided by these programs to serve students at HBCUs goes a long way toward increasing the odds of student success than students who do not have the benefit of these programs. Also, as part of TRIO, the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Post-Baccalaureate Achievement program is designed to encourage low-income students and minority undergraduates to consider careers in college teaching as well as prepare for doctoral study (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

Few take note that HBCUs have been an attractive option not only to African Americans but also to students from other diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds, including international students. For the past several decades, African American students have constituted approximately 80 percent of the total student enrollment, while the remaining 20 percent have reflected a diverse population. As

long as hundreds of thousands of students continue to seek out these institutions, HBCUs have a responsibility to serve them in ways that contribute to their intellectual, social and emotional development, and that help to prepare them for success after graduation (Richards & Awokoya, 2012).

All four of the HBCUs in my research study have TRIO programs as part of their curriculum. Many students have found success through the TRIO programs, because it has helped them to improve their assessment and learning skills. Students have learned to enhance their creative thinking skills, expand their ability to communicate effectively, and learn good study habits (Thomas Henson University, 2014). The Student Support Services (SSS) are targeted toward students who are at risk of becoming “discouraged learners” because of basic skills deficiencies. If a student is accepted to participate in the Student Support Services Program, the candidate will be monitored from the time of enrollment to the date of graduation according to an individualized academic support plan grounded in the student’s degree and graduation plans (Simon Wiltz College, 2012a).

At HBCUs, the mission of Student Support Services (SSS) is to provide educational and support services for students to excel academically and acquire leadership skills needed for collegiate, government and civic organizations. The goal is also to provide amenities for students to increase the retention and graduation rates at each college or university. There are also resources that are provided to enhance personal skills and academic competencies (Thomas Henson University, 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education is committed to ongoing improvement in managing its programs so as to improve the educational outcomes of student learning. In its efforts to strengthen the work of its programs, the U.S. department provides grantees, key stakeholders, and the public with data on programs' performance and with contextual information to encourage reflection, action, and collaboration (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Problem Statement

This research seeks to address the problems and the need for managing student learning outcomes in academic programs at four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that are affiliated with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), or the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS). This study is focused on the strategies and procedures used in managing problems that occurred in assessing student learning outcomes through university accreditation among academic levels.

The collective mission of HBCUs has been to traditionally accept students who otherwise would not have gone to college because of economic circumstances. Once enrolled, it is essential that all students work to their greatest potential in order to meet the requirements of graduation. For students to achieve this, the institution must identify expected outcomes for its educational programs. The institution must also assess whether it achieves these outcomes and provide evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results (Jackson & Johnson, 2007).

The evidence that students have attained college-level competencies is demonstrated in the students' successful completion of individual courses. However, if a special plan has not been developed to assess student achievement, then the graduation rate will be low (Jackson & Johnson, 2007). Degree completion is often used by policymakers as well as students and their families in making public and private decisions about HBCUs. Completing a baccalaureate degree is not only considered an indicator of academic success, but also a vehicle to professional advancement and a symbol of membership in the American middle class. Among minority students in particular, college degree completion is a highly valued goal, especially because it is often viewed as the only hope and means for upward social mobility (Kim & Conrad, 2006).

In the face of maintaining accreditation, HBCU opponents would prefer to see HBCUs as "a four-year community college." However, many Historically Black Colleges are gaining more attention by moving to the status of becoming four-year universities rather than four-year colleges. Proponents of HBCUs are pleased with the increase of Historically Black Colleges transitioning into universities and offering graduate level programs for students. Along with offering baccalaureate degrees and graduate degrees, HBCUs can further sustain their excellence through curricula that prepare students for social, political, and economic platforms within society, offering competitive salaries for faculty, and advancing opportunities for students through technology (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Davis, 2012).

Given the nature of the issues HBCUs are facing with regard to accreditation, this study addressed the following questions:

Research Questions

1. How do HBCUs interpret the types of student learning outcomes that meet regional accrediting agency standards?
 - a. What is a “Student Learning Outcome?”
 - b. What is “Assessment” in relation to Student Learning Outcomes?
2. What are the strategies that the HBCUs under examination currently use to manage academic programs in order to meet student learning outcomes that are compatible with regional accreditation standards?
3. What approaches can HBCUs implement to successfully meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the accreditation problems of four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and evaluate the strategies and procedures used in solving these problems. The focus was on the management of academic programs and the improvement of assessment and student learning outcomes on the collegiate level.

The value of a college education is not primarily economic. The experience, skills, and knowledge students develop through higher education contribute to their personal development and promote their engagement in a democratic society. Awarding more degrees will only be meaningful if those degrees reflect a high level of student accomplishment. Persistence and learning are linked. Paying close attention to student

engagement in learning and learning outcomes will likely help students remain enrolled and graduate (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012).

The primary responsibility for assessing and improving student learning falls on colleges and universities. Those granting educational credentials must ensure that students have developed the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that prepare them for work, life, and responsible citizenship. U.S. higher education must focus on both quantity and quality – increasing graduation rates and the learning represented in the degree (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012).

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1988) stated that the outcomes of accreditation are achieved through rigorous internal and external review processes which the institution is evaluated against a common set of standards. These standards have been met in the area of student learning outcomes and assessment at the four institutions.

Analyzing Four Historically Black Colleges and Universities

In this study, John Aaron College, Thomas Henson University, and David Kemmer University [pseudonyms] are three HBCUs that have had accreditation problems with student assessment and learning outcomes. In spite of assessment problems, Simon Wiltz College [pseudonym] has been able to constantly maintain the standards of accreditation that are affiliated with SACS. Therefore, this study analyzed current learning outcomes, and determined why the in-class assessment and final grade was not enough to demonstrate quality. Students must be able to use critical thinking

skills in order to achieve the quality of learning that is required by a college or university.

This dissertation placed a great deal of emphasis on the management and supervision of academic programs and the various strategies that were implemented. Therefore, I used the case study approach to do a comparative study that revealed the amount of progress made at each institution over the last few years in assessment and student learning outcomes. It is evident that an institution must establish clear learning goals that can be evaluated in order for students to be successful. Assessment will not only demonstrate quality and excellence, but it will also identify areas needing attention and support (Jackson & Johnson, 2007).

This study reviewed the academic areas that were weak and in need of support and development. I contacted the Presidents, Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs, Deans, Department Heads, other administrators, faculty and staff that were involved in compiling the Self-Study Report for the reaffirmation of accreditation. I reviewed the learning goals, the assessment methods and the assessment data collected from the interviews, school reports, and the websites of the four institutions. I also reviewed the assessment methods that worked and those that didn't work. It is essential to know that assessment methods do not have to be costly, but they do have to be effective in measuring success.

Some specific issues that are addressed in this study involve an overview of retention, graduation rates and the appraisal of student learning. I used the case study approach to help address these issues in my dissertation. The case study is an empirical

inquiry that allowed me to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (Yin, 2009).

Accreditation Issues at HBCUs

John Aaron College

John Aaron, an African Methodist Episcopal-affiliated college, lost its accreditation through a court injunction in 2009. The Commission on Colleges of the SACS revoked its accreditation because of problems with the school's finances and student learning outcomes. However, John Aaron is now accredited by the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS) (Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, 2011). Edward Hillcrest has served as President of the college for several years. Observers say Hillcrest comes across as a dynamic, hands-on administrator with a fresh vision. That perception appears to have an impact on parents, students, alumni and donors. A few years ago, the college raised \$ 1.7 million in outside funding. Also, student enrollment is expected to increase each year (Oguntoyinbo, 2010). The other three institutions in this study have worked steadily to maintain their reaffirmation of accreditation in order to establish higher graduation rates.

Thomas Henson University

Part of Thomas Henson University's (THU) problems stems from its inability to communicate the effectiveness of its planning efforts and student assessment. After being placed on a warning status, the university was given time to address the problems raised by the committee (Watkins, 2010). In the spring of 2011, interim President Marla

Thorsen-Scott was brought in to oversee the campus's reaccreditation and to implement other reforms. At the top of the list of things to be changed was the university's top-heavy bureaucracy. Every dollar that THU saved from its cutbacks was poured into identifying "outstanding faculty who did not mind coming into work" on what would otherwise be a day off to help students who need extra instruction. The university also decided to recruit community volunteers to help with tutoring subjects like calculus and chemistry (Brooks, 2011). Thomas Henson University's accreditation was at risk until it was proven that professors could adequately test students. Also, emphasis was placed on administrators making results-driven decisions and instructors having the right credentials to teach their subjects (Sarrio, 2010). As of December 2011, THU fulfilled the requirements of SACS and received a reaffirmation of accreditation (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2011).

David Kemmer University

In 2001, David Kemmer University was denied reaffirmation by SACS. However, the accreditation was continued for good cause and placed on probation for twelve months. During this time, the university had to improve their educational programs, administrative and educational support services, academic and professional preparation, and financial resources (C. Luthman, personal communication, August 30, 2011). After being denied reaffirmation by SACS, David Kemmer decided to strengthen the institutional effectiveness of the university. The university's 2001-2010 Strategic Plan describes increases in student scholarships, academic programs, student support programs and professional development opportunities. Documentation of student

learning outcomes in higher education has become a standard expectation for the regional accreditation organizations (Office of Sponsored Programs, n.d.).

As an historically black institution, David Kemmer's mission was to provide opportunities to a diverse population for academic achievement with emphasis on academic excellence, and leadership in a nurturing environment (David Kemmer University, n.d.). Today, the university is now accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The President of David Kemmer University is Dr. Jacob E. Spencer, who has held that position since the year 2000. After restoring the accreditation of David Kemmer, he was later elected as an officer of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Board of Trustees (David Kemmer University, 2012a). At the SACS Annual Meeting in December of 2012, he was recently elected to a higher position (David Kemmer University, 2012b).

Simon Wiltz College

Simon Wiltz College was founded in 1873 in the Southern Region. It is a historically black, primarily liberal arts, residential, co-educational, baccalaureate degree-granting institution affiliated with The United Methodist Church (Simon Wiltz College, 2011). Simon Wiltz College is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate and baccalaureate degrees (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.b). Under President Nelson P. Truce's administration, the College had its accreditation reaffirmed to the year 2013 (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.b). The college serves traditional and non-traditional students from

diverse backgrounds who have expressed a desire and potential for learning in a christian environment. The college, in fulfilling its basic purpose of providing a liberal arts education with a global focus, endeavors to provide an intellectually stimulating environment, promoting student competencies in communication, as well as, critical and analytical thinking. The college also supports spiritual, ethical, moral, and leadership development. The faculty provides a rigorous curriculum for preparing graduates for professional or graduate studies and/or productive careers in traditional and emerging career fields (Simon Wiltz College, 2011).

Simon Wiltz College is committed to shared governance and exemplary stewardship of its resources. The college employs innovative techniques and strategic planning in all its administrative processes (Simon Wiltz College, 2011). The college garnered rare, international visibility with the release of a film that captured the fame and notoriety of a college professor (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a).

According to Austin King (2013) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2013), Simon Wiltz College was reaffirmed in June 2013. Colleges are required to develop a “Quality Enhancement Plan” (QEP) to form a program of enriching student learning in vital areas of academics (King, 2013). Due to a successful Quality Enhancement Plan, Simon Wiltz has had very few problems with assessment and student learning. The leadership of the current president and past presidents has helped the institution to maintain their reaffirmation of accreditation.

President Obama's Plan for HBCUs

In 2010, President Obama hosted a White House reception to celebrate the contributions of the nation's 105 black colleges and to reiterate his pledge to invest another \$850 million in these institutions over the next decade. Recalling the circumstances under which many of these schools were created after the Civil War, the president noted,

At a critical time in our nation's history, HBCUs waged war against illiteracy and ignorance and won. You have made it possible for millions of people to achieve their dreams and gave so many young people a chance they never thought they'd have, a chance that nobody else would give them (Riley, 2010, p. A21).

Like previous U.S. presidents, Barack Obama has invested a considerable amount of money in HBCUs. He is holding these institutions accountable, pushing for higher graduation rates and demanding that they build their endowments. The president realizes that HBCUs are integral to his goal of increasing higher education for all Americans. In fact, the recent White House conference on HBCUs was a refreshing conversation on these institutions-offering sessions on fundraising, retention and graduation rates, online education, and public-private partnerships, among other topics. The conversations were forward thinking and pushed for change and growth (Gasman, 2010). Leaders of HBCUs feel that Historically Black Colleges and Universities will be integral players in the push to achieve President Obama's 2020 goal to restore the

nation's standing as the country with the highest proportion of college graduates (Wiseman, 2011).

Limitations

The gatekeepers' approval of entrance into each institution was not limited in this study. Once the entrance was granted, some participants were reluctant to share information. The researcher was limited to the access of institutional records, because some were proprietary or not available to the public. Also, some accreditation team members had a conflicting schedule during the interview sessions, and some interviews were too brief. This was the first accreditation process for some new team leaders, and a few of them had difficulty answering open-ended questions. One participant at one of the institutions did not complete the interview because of other obligations. Also, some participants followed a strict timeline for completing each task.

There were also some limitations on coordinating and managing the internal review process (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2004). However, the success of this study was based on the gatekeepers' approval at four institutions, and the cooperation of accreditation team leaders and interview participants.

Definitions

1. **Accreditation-** is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002).
2. **Institutional Accreditation-** applies to an entire institution indicating that each of an institution's parts are contributing to the achievement of the institution's objectives (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).
3. **Interview Protocol-** used for asking questions and recording answers during a qualitative interview (Creswell, 2009).
4. **Member Checking-** The qualitative researcher checks the data and the analysis as it develops with the people being studied (Punch, 2006).
5. **Programmatic Accreditation-** applies to programs, departments, or schools that are parts of an institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).
6. **Sanction-** is authoritative permission or approval that makes a course of action valid. It is also consideration, influence, or principle that dictates an ethical choice (Pickett, 2002).
7. **Self-Study-** the written summary of performance that is based on accrediting organizations' standards (Eaton, 2003).
8. **Thick Description-** The emphasis in qualitative research on capturing and conveying the full picture of behavior being studied-holistically, comprehensively and in context (Punch, 2006).
9. **Triangulation-** Using several kinds of methods or data to study a topic; the most common type is data triangulation, where a study uses a variety of data sources (Punch, 2006).
10. **Regional Accreditors-** Accredit public and private, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting, two- and four-year institutions (Eaton, 2006).
11. **Faith-Based Accreditors-** Accredit religiously affiliated and doctrinally based institutions, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting (Eaton, 2006).
12. **Private Career Accreditors-** Accredit mainly for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, both degree and non-degree (Eaton, 2006).

Chapter Summary

Chapter I introduces the process of accreditation review among Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The Problem Statement seeks to address the problems and the need for managing the assessment of student learning outcomes in academic programs that are affiliated with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools. In the Purpose Statement, emphasis is placed on assessing and improving student learning at four Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In Chapter II, a summary of the Literature Review provides background information on the importance of accreditation in higher education. Emphasis is placed on researching the accreditation problems, sanctions, core requirements, comprehensive standards, and how HBCUs are experiencing changes in assessment and student learning. The future of Historically Black Colleges and Universities will be determined by their competitiveness, responsiveness and relevance.

Chapter III describes the Methodological Approach used for data collection and data analysis. Also, information on the site selection and unit of analysis gives a broad description of the four Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In Chapter IV, the Findings from the interview transcriptions are presented and discussed. This chapter will also focus on the data collected and analyzed from the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Chapter V outlines the study and presents concluding comments and implications drawn from the findings on student learning outcomes and assessment. This chapter will also focus on the recommendations that will enhance the future research of accreditation at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Accreditation in Higher Education

Accreditation is a creation of colleges and universities that dates back more than a century. Its fundamental purposes are quality assurance and quality improvement in higher education. Accreditation depends heavily on volunteers from higher education who participate in self-studies, serve as peer and professional reviewers, and serve on accrediting organizations' decision-making bodies (Eaton, 2010).

At its inception, accreditation was a truly voluntary activity. Colleges and universities were free to decide to seek accreditation if they thought that its benefits outweighed its costs but were equally free to remain unaccredited if they felt that the costs (both monetary and in loss of managerial freedom) outweighed the benefits. The knowledge that institutions could drop accreditation if the criteria became too intrusive or onerous held the accrediting associations back from becoming dictatorial or attempting to influence education in any ideological direction. Now, however, that eligibility for financial aid is contingent upon achieving and retaining "accredited" status, accreditation is almost essential. Most colleges and universities feel that they could not survive financially without access to federal student aid. At times accreditors have tried to use their power to compel colleges to comply with accretor agendas that are more political or philosophical than educational in nature (Leef & Burris, 2002).

Alstete (2007) indicated that the purposes of accreditation include the desire to encourage institutions to improve, facilitate the transfer of students, inform employers

of graduates about the quality of education received, meet the needs of students, and supply the general public with some guidance on which institutions to attend. Accordingly, the purpose of accreditation can best be accomplished through a voluntary association of educational institutions (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1988).

The Reauthorized Higher Education Act of 2008

According to my research, the Reauthorized Higher Education Act, retitled the Higher Education Opportunity Act, was signed into law in August 2008. To implement the 2008 Higher Education Act, consultation through negotiated rulemaking began in March 2009 under the Obama administration. Higher education and accreditation leaders approached this rulemaking with both hope and relief, based on an expectation that the accountability pressure of the Bush administration would be a thing of the past. Many were most appreciative of the new administration's unprecedented investment in student aid and other funds for higher education, reflecting its commitment to the value of higher education (Eaton, 2010).

The impact of the new law, regulations, and proposed subregulations on the academic work of institutions and faculty members is far-reaching and sobering. The federal government now has at least some legal or regulatory authority in the academic areas of transfer of credit, articulation agreements, distance learning, enrollment growth, quality of teacher preparation, and textbooks. The latest proposed rules include a federal definition of what a credit hour is, and they call for the states to provide additional oversight of higher education. There are compliance factors in the proposed guide that

address the core of faculty academic decision making, judgments about general education requirements, curriculum design, appropriate academic standards, acceptable faculty credentials, and expectations with regard to student achievement (Eaton, 2010).

An Overview of the Accreditation Process

Functions of Accreditation

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), there are several functions of accreditation that help to enhance the quality of a structured academic program or an institution as a whole. They are:

1. Verifying that an institution or program meets established standards.
2. Assisting prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions.
3. Assisting institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits.
4. Helping to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds.
5. Protecting an institution against harmful internal and external pressure.
6. Creating goals for self-improvement of weaker programs and stimulating a general raising of standards among educational institutions.
7. Involving the faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning.
8. Establishing criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation.
9. Providing one of several considerations used as a basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance.

Structure of Accreditation

So how is accreditation structured? In brief, accreditors set the comprehensive standards or guidelines and conditions under which institutions or programs are eligible to request accreditation. Eligible institutions can then apply for accreditation, and are examined by a professional staff and teams of expert examiners from peer institutions to verify assertions and data in institutional self-studies, and to determine whether all accreditation standards have been met or exceeded (Wiley, 2009). They also suggest areas for further improvement when appropriate. If further improvement is not made in the future, then problems are created for an institution.

How Accreditation Operates

Accreditation of institutions and programs take place on a regular basis over a span of several years. Accreditation is an ongoing process, and the periodic review is a fact of life for accredited institutions and programs. Self-accreditation has never been an option, because every university must be accountable to the accrediting agencies (Eaton, 2003). Eaton (2003) outlined several steps or key features involved in the accreditation process. They are:

1. The *self-study* or written summary of performance is based on accrediting organizations' standards.
2. The *peer review* is conducted by faculty and administrative peers in the profession that serves on visiting teams.
3. The *site visit* is where accrediting organizations send a visiting team to review the institution or program.
4. The *action (judgment)* occurs when accrediting organizations have commissions that affirm accreditation for new institutions and programs.

They also reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programs and deny accreditation to some institutions and programs.

5. The last key feature involves the *ongoing external review*. Eaton (2003) pointed out that institutions and programs continue to be reviewed over time on cycles that range from every few years to ten years.

The institutions prepare a self-study and undergo a site visit each time. Eaton (2003) indicated that accreditors are always held accountable. They are accountable to the institutions and programs they accredit. They are also accountable to the public and government who have invested heavily in higher education and expect quality.

The accrediting organization demonstrates public accountability in two ways. It has standards that call for institutions to provide consistent information about academic quality and student achievement and thus to foster continuing public awareness, confidence, and investment. Second, the accrediting organization itself demonstrates public involvement in its accreditation activities for the purpose of obtaining perspectives independent of the accrediting organization. Representatives of the public may include students, parents, persons from businesses and the professions, elected and appointed officials, and others (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2006).

The Self-Study

The common stages in a self-study procedure usually include getting ready for and planning the self-study, organization of the review, carefully observing the process, involving peers in the study, and combining the cycles of study and planning. It is important to set up the leadership and internal rationale for the self-study during the

preparation phase, pinpoint a detailed list of college or university needs and topics, and recognize local circumstances to show in the self-study plan. A high-quality self-study can bring the members of an educational institution together in search of a common course with resilient leadership and vigorous community involvement. In addition, effective organization of the self-study should also properly describe team members' tasks and roles (Alstete, 2007).

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

The SACS Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is mandatory for all institutions in that accreditation organization's region. A QEP must be submitted that (1) includes a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2) focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement. The SACS QEP plans are followed by a peer visit that may include an assessment expert who consults with the institution concerning its QEP (Provezis, 2010).

Faculty Involvement

To engage faculty members in learning outcomes assessment, institutions should search for ways to collaborate with disciplinary and professional organizations. Most faculty members want to improve their courses and the curriculum for students; many are already deeply involved in such work. At the same time, faculty members too often

tend to perceive assessment as an additional administrative chore. Faculty involvement in learning outcomes assessment will require a shift in the direction of viewing assessment as a form of scholarly, intellectual work (Provezis, 2010). Faculty members have a huge stake in ensuring the strength and viability of accreditation because of the importance of sustaining the values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and peer and professional review (Eaton, 2010).

Types of Accreditation

There are two basic types of educational accreditation. They are *institutional* and *specialized*. Institutional accreditation normally applies to an entire institution indicating that each of an institution's parts is contributing to the achievement of the institution's objectives. The specialized or programmatic accreditation applies to programs, departments, or schools that are parts of an institution. The accredited unit may be as large as a college or school within a university, or as small as a curriculum within a certain discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Importance of Accrediting Agencies

According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2002), there are three different types of accrediting agencies. They are:

1. Regional Accrediting Organizations operate in six different regions and review entire institutions, 98 percent or more of which are both degree-granting and nonprofit.
2. National Accrediting Organizations operate throughout the country and review entire institutions. Of the nationally accredited institutions, 34.8 percent are degree-granting and 65.1 percent are non-degree-granting.

3. Specialized accrediting organizations also operate throughout the country and review programs and some single-purpose institutions. There are more than 17,600 of these accredited programs and single-purpose operations.

Requirements of Regional Accreditation

The work of regional accrediting organizations involves hundreds of self-evaluations and site visits each year, attracts thousands of higher education volunteer professionals, and calls for substantial investment of institutional, accrediting organizations, and volunteer time and effort. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (2006) recognizes three basic purposes of accrediting organizations:

Table 1

Basic Purposes of Accrediting Organizations

Basic Purposes of Accrediting Organizations
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1. To advance academic quality
2. To demonstrate accountability
3. To encourage, where appropriate, scrutiny and planning

Note. Adapted from “Accreditation and Accountability: A CHEA Special Report,” by CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2006, pp. 1-5. Copyright 2006 by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Regional Accreditation and Student Learning:

Principles for Good Practices

The emerging focus on student learning has created new challenges for regional institutional accreditation. The diversity of America’s colleges and universities provides a public access to higher education unequalled anywhere in the world. The Council of

Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) has adopted two sets of principles governing the use of student learning data in institutional accreditation. One set deals with what a regional accrediting commission should reasonably expect of itself, the other with what an accrediting commission should reasonably expect of its institutional members (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003).

What an Accrediting Commission should reasonably expect of itself

1. *Role of student learning in accreditation.* Evaluation of an institution's success in achieving student learning is central to each Commission's function and public charter. The focus on student learning is conducted within the context of the mission of the institution, the suitability and effectiveness of processes designed to accomplish institutional goals, and the institution's continued ability to fulfill its purposes.
2. *Evidence used for accreditation.* Commissions focus on the strength of the institution's claim that it is fulfilling its declared educational mission, and give particular attention to how the institution's collection and use of student learning evidence helps to achieve its learning goals.
3. *Forms of appropriate evidence.* Evidence examined by Commissions for the purpose of evaluating the quality of student learning may include:
 - a. fulfillment of institutional purposes in the form of evidence of *student learning outcomes* appropriate to its educational goals;
 - b. institutional *processes* for evaluating educational effectiveness, in the form of student learning goals appropriate to its mission, procedures for collecting data on student achievement of these goals, and evidence that these data are used to effect improvements in educational offerings;
 - c. effective teaching and learning *practices*, including such characteristics as academic challenge, engagement of students with faculty and each other, active and collaborative learning, and enriching educational experiences;
 - d. institutional *capacity* in the form of a climate conducive to educational and academic freedom, and appropriate and sufficient resources for effective teaching, learning, and assessment.

4. *Role of commissions in improving student learning.* Commissions not only evaluate and affirm educational quality but also help institutions build capacity for documenting and improving student learning.
5. *Training.* Evaluation teams, commissions, and staff are trained in skills needed for effective accreditation practice, and operate within the spirit expressed by these principles (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003).

What an Accrediting Commission should reasonably expect of an institution

1. *Role of student learning in accreditation.* Educational quality is one of the core purposes of the institution, and the institution defines quality by how well it fulfills its declared learning mission.
2. *Documentation of student learning.* The institution demonstrates that student learning is appropriate for the certificate or degree awarded and is consistent with the institution's own standards of academic performance. The institution accomplishes this by:
 - a. setting clear learning goals, which speak to both content and level of attainment;
 - b. collecting evidence of goal attainment using appropriate assessment tools;
 - c. applying collective judgment as to the meaning and utility of the evidence; and
 - d. using this evidence to effect improvements in its programs.
3. *Compilation of evidence.* Evidence of student learning is derived from multiple sources, such as courses, curricula, and co-curricular programming, and includes effects of both intentional and unintentional learning experiences. Evidence collected from these sources is complementary and portrays the impact on the student of the institution as a whole.
4. *Stakeholder involvement.* The collection, interpretation, and use of student learning evidence is a collective endeavor, and is not viewed as the sole responsibility of a single office or position. Those in the institution with a stake in decisions of educational quality should participate in the process.
5. *Capacity building.* The institution uses broad participation in reflecting about student learning outcomes as a means of building a commitment to educational improvement (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003).

Researching the Accreditation Problem

The Commission on Colleges requires that a member institution be in compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* and its Core Requirements, comply with Commission policies and procedures, and provide information requested by the Commission in order to maintain membership and accreditation. When an institution fails to comply with these requirements within a maximum two-year monitoring period, the Commission may impose sanctions (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

Sanctions

An institution found to be out of compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* must correct the deficiencies or face the possibility of being placed on one of two sanctions: Warning or Probation, in order of degree of seriousness. These sanctions are not necessarily sequential, and the Commission may place an institution on either sanction with or without reviewing a visiting committee's report and with or without having previously requested a monitoring report, depending on the seriousness and extent of noncompliance. In certain circumstances, an institution may be removed from membership without having previously been placed on a sanction (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

During the two-year monitoring period, institutions may be placed on a sanction for six or twelve months, with a monitoring report required at the end of the period of the sanction. Institutional accreditation cannot be reaffirmed while the institution is on sanction. Denial of reaffirmation of accreditation and invocation of sanctions are not

appealable actions. Actions invoking sanctions are publicly announced at the annual meeting of the College Delegate Assembly, published in the *Communiqué of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools*, and posted on the Commission's Web page (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

Warning

The less serious of the two sanctions, Warning is usually, but not necessarily, levied in the earlier stages of institutional review and often, but not necessarily, precedes Probation. It cannot, however, succeed Probation. An institution may be placed on Warning or Probation for noncompliance with any of the Core Requirements or significant noncompliance with the Comprehensive Standards. Additionally, an institution may be placed on Warning for failure to make timely and significant progress toward correcting the deficiencies that led to the finding of noncompliance with any of the *Principles of Accreditation* (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

Probation

Failure to correct deficiencies or failure to make satisfactory progress toward compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation*, whether or not the institution is already on Warning, may result in the institution being placed on Probation. Probation is a more serious sanction than Warning and is usually, but not necessarily, invoked as the last step before an institution is removed from membership. Probation may be imposed upon initial institutional review, depending on the judgment of the Commission of the

seriousness of noncompliance, or in the case of repeated violations recognized by the Commission over a period of time. An institution must be placed on Probation when it is continued in membership for Good Cause beyond the maximum two-year monitoring period. The maximum consecutive time that an institution may be on Probation is two years (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

Denial of Reaffirmation of Accreditation

If an institution is judged by the Commission to be out of compliance with a Core Requirement, its reaffirmation of accreditation will be denied, and it will be placed on a sanction. If an institution is judged to be significantly out of compliance with one or more of the Comprehensive Standards, its reaffirmation of accreditation may be denied. The action of denying reaffirmation of accreditation will be accompanied by the imposition of a sanction. The institution's accreditation will not be reaffirmed while it is on Warning or Probation, but its accreditation will be continued (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

Core Requirements

Core Requirements are basic, broad-based, foundational requirements that an institution must meet to be accredited with the Commission on Colleges. They establish a threshold of development required of an institution seeking initial or continued accreditation by the Commission and reflect the Commission's basic expectations of candidate and member institutions. Compliance with the Core Requirements is not sufficient to warrant accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. Accredited institutions must also demonstrate compliance with the Comprehensive Standards and

the Federal Requirements of the *Principles of Accreditation*, and with the policies of the Commission (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2009).

Comprehensive Standards

The Comprehensive Standards set forth requirements in the following four areas: (1) institutional mission, governance, and effectiveness; (2) programs; (3) resources; and (4) institutional responsibility for Commission policies. The Comprehensive Standards are more specific to the operations of the institution, represent good practice in higher education, and establish a level of accomplishment expected of all member institutions. If an institution is judged to be significantly out of compliance with one or more of the Comprehensive Standards, its reaffirmation of accreditation may be denied (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2009).

Removal from Membership

An institution may be removed from Commission membership at any time, depending on the Commission's judgment of the seriousness of noncompliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* or with the Commission's policies and procedures. Removal from membership, however, usually occurs after persistent or significant noncompliance during a monitoring period or any time an institution is being followed for Good Cause. A serious instance of noncompliance or repeated instances of noncompliance may result in removal of membership without a monitoring period (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

An institution's accreditation can be extended for Good Cause if

1. the institution has demonstrated significant recent accomplishments in addressing non-compliance (e.g., the institution's cumulative operating deficit has been reduced significantly and its enrollment has increased significantly), and
2. the institution has documented that it has the potential to remedy all deficiencies within the extended period as defined by the Committee on Compliance and Reports; that is, that the institution provides evidence which makes it reasonable for the Commission to assume it will remedy all deficiencies within the extended time defined by the Committee on Compliance and Reports, and
3. the institution provides assurance to the Commission that it is not aware of any other reasons, other than those identified by the Commission on Colleges, why the institution could not be continued for Good Cause (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

The Commission may extend accreditation for Good Cause for a maximum of one year. At the conclusion of the period, the institution must appear before the Commission at a meeting on the record to provide evidence again for good cause (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005).

Student Learning Outcomes in Accreditation Quality Review

In recent years, accreditation standards developed and used by most of the regional accreditors have changed to incorporate the assessment of student learning as a central process in evaluating institutional effectiveness. The incorporation of student learning outcomes into accreditation evaluation processes reflects a decade-long movement in higher education to assess student learning. This movement itself is both a product of the concern of higher education practitioners with the quality of their own institutional and professional practices and an effort to identify and better address diverse student learning needs (Beno, 2004).

Accreditation, by design, evaluates institutional quality. Institutional quality is determined by how well an institution fulfills its purposes. In assessing institutional quality, accreditors are evaluating the student learning produced by the institution in the context of the institution's own mission, its stated learning objectives, and its identified means of assessing student learning (Beno, 2004).

Student Learning, Assessment and Accreditation

Student learning has been the central concern of higher education and accreditation from the very beginning (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2003). Student Learning Outcome is properly defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences (Ewell, 2001). Evidence of student learning can take many forms but must involve a direct examination of student levels of attainment. Examples of the types of evidence that might be used include (but are not limited to):

- faculty-designed comprehensive or capstone examinations and assignments
- performance on external or licensure examinations
- authentic performances or demonstrations
- portfolios of student work over time
- samples of representative student work generated in response to typical course assignments (Ewell, 2001).

Evidence such as survey self-reports about learning, focus groups, interviews, and student satisfaction studies are certainly useful in the accreditation process, but do not constitute direct evidence of student learning outcomes (Ewell, 2001).

The accreditation community has taken many steps to address student learning outcomes, especially during the past ten years. The community is now challenged to respond effectively and coherently to the current request and the accompanying sense of urgency by providing additional and measurable information about student learning. At the same time, accreditors have the important responsibility to further inform constituents of the longstanding and complex role that student learning plays in accreditation and higher education (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2003).

Today, students, parents, and the public are looking not only at the price of a college education, but also at the quality of general education and career potential that lies behind a student's education. In particular, they want to know what the learning gained in these programs will mean in the marketplace and in their lives as citizens and community members. Conversations are widening about how to organize institutions of higher education to improve undergraduate teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the growing presence of technology and distance delivery enhances the salience of student learning outcomes because traditional markers of academic achievement, like numbers of classes completed and credits earned, are often absent (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2003).

Institutions accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) are experiencing changes in the ways they assess student learning. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are asking, “What do we want our students to know and be able to do once they have matriculated on our college campus?” Southern University at Shreveport (Louisiana), a two-year institution within the Southern University system, and the only historically Black land grant university system in the United States, answered that question by developing these educational goals: computer/technical literacy; critical thinking skills; effective communication skills; ethics and integrity; group interaction and teambuilding skills; information literacy skills; leadership skills; and multicultural and global awareness. Information technology has changed life and learning, and it continues to significantly influence the infrastructure and delivery of formal education (Evans, 2007).

Hatfield (2001) stated that accrediting agencies are asking for documentation that supports the assertion that students have indeed achieved the desired learning goals, and just as important, an indication of the steps to be taken to close any gaps between departmental goals and student performance. While university-wide efforts might be useful in assessing the overall success of the institution in achieving its goals, student learning must be assessed at the department or program level.

Assessment is often referred to the many means that institutions and programs use to collect and interpret evidence of their educational effectiveness. It also embraces the processes used by institutions and programs to apply what they learn about learning

in order to make improvements in teaching and learning (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2003).

Hatfield (2001) pointed out that departments and programs undertaking an accreditation self-study focusing on student learning must (a) define the learning goals for their students, (b) identify how those outcomes are facilitated through the curriculum and structured learning experiences, and (c) to design and implement assessment processes and methods. The department or program must have identified specific learning goals for their students, promoted those goals through a set of specifically designed learning activities, and made conscious decisions as to how those goals can be best measured.

Starting with the identification of learning goals in the cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains, departments and programs should carefully consider questions of formative and summative assessment. They should also consider the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative data, and whether it makes sense to assess learning goals individually or holistically. In addition, regardless of where the department is in its assessment efforts at the time of the accreditation self-study and subsequent visit, the self-study should demonstrate a clear understanding of the culture, responsibilities, resources, and data uses necessary to move its assessment initiative forward to the point where student learning can be clearly and accurately documented (Hatfield, 2001).

Research has indicated that the HBCU experience is said to offer more nurturing, more congruent mentoring, more appropriate remediation, more cultural and extra-

curricular activities and a better social life for students (Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, & Nora, 1997). Because all individuals learn differently, different environments provide positive learning experiences for different students. Institutions can provide positive learning environments by first recognizing that, with the exception of the smallest of colleges, they already provide multiple environments and experiences for different groups. Although students do not always show strong dispositions toward intellectual inquisitiveness and critical thinking as they enter college, institutions and faculty can improve students' dispositions toward analysis and inquiry (Ratcliff & Associates, 1995).

Students' critical thinking skills and abilities may be among the most important areas of learning to develop during the undergraduate experience. Critical thinking can be defined as a student's ability to identify an argument's central issues and assumptions, draw inferences, make deductive conclusions, to interpret the data or information, and evaluate an argument's validity. While several conceptions of critical thinking exist, faculty, employers, and policy makers have broad areas of agreement on what it constitutes. These groups agree that college graduates should be able to analyze and evaluate, make judgments, and draw conclusions (Ratcliff & Associates, 1995).

It is important to notice that college outcomes include more than narrow measures of classroom learning. The literature on collegiate student learning is remarkably clear on what it takes to produce quality learning. "Educational quality" refers to the quality of student learning itself, both the extent to which the institution provides an environment conducive to student learning, and the extent to which this

environment leads to the development of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and predispositions of value to students and the society they are preparing to serve. Educational quality is measured primarily by evidence of impact on students, while other indicators, such as retention rates, graduation rates, or graduates' GRE scores, play secondary roles. An institution's "learning mission" reflects its aspirations for students and is stated in terms of how students are expected to benefit from its course of study (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, n.d.).

The collegiate learning experience is complex, and the evidence used to investigate it must be similarly authentic and contextual. But to pass the test of public credibility, and thus remain faithful to accreditation's historic task of quality assurance, the evidence of student learning outcomes used in the accreditation process must be rigorous, reliable, and understandable (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2003).

Transparency and Student Learning

Several commission representatives mentioned that transparency and learning outcomes assessment rose to the fore in the wake of the Spellings' Commission report and the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. In this current climate, grade-point averages, graduation rates, alumni surveys, and such are all important but not sufficient in the eyes of critics. Additional information is being requested and several national organizations are addressing transparency. Even so, at this point, the majority of commissions ask institutions to be more transparent through their integrity standards.

Most educators assert that transparency is a part of institutional integrity and that college campuses should be able to show what students will learn (Provezis, 2010).

Transparency is important and should be increased on the collegiate level for a number of reasons. Most often thought of in terms of “accountability,” transparency is also useful as a way of sharing new and innovative approaches to learning outcomes assessment and best practices within an institution, with the public, and with policy makers. How to share assessment information publicly and to make it transparent without compromising the assessment process is a challenge. Both accreditors and institutions need to consider fully what to share with the public. Accreditation organizations must carefully weigh the benefits of making the accreditation process more public against the need for institutions to make honest, objective, and useful self-assessments of performance. Moving forward with this transparency issue requires more attention from all stakeholders (Provezis, 2010).

Measuring Student Learning for Institutional Effectiveness

Any effort to measure student learning as an indicator of institutional effectiveness faces some significant challenges, ranging from selecting relevant learning outcomes and appropriate assessment methods to overcoming stakeholder objections and identifying useful ways to report assessment findings. Underlying these challenges are some substantial differences of opinion on what form the assessment of student learning for accountability purposes should take (Erismann, 2009).

The demand for more public accountability in higher education has strengthened over the last five years. While accountability for student learning has been part of

American higher education policy discussion for more than two decades, a number of high profile organizations recently brought renewed attention to the topic. Reports from the Business-Higher Education Forum [BHEF], the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, the Educational Testing Service [ETS], and the National Governor's Association have called for higher education institutions to provide better information to policymakers and the public, especially in the area of student learning, and for states to use that information to make data-driven decisions to improve student success in higher education (Erisman, 2009).

The demand for additional postsecondary accountability became even greater following the 2006 release of the report developed by the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly referred to as the Spellings Commission. This report explicitly criticizes colleges and universities for their low graduation rates and calls for "a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education" (Erisman, 2009, p. 4). The Spellings Commission recommended that all postsecondary institutions assess and report on student learning outcomes, including value-added assessments showing students' learning gains, and that these reports be made publicly available through higher education accountability systems (Erisman, 2009).

According to Erisman (2009), understanding the academic impact of higher education on students is a particularly *hot* topic in discussions of learning outcomes assessment and accountability. Much of the learning assessment on college and university campuses focuses on determining if students have reached the standard of

performance defined as the minimum competency needed for a particular learning outcome. However, student achievement in higher education is inevitably related to academic ability and preparation prior to entering college. From this perspective, the most important measurement is how much a student's knowledge and skills have increased as a result of postsecondary education.

Standardized Exams

In measuring student learning, there are two most commonly used assessment approaches. The first one is *Standardized Exams*. Because of the desire for comparable data on student learning, standardized exams are often viewed as the best assessment approach for accountability purposes. Most colleges and universities that use standardized exam scores to evaluate institutional effectiveness administer the tests in ways that are not directly connected to students' academic coursework. In some cases, all students are required to take a rising junior exam before registering for the upper-division coursework or to take an exit exam as a graduation requirement, but the exam scores themselves typically do not affect the students' academic standing. More often, sampling techniques are used to select a group of students who are asked to take a standardized exam as part of the institution's assessment efforts (Erisman, 2009).

Embedded Assessment

The second commonly used assessment approach is *Embedded Assessment*. It mirrors the way in which individual instructors assess their students. It is also the principal alternative to standardized exams in higher education. This practice is often called "embedded assessment" because the process of collecting assessment data is

embedded in a course rather than occurring outside of the student's usual academic routine. Student work used for this type of assessment can include exams, written assignments and papers, oral presentations, and even creative works or performances. The primary advantages of embedded assessment are that data can be collected under the same conditions in which students learn and can reflect the complex nature of learning, in which multiple outcomes may be demonstrated in the same piece of work. Because students are graded on the work they produce for a class, they are presumably motivated to do well. Moreover, if the instructor selects exams or assignments that address the specific learning outcomes of a course, it becomes easier to use assessment findings to improve teaching and learning within the institution as well as to develop a picture of student learning at the institutional level (Erisman, 2009).

Erisman (2009) implied that the two assessment approaches described are most commonly used by colleges and universities as a way to measure student learning. These assessment practices have influenced broader efforts to hold colleges and universities accountable for what students learn. However, efforts to measure student learning as an indicator of institutional effectiveness are not new to American higher education. The conversation about accountability in higher education dates as far back to the 1970s. Over time, six regional accrediting associations have come to serve as the principal agents for evaluating the quality of American colleges and universities. They have focused their evaluations on the goal of institutional improvement within a context of respect for institutional diversity.

Statewide Approaches to Measuring Student Learning

While most statewide higher education accountability systems require that all institutions report on the same performance measure, which is one reason why some states have turned to standardized exams as a way to measure student learning, Colorado and Kansas take a somewhat different approach. These states require colleges and universities to assess student learning as part of the performance agreements the state negotiates with individual institutions. Colorado's performance agreements generally require that colleges and universities report on the results of their institutional assessments, particularly as these relate to student learning in core curriculum courses. However, because there are no specific targets set for student learning and no penalties associated with failure to perform as required by the contracts, a recent evaluation of the performance agreement program concluded that it has had little impact on institutional actions. Kansas directs institutions to set specific targets on selected measures in their performance agreements, and at least half of these performance measures must be direct measures of student learning. New state funds are awarded to institutions each year on the basis of their performance in achieving these targets (Erisman, 2009).

To make comparisons about the relative effectiveness of different postsecondary institutions, policymakers and the public need comparable data about student learning at those institutions. However, comparable data on student learning can be difficult to obtain, and many states have opted to avoid this challenge by not including a direct measure of student learning in their accountability systems (Erisman, 2009). (See Table on the next page).

Table 2

Measuring Student Learning by Selected States

Measuring Student Learning		Selected States
Policies requiring that learning outcomes be assessed and reported by institutions		Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, Rhode Island
Policies requiring that learning and assessment plans be posted on institutional Web sites		Florida, Ohio
Policies requiring that a set of general education competencies be assessed and reported		Maryland, New Mexico, Texas, Virginia
Performance agreements with institutions requiring the assessment of student learning		Colorado, Kansas
Direct measure of student learning included in state accountability system	Pass rates on licensure or certification exams	Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, Wisconsin
	Pass rates on graduate admissions exams	Minnesota, Wisconsin
	Pass rates on other standardized tests	Minnesota, Missouri

Note. Adapted from “Measuring Student Learning as an Indicator of Institutional Effectiveness: Practices, Challenges, and Possibilities,” by W. Erisman, 2009, *Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board*, p. 18. Copyright 2009 by the Higher Education Policy Institute.

Improving Educational Programs Through Assessment

According to Suskie (2009), many of today's faculty are dedicated teachers who want to do the best possible job in helping their students learn. Many faculty members follow a learning-centered paradigm. The purpose of assessment has expanded under this new paradigm. Under the teaching-centered model, the major, if not sole, purpose of assessment has been to assign student grades. Under the learning-centered paradigm, assessment is also used to improve curricula and pedagogies to bring about even greater learning. Suskie (2009) indicated that assessment helps accomplish this in several ways: Assessment helps students learn more effectively. This is because:

- The clear expectations that good assessment requires help students understand where they should focus their learning time and energies.
- Assessment, especially the grading process, motivates students to do their best.
- Assessment feedback helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses.

Assessment activities bring faculty and staff together to discuss important issues.

- Assessment leads faculty and staff to discuss what they teach, why, and their standards and expectations. In other words, assessment encourages faculty and staff to undertake a collaborative approach to teaching.

Assessment activities help faculty and staff see how courses link together.

- Assessment encourages the formation of coherent, integrated programs.
- It helps faculty see how the courses they teach contribute to student success in subsequent pursuits.

Assessment results provide feedback.

- Such feedback is essential to helping faculty and staff understand what is and is not working and decide what changes, if any, are warranted.

Assessment brings neglected issues to the forefront.

- Some colleges have problems that have been swept under the carpet far too long: outdated general education curricula, a dysfunctional governance system, a fragmented and incoherent curriculum, or outmoded pedagogies. Launching an assessment effort often requires addressing issues that probably should have been tackled long ago.
- Some people find that assessment processes are even more useful than their products: these initial conversations and work yield greater benefits than the eventual assessment results.

Assessment helps faculty and staff make better decisions and use limited resources more wisely.

- At too many colleges, decisions are based more on hunches, intuition, anecdote, and lore than on solid evidence. Assessment increases the likelihood of making appropriate decisions and directing scarce resources where they are most needed (Suskie, 2009).

Wagenaar (2011) pointed out that good-quality assessment simply asks about our goals, our instructional procedures, and the link between both of those and learning.

He also placed emphasis on the elements of quality assessment. They are:

- *Student engagement.* Students can tell us how and why certain courses and programs are successful (or not) and can provide insights on how to improve their teaching and assessment.
- *Use of effective rubrics.* Rubrics help students see the organization and goals of a course more clearly, and help others assess the course and student learning more accurately.
- *Measuring critical thinking.* This can be done by describing discrete elements of critical thinking that could be applied across disciplines, and then by giving specific examples.

- *Conversations with colleagues.* This can be done both on and off campus to help promote a collective responsibility for teaching and assessing critical thinking as well as other general education and disciplinary goals.
- *Academic responsibility must complement academic freedom.* Faculty members prize their independence and autonomy. But that independence can sometimes be detrimental to students, because it diminishes a collective responsibility for student learning. Assessment brings into focus what students should learn in courses and programs and how successful teachers are as faculties.

I believe that it is not the assessment itself that leads to the improvement of student learning, but it is how the faculty, staff, and institutional leaders use it. Also, colleges and universities are emphasizing the importance of assessment and student learning through the improvement of accountability.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment

One of the approaches to student learning has been called the *value added* approach because it emphasizes the value of higher education to the student and society. In recent years, the *value added* approach to assessment has often been associated with using standardized exams to test learning gains for seniors as compared to freshmen. However, the approach can be used with any assessment method that allows for the collection of baseline data against which to compare later results (Erisman, 2009).

According to Klein, Benjamin, Shavelson and Bolus (2007), the best example of direct *value added* assessment is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), an outgrowth of RAND's Value Added Assessment Initiative (VAAI) that has been available to colleges and universities since the spring of 2004. The test goes beyond a multiple-choice format and poses real-world performance tasks that require students to

analyze complex material and provide written responses (such as preparing a memo or policy recommendation).

The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), which has come to be known as the "Spellings' Commission," identified the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) as one of "the most comprehensive national efforts to measure how much students actually learn at different campuses" and that the CLA, "promotes a culture of evidence-based assessment in higher education" (Klein et al., 2007, p. 415). The Commission went on to recommend that "higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality assessment data from instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which measures the growth of student learning taking place in colleges" (Klein et al., 2007, pp. 415-416).

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) focuses on the institution rather than the student as the unit of analysis. Its goal is to provide a summative assessment of the *value added* by the school's instructional and other programs taken as a whole with respect to certain important learning outcomes. The results with these measures are intended to send a signal to administrators, faculty, and students about some of the competencies that need to be developed, the level of performance attained by the students at their institution, and most importantly, whether that level is better, worse, or about the same as what would be expected given the ability level of its incoming students. The CLA measures students' critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem

solving, and written communication skills with meaningful, holistic and complex tasks (Klein et al., 2007).

The CLA itself does not identify the reasons why a school's students do better or worse than expected, nor does it suggest what curricular or other changes the school should implement to improve student performance. A college must turn to its faculty, reviews from accrediting agencies, data from locally constructed measures, and other sources to determine what it can and should do to raise scores. However, because CLA scores are standardized across administrations, they can be used (along with other indicators) to examine the overall effects on student performance of the reforms and policies an institution implements (Klein et al., 2007).

In short, the CLA's main goal is to provide information that will help colleges and universities determine how much their students are improving and whether that improvement is in line with the gains of comparable students at other institutions. Some leading colleges also are using the CLA to examine the effects of alternative instructional programs within their institution (Klein et al., 2007).

Research has indicated that some HBCUs are at a disadvantage when it comes to assessing student learning outcomes and developing educational resources. However, they always seem to provide an environment that has been shown to promote retention and degree completion (Terenzini et al., 1997).

Contributions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities to the Nation

The majority of the nation's 106 Black Colleges were created in the second half of the nineteenth century, following the Emancipation Proclamation by President

Abraham Lincoln, which abolished slavery on January 1, 1864. Many of these colleges were created by religious organizations and others by state governments (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

With the passage of voting rights legislation in the 1960s and other legislation designated to eliminate the vestiges of segregation and discrimination, the question has arisen about the need for and the educational effectiveness of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. For most young people entering college, this is their first experience away from home for an extended period. It is a time of socialization, of developing a clear identity and a time for reinforcing their values. It is during this time that young people move from the familiar protected environment of home to the new, more open, challenging and less secure ambiance of the college campus (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

For some African American young people, this interplay of academic, social and personal development which occurs on the campus of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) during their personal transition from home to the wider world can have a profound influence on their development as scholars, future family members, members of the country's workforce and as responsible citizens. An example of this is illustrated by the number and percentage of the graduates of some HBCUs who are successful in gaining entry to, and graduation from, schools of medicine, engineering, law and other fields. For a number of HBCUs these percentages are equal to or exceed the outcomes achieved by the African American students and graduates from

predominantly white colleges and universities which are often older and wealthier (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

Among the HBCUs that have demonstrated this level of success in their graduates are Xavier University, Spelman College, Morehouse College, Florida A&M University, North Carolina A&T University, Jackson State University and others (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

What accounts for the success that the students and the graduates of HBCUs are experiencing? There are multiple factors, including (1) the dedication of the faculty to their teaching responsibilities, (2) the supportive social environment, (3) the strong encouragement given to the students to explore a full range of career possibilities (including leadership roles) in business, the sciences, public service, education and other fields and (4) the role models for students among the faculties of the HBCUs (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

Public and Private Black Colleges

As of 2012, there were 105 HBCUs. From this total, there were 40 public four-year colleges and universities and 49 private four-year colleges and universities. The remaining ones are two-year institutions. However, as of 2013, the American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee was designated as a private Historically Black institution. The addition of this school increased the number of HBCUs to 106. The school, which has 150 students, has added a new major in behavioral studies and will add two new majors in the next year (Roach, 2013).

Some private institutions have fewer than 1000 students and many are underfunded, located in rural areas, possess small endowments, and many lack the basic infrastructure (i.e., facilities, technology, scholarships) to compete for students who are academically prepared for college study. Many of these students enroll with academic deficiencies which, if identified at the outset can be remediated. Public Black colleges on the other hand tend to have larger enrollments and because of taxpayer support, are not as vulnerable to fiscal problems as the private colleges. They are not invincible (Schexnider, 2013).

As is true for private HBCUs, the budgets of public black colleges are enrollment-driven. This heightens the competition for students who are critical to their ability to succeed. Unlike private HBCUs however, public black colleges receive taxpayer support along with the political clout African American legislators can muster on their behalf. These conditions may be necessary but not sufficient to ensure their success. However, it has been determined through research that all HBCUs are salvageable (Schexnider, 2013).

Schexnider (2013) indicated that the great nineteenth century abolitionist Frederick Douglass noted, “There can be no progress without struggle” (p. 9). This has to be an article of faith for black colleges as most have struggled since their inception. Even at the dawn of a new century when scores of HBCUs have been in existence for at least 100 years, the struggle continues through accreditation.

Accreditation at an HBCU

Beginning in the 1830s, public and private higher education institutions were established to serve African Americans operated in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the states of the old Confederacy. Until recently the vast majority of people of African descent who received postsecondary education in the United States did so at historically black institutions. Spurred on by financial and accreditation issues, litigation to assure compliance with court decisions, equal higher education opportunity for all citizens, and the role of race in admissions decisions, the future of Historically Black Colleges and Universities has been renewed (Betsey, 2008).

The competition that HBCUs currently face in attracting and educating African Americans and other students presents both challenges and opportunities. Despite the fact that numerous studies have found that HBCUs are more effective at retaining and graduating African American students than predominately white colleges, HBCUs have serious detractors. Perhaps because of the increasing pressures on state governments to assure that public HBCUs receive comparable funding and provide programs that will attract a broader student population, several public HBCUs no longer serve primarily African American students (Betsey, 2008).

The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as institutions of higher learning established before 1964 whose principal mission was then, as is now, the [higher] education of Black Americans. All institutions classified as HBCUs are accredited or, are making reasonable progress toward accreditation by an approved accrediting body (Wilson, 2008).

There are 106 institutions classified as HBCUs, representing three percent of all institutions of higher education in the United States. HBCUs currently enroll 15 percent of all black college students and produce roughly one-third of all black college graduates. Although most HBCUs are small, have a relatively high percentage of disadvantaged students, and lack many of the resources available at mainstream institutions, there are differences in financial endowment, tuition costs, fields of study offered, and academic selectivity between HBCUs and Traditional White Institutions (TWIs). Notwithstanding their limited resources, HBCUs have done a remarkable job of educating many of this country's African American professionals. At either the graduate or undergraduate level, HBCUs have educated some 75 percent of all African American Ph.Ds., 46 percent of all African American business executives, 50 percent of African American engineers, 80 percent of African American federal judges, and 65 percent of African American doctors (Wilson, 2008).

The Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which have traditionally educated a significant number of the nation's blacks, have faced, and continue to face, substantial challenges in attempting to enhance their academic and research capabilities. Some of these institutions have a myriad of problems: aging infrastructures, limited access to digital and wireless networking technology, absence of state-of-the-art equipment, low salary structures, small endowments, and limited funds for faculty development and new academic programs for students. While many of these problems exist in other institutions, they appear to be considerably more serious in HBCUs (Matthews, 2008).

Research has indicated that Black students at HBCUs tend to have lower high school GPAs and SAT scores compared with Black students attending TWIs. Black students attending HBCUs also tend to come from families lower on the socioeconomic scale than those of their peers at White institutions. The quality of the faculty, facilities, available academic programs, and opportunities for advanced study is often poorer at HBCUs. On the other hand, HBCUs seem to make up for what they lack in resources by providing a more collegial and supportive learning environment for students and faculty. Retention studies of students at all institutions have shown that the frequency of student-faculty contact is positively related to students' academic growth (Kim and Conrad, 2006).

Improving Retention and Graduation Rates

Retention is a sign of efficiency at colleges and universities and contributes to an institution's public image. However, when considering graduation rates, it's important to keep in mind that the majority, but certainly not all, of HBCU students are low-income, first-generation, and Pell-Grant-eligible. Students with these characteristics are less likely to graduate no matter where they attend college. Traditional White Institutions (TWIs) with institutional characteristics and student populations that are similar to HBCUs have similar graduation rates. More selective HBCUs (those that accept only students who are highly prepared for college) have higher graduation rates than their less selective counterparts (Gasman, 2013). Most HBCUs are in the South, where all but four states have graduation rates below the national average. When measuring graduation rates, students' backgrounds and prior academic achievements

matter, as does the selectivity of the institution. The following figure measures the six-year graduation rate and retention rate at private and public four-year HBCUs (Gasman, 2013).

I feel that today Historically Black Colleges and Universities must continue to raise the expectations for students to excel and graduate from the institution of their choice. They must also continue to be more competitive and responsive in their curriculum at private and public four-year institutions.

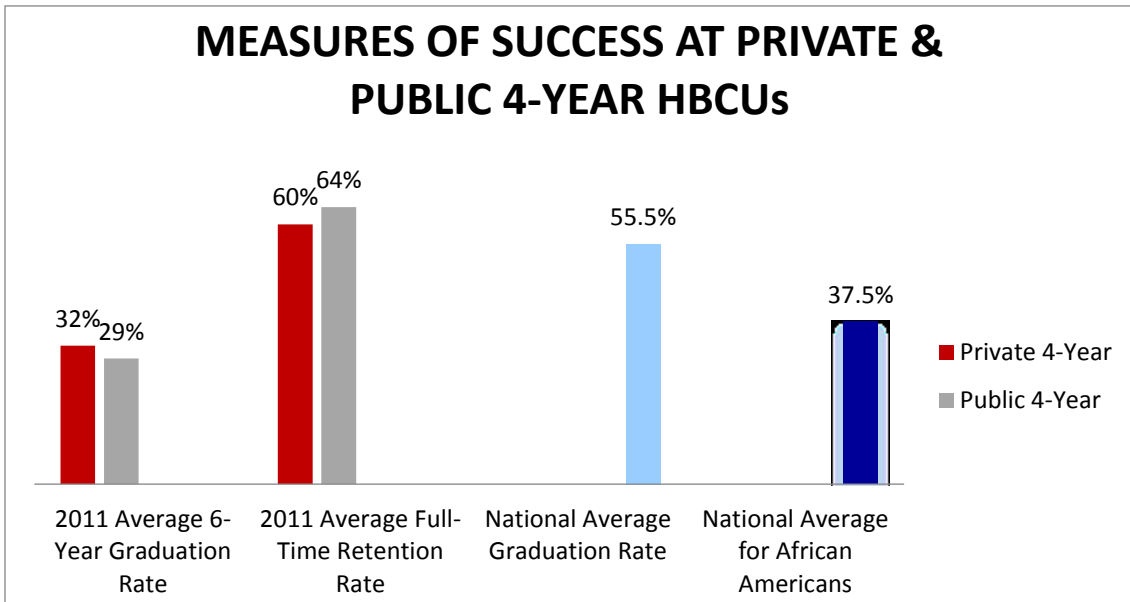


Figure 1. Measures of Success at Private & Public 4-Year HBCUs. Adapted from “The Changing Face of Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” by M. Gasman, 2013, *University of Penn Graduate School of Education: Center for Minority-Serving Institutions*, p. 10. Copyright 2013 by the University of Pennsylvania.

The Concerns and Survival of HBCUs

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have exceeded the expectations of their original purpose of only appealing Black people and not succeeding by providing

over 150 years of access to higher education and producing a large majority of Black professionals and leaders in both the Black community and the United States. Most HBCUs strive to achieve six basic goals in maintaining their culture. They are:

1. Maintaining the Black American historical and cultural tradition
2. Providing key leadership for the Black American community
3. Providing Black American role models for social, political, and economic purposes in the Black community
4. Assuring economic function in the Black American community
5. Providing Black American role models who will address issues between minority and majority populations in the Black community
6. Producing Black agents for research, institutional training, and information dissemination in the Black and other minority communities (Cantey, Bland, Mack & Davis, 2012).

These six goals have helped HBCUs maintain their culture of excellence.

However, in facing economic and global challenges, HBCUs are forced to reassess their mission, goals, and methods to further sustain their role in higher education. For instance, Historically Black Colleges and Universities continue to respond to detractors' position that HBCUs are not relevant. These critics suggest that, "HBCUs are academically inferior and would be better off if turned into community colleges or for profit online schools such as the University of Phoenix" and that "HBCUs were the embarrassment of the nation" (Cantey et al., 2012, p. 10). Although HBCUs are recognized for producing a significant number of graduates who later become PhDs in science and engineering, and also educating a significant number of low-income

students, detractors continue to negate this contribution and argue the value and relevance of HBCUs in the 21st century (Cantey et al., 2012).

Cantey et al. (2012) suggested that in order for HBCUs to continue filling the gap in U.S. higher education, they also need to fill the existing gaps and challenges that impact sustaining their culture of excellence. Specifically, HBCUs existing difficulties to sustaining a culture of excellence include: accreditation of undergraduate and graduate programs, funding, and the role of leadership and management of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

While some HBCUs received accreditation as early as 1928, the current lack of accreditation of specific curricula and programs have shown to adversely impact HBCUs. Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the nation equally face challenges with curricula and accreditation (Cantey et al., 2012).

As previously mentioned, HBCU opponents would prefer to see HBCUs as “a four-year community college.” However, many Historically Black Colleges are gaining more attraction by becoming universities. Proponents of HBCUs are pleased with the increase of Historically Black Colleges transitioning into universities and offering graduate level programs for students. Along with offering baccalaureate degrees and graduate degrees, HBCUs can further sustain their excellence through curricula (Cantey et al., 2012).

In order for HBCUs to maintain accreditation and create academic spaces for critical thinking and critical pedagogy, universities must also recruit and retain faculty that are able to enhance and develop these challenging and progressive spaces for

student learning. To further sustain excellence through recruitment and retention of faculty, HBCUs must increase the number of African American Ph.D. level faculty as this helps to increase the available number of accredited programs. Additionally, there is a need to attract existing African American doctoral faculty through competitive salaries. Salaries have shown to be a major factor for professionals when selecting their jobs of choice and represent a large item in college and universities budgets. Also, attracting and retaining faculty directly coincides with funding at universities. For presidents, deans and other leaders, fundraising in the form of grants, alumni development/contributions, and corporate and individual donations needs to be improved (Cantey et al., 2012).

The discussion concerning the survival of HBCUs still lingers today. Institutional resources are still the primary judge for most accrediting agencies. Although HBCUs historically have been underfunded, today they are still rated against other types of institutions that permit them to be viewed out of context. Thus, the historical use of the term *classification* raises many concerns for proponents of HBCUs due to the negative implications. This is no surprise given the historic nature of classifications in creating a hierarchical system among America's colleges and universities. But rather than focusing on the negative implications, proponents of HBCUs must use classification techniques to gain insight into the diverse nature of these institutions and the critical role they serve in higher education (Coaxum III, 2001).

HBCUs in the SACS Region

HBCUs have always welcomed the accreditation review process, while being consistently opposed to preferential treatment in meeting accreditation standards. Many HBCUs have had concerns relative to physical facilities, library, organization and governance, and finance (Allen and Austin, 1989). However, it is still obvious that much more needs to be done to improve the overall participation rates of blacks in every aspect of the accreditation process (Simmons, 1989).

Knoxville College, Morris Brown College and Barber Scotia College are just some of the recent victims of lost accreditation. Many HBCUs have either teetered on the brink, suffered or closed entirely following the loss of accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Today, several HBCUs are currently having problems with accreditation. So, in efforts to prepare HBCU administrators to successfully meet SACS accreditation requirements, Lynn Walker Huntley, past president of the Southern Education Foundation Inc. (SEF) and Dr. Norman C. Francis, past president of Xavier University in New Orleans and SEF Chair Emeritus, laid the groundwork for an innovative endeavor. “Investing in HBCU Leadership” is designed to identify and address the technical and professional development needs of HBCU executives, a pressing issue of accreditation. In 2004, Huntley explains that although it’s not specifically designed to address those institutions that have already lost accreditation, the program is a forward-looking “preventative effort to keep other HBCUs from walking down that path” (Keels, 2004, p. 30).

The SEF initiative, which was the result of eight months of assessments and surveys of HBCU presidents and other interested parties including donors, was right on time, especially as new SACS requirements, *Principles of Accreditation*, were introduced in January 2004. That development helped further shape the direction of the HBCU leadership program. The three-year HBCU leadership program is funded by the Charles Stewart Mott and the Andrew Mellon Foundations, which make it possible for SEF to disburse small grants, ranging from \$ 10,000 to \$ 20,000 for special projects at HBCUs to meet various institutional needs. For example, if one institution requires a certain software program, and another needs a consultant to address financial issues and meet the financial stability measures SACS requires -- all to help them move toward a reaffirmation review -- those schools can apply for SEF grants. The author pointed out that the size of large HBCUs poses the same problems that other small schools face but notes that cultural and historical factors also play a part in the struggle some HBCUs experience with accreditation (Keels, 2004).

The SACS Commission on Colleges installed its first African American president, Dr. Belle S. Wheelan, in 2005. The previous president led the organization for 20 years. Wheelan recognized the past tension between Black colleges and SACS. Therefore, she worked to increase communication with and provide educational programming for HBCUs to enhance their ability to maintain accreditation. Wheelan has also committed to hiring more Black employees to enhance the image of the organization and improve its relationships with HBCU members. Since Wheelan took office, SACS has placed fewer Black colleges on probation (Gasman, 2008).

The White House Initiative on HBCUs of 1997 emphasized the need for the American public to learn more about the tremendous impact that HBCUs have had and continue to have on the American economy. There is no question that HBCUs have made a significant impact in the field of higher education. These institutions are responsible for the Black middle class in America. HBCUs also invented the practice of open enrollment at a college or university. The one theme that unites all HBCUs is that they have traditionally accepted students who otherwise would not have gone to college because of economic circumstances. This has been the collective mission of all HBCUs in the United States (Coaxum III, 2001).

Reinvigorating the HBCUs

According to Nelms (2011), it is imperative that HBCUs remain true to their unique missions. Also, it is strategically important for them to consider their role in a new American society. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are not only critical to degree attainment, but also to America's maintenance of its global leadership role. In order to advance America's agenda, HBCUs must respond to the dynamic changes taking place in our society and demonstrate their continued relevance. To become a more competitive force, HBCUs must make critical changes.

In order to make these changes, HBCUs must have facilities that are adequately equipped and maintained, and deferred maintenance problems must be eliminated. Moreover, HBCUs must make more effective use of technology in their administrative operations, fiscal and internal controls, instructional delivery, research programs, planning and assessment (Nelms, 2011).

Nelms (2011) and other researchers indicated that Historically Black Colleges and Universities must continue to become more competitive and responsive in their curricula offerings. This would include the number and kinds of doctoral programs that make them competitive with majority institutions. Also, online education requires that institutions explore more contemporary modes of instruction delivery, inter-institutional collaboration and research in emerging fields. Historically Black Colleges and Universities must also diversify curricula to include more contemporary offerings reflective of the dynamic social, economic, national and international landscapes, and to include offerings in entrepreneurship, health disparities, environmental issues, mass communications and information management, just to name a few.

During the reinvigorating process, the student is of paramount interest. Every student deserves the fullest commitment on the part of HBCUs to continue to place their highest priority on student learning and degree attainment. Research shows that millennial students learn differently. Faculty must better align their teaching, mentoring and advising to establish a partnership with these students that meet their needs (Nelms, 2011).

Expectations for student success must be elevated to provide students with a competitive edge. For more than three decades, the national focus has been on student access, with student success gaining momentum in more recent years. Many HBCUs have retention and graduation rates that are unacceptably low. Knowing that retention is a prerequisite for graduation, HBCUs must significantly increase support services in both undergraduate and graduate programs. HBCUs must raise the expectations for

student graduation. Further, HBCUs must concentrate their efforts in putting all the necessary mechanisms in place to assure that students excel and graduate well prepared for their chosen careers (Nelms, 2011).

It is important to know that the future of Historically Black Colleges and Universities will be determined by their competitiveness, responsiveness and relevance. A commitment by public and private funding sources to underwrite HBCUs should be orchestrated as an essential part of a national strategy to develop American intellectual capital, and to assist in meeting the President's goal in the American Graduation Initiative and sustain our economy (Nelms, 2011).

New Initiative to Improve Educational Outcomes for African Americans

During the summer of 2012, President Obama decided to sign an Executive Order to improve outcomes and advance educational opportunities for African Americans. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans will work across Federal agencies and with partners and communities nationwide to produce a more effective continuum of educational programs for African American students. The Initiative aims to ensure that all African American students receive an education that fully prepares them for high school graduation, college completion, and productive careers (Office of Press Secretary, 2012).

The president has set the goal for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. To reach this ambitious goal, and to ensure quality of access and opportunity in education for all Americans, the Obama administration is dedicating new resources through rigorous and well-rounded

academic and support services. This will enable African American students to improve their educational achievement and prepare for college and a career (Office of Press Secretary, 2012).

To deliver a complete and competitive education for all African Americans, the Initiative will promote, encourage, and undertake efforts designed to meet several objectives including:

- Increasing the percentage of African American children who enter kindergarten ready for success by improving access to high quality, early learning, and developmental programs.
- Ensuring that all African American students have access to high level, rigorous course work and support services that will prepare them for college, a career and civic participation.
- Providing African American students with equitable access to effective teachers and principals in pursuit of a high quality education, and supporting efforts to improve the recruitment, preparation, development, and retention of successful African American teachers and principals.
- Promoting a positive school climate that does not rely on methods that result in disparate use of disciplinary tools, and decreasing the disproportionate number of referrals to special education by addressing root causes of the referrals;
- Reducing the dropout rate of African American students and increasing the proportion of African American students who graduate from high school prepared for college and a career;
- Increasing college access, college persistence, and college attainment for African American students;
- Strengthening the capacity of institutions of higher education that serve large numbers of African American students, including community colleges, HBCUs, Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), and other institutions; and
- Improving the quality of, and expanding access to, adult education, literacy, and career and technical education (Office of Press Secretary, 2012).

The Executive Order also creates the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans, to aid and advise the work of the initiative. The Commission advised President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan on matters pertaining to the educational attainment of the African American community, including the development, implementation, and coordination of resources aimed at improving educational opportunities and outcomes for African Americans of all ages (Office of the Press Secretary, 2012).

I believe this new Initiative will be able to help HBCUs to improve their learning goals and assessment methods. This will also give HBCUs the opportunity to develop the skills and strategies that will prepare them to face the challenges in education and comply with the standards of accreditation.

Chapter Summary

The Literature Review provided insights on the importance of accreditation in higher education. The Commission on Colleges bases its accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions and entities on the *Principles of Accreditation*. These principles apply to all institutional programs and services. From my research, I discovered that the purposes of accreditation include the desire to encourage institutions to improve, facilitate the transfer of students, inform employers of graduates about the quality of education received and meet the needs of students.

In recent years, accreditation standards developed and used by most of the regional accreditors have changed to incorporate the assessment of student learning as a central process in evaluating institutional effectiveness. Student learning has been a central concern in higher education for years. Therefore, accrediting organizations are expecting institutions to be accountable for assessing student learning. Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have taken steps to address student learning outcomes and assessment by becoming more competitive and responsive in their curricular offerings.

Even though many HBCUs have achieved the reaffirmation of accreditation, some institutions have not. Research has indicated that the HBCU experience is said to offer more nurturing, more congruent mentoring, more appropriate remediation, more cultural and extracurricular activities, and a better social life for students. Parents, faculty, school personnel and politicians must be aware of the fact that all students learn

differently, and the environment plays a huge role in promoting how much a student can achieve. Also, HBCUs must recruit and retain a faculty that will enhance and develop new methods of teaching. On the HBCU campus, the student is of paramount interest, and priority should be placed on the assessment of student learning and degree attainment. HBCUs must raise the expectations for students to graduate so they can fulfill the mission of the institution and comply with the standards of accreditation.

During the summer of 2012, President Obama decided to sign an Executive Order to improve outcomes and advance educational opportunities for African American students. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence aims to ensure that all African American students receive an education that fully prepares them for high school graduation, college completion, and productive careers.

From my research study, it is obvious that the survival of HBCUs is ongoing, even though many institutions have struggled to successfully complete the reaffirmation process. However, there is a definite need for improvement in the area of assessment and student learning outcomes. If HBCUs continue to work toward sustaining a culture of excellence, then the retention and graduation rates will improve.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned, this study explores the accreditation problems of four Historically Black Colleges and Universities and evaluates the strategies and procedures used in solving these problems. This study also focuses on the management of academic programs and the improvement of assessment and student learning outcomes.

A review of the student learning outcomes and assessment problems led to the development of the following research questions:

1. How do HBCUs interpret the types of student learning outcomes that meet regional accrediting agency standards?
 - a. What is a “Student Learning Outcome?”
 - b. What is “Assessment” in relation to Student Learning Outcomes?
2. What are the strategies that the HBCUs under examination currently use to manage academic programs in order to meet student learning outcomes that are compatible with regional accreditation standards?
3. What approaches can HBCUs implement to successfully meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment?

This dissertation used a qualitative research approach designed to provide an in-depth investigation into the study of institutional accreditation and the effectiveness of assessing student learning outcomes in higher education. Creswell (2009) implied that Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting,

data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.

Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters. A complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surround the term *qualitative research*. These include the traditions associated with foundationalism, positivism, postfoundationalism, postpositivism, poststructuralism, and the many qualitative research perspectives, and/or methods connected to cultural and interpretive studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative research is also a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

According to Creswell (2007), there are two main questions that have to be considered when using qualitative research.

When is it Appropriate to use Qualitative Research?

We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can then be measured, or hear silenced voices. These are all good

reasons to explore a problem rather than to use predetermined information from the literature or rely on results from other research studies. We also conduct qualitative research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power of relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study.

What Does it Take to Engage in this Form of Research?

To undertake qualitative research requires a strong commitment to study a problem and demands time and resources. Qualitative research keeps good company with the most rigorous quantitative research, and it should not be viewed as an easy substitute for a “statistical” or quantitative study. Qualitative inquiry is for the researcher who is willing to do the following:

- Commit to extensive time in the field. The investigator spends many hours in the field, collects extensive data, and labors over field issues of trying to gain access, rapport, and an “insider” perspective.
- Engage in the complex, time-consuming process of data analysis through the ambitious task of sorting through large amounts of data and reducing them to a few themes or categories.
- Write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate claims and the writer needs to show multiple perspectives. The incorporation of quotes to provide participants’ perspectives also lengthens the study.
- Participate in a form of social and human science research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and constantly changing (Creswell, 2009).

Strategies of Inquiry

Strategies of Inquiries are types of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs or models that provide specific direction for procedures in a research design. In qualitative research, the numbers and types of approaches have become more clearly visible during the 1990s and into the 21st century. Creswell (2009) asserted that some of the following qualitative strategies are:

- *Ethnography* is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily, observational and interview data.
- *Grounded Theory* is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants. This process involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information.
- *Case Studies* are a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time.
- *Phenomenological Research* is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants. Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning.
- *Narrative Research* is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then often retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology.

I decided to use the case study approach in my qualitative study, because it involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system. It also gives the researcher a chance to use various sources of data.

Case Study Research Method

According to Yin (2009), using case studies for research purposes remains one of the most challenging of all social science endeavors. As a research method, the case study is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena. Not surprisingly, the case study has been a common research method in psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, social work, business, education, nursing, and community planning. Case studies are even found in economics, in which the structure of a given industry or the economy of a city or a region may be investigated.

Yin (2009) recommends that the researcher must decide on whether a single case or multiple case approach should be used to answer the research question prior to beginning data collection. The researcher should select some phenomenon in need of explanation from the everyday life of the university or school. Some good examples are, why the university or school changed a policy, or how it makes decisions about its curriculum requirements. The researcher should then design a case study protocol to collect the information needed to make an adequate explanation. The 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. A case study

protocol has only one thing in common with a survey questionnaire: both are directed at a single data point.

Yin (2009) pointed out that another preparatory step is the final selection of the case(s) to be part of your case study. Sometimes, the selection is straightforward because you have chosen to study a unique case whose identity has been known from the outset of your inquiry. Or, you already may know the case you will study because of some special arrangement or access that you have. My study involves a single case that includes four institutions of higher learning because of the nature of accreditation. Yin emphasized that single-case designs are vulnerable if only because you would have placed all of your eggs in one particular basket. More important, the analytic benefits from having two (or more) cases may be substantial.

Site Selection and Unit of Analysis

Yin (2009) indicated that the sites or individuals or some other entity depends on your unit of analysis. The screening may consist of people knowledgeable about each site. The researcher may even collect limited documentation about each site. If doing a single case study, choose the case that is likely to yield the best data.

I have narrowed the potential sites for this study to four historically black institutions. These institutions are located in the southern region and are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), or the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS). These institutions were analyzed based on current data and how well they were able to conquer the accreditation problems in assessment and student learning outcomes. I conducted my research at John

Aaron College, Thomas Henson University, Simon Wiltz College and David Kemmer University.

John Aaron College

John Aaron College was founded by a small group of African Methodist Episcopal preachers in the southern part of the United States in 1878. The school's original purpose was to educate freed slaves and their offsprings. The college was housed in a modest one-building trade school where newly freed slaves were taught the skills of blacksmithing, carpentry, tanning, and saddle work (John Aaron College, 2011a).

Later, under the direction of Bishop John Aaron, A.M.E. districts were developed throughout the South and tasked with raising funds to improve the college. The college's curriculum also expanded during this time to include the subjects of Latin, mathematics, music, theology, English, carpentry, sewing, and household, kitchen, and dining room work. As the value of the college became more apparent, the campus was expanded. New buildings were constructed with capital raised from interested patrons (John Aaron College, 2011b).

Dr. Samuel R. Kane became President of the College in 1969. Under his leadership, the physical plant of the college continued to improve. The most significant development under Dr. Kane was the full accreditation of the college with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) for the first time in 1972. Today, John Aaron College is accredited by the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and

Schools (TRACS). The present enrollment is now 243 students under the administration of President Edward Hillcrest (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a).

Thomas Henson University

Thomas Henson University (THU) is a comprehensive urban coeducational land-grant university founded in 1912 in the southern part of the United States. The university was named after Dr. Thomas Henson, a pioneer in higher education. The 500-acre main campus, with more than 65 buildings, is located in a residential setting; the Nolan Campus is a branch that's located downtown, near the business and government district. Through successive stages, THU has developed from a normal school for Negroes to its current status as a national university with students from 44 states and 45 countries (Thomas Henson University, 2010).

By virtue of a 1909 Act of the General Assembly, the Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School was created, along with two other normal schools. However, THU began serving students on June 19, 1912. In 1922, the institution was raised to the status of a four-year teachers' college and was empowered to grant the bachelor's degree. The first degrees were granted in June 1926. During the same year, the institution became known as the Agricultural and Industrial State Normal College. In 1929, "Normal" was dropped from the name of the college (Thomas Henson University, 2010).

Accreditation of the institution by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools was first obtained in 1946. In August 1953, the institution was granted university status by approval of the State Board of Education. The reorganization of the institution's educational program included the establishment of the Graduate School, the

School of Arts & Sciences, the School of Education, and the School of Engineering. Provisions were also made for the later addition of other schools in agriculture, business, and home economics (Thomas Henson University, 2010).

Frank C. Lester was installed as president in October 2006, making him only the seventh president in the university's nearly 100 years. The THU of today offers 45 bachelor's degrees and 24 master's degrees and awards doctoral degrees in eight areas: biological sciences, computer information systems, engineering, psychology, public administration, curriculum and instruction, administration and supervision, and physical therapy (Thomas Henson University, 2010). The present enrollment is now 8,883 students under the administration of Dr. Gilda Turner (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.c).

Simon Wiltz College

Simon Wiltz College is a four-year, privately-supported, historically black college located on the west side of the Southern Region. The college was founded in 1873 and was named in honor of Bishop Simon P. Wiltz, an outstanding minister, medical missionary and educator (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a).

The College was founded by the Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the purpose of providing education to the "newly freed men" and preparing them for a new life. The College is currently affiliated with the United Methodist Church. Increasingly, students of other races, as well as international students, are finding Simon Wiltz College to be an attractive place to acquire a college education (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a).

Simon Wiltz College is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate and baccalaureate degrees (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.b). The college serves traditional and non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds that have expressed a desire and potential for learning in a Christian environment. The College also fulfills its basic purpose of promoting student competencies in communication, as well as, critical and analytical thinking (Simon Wiltz College, 2011).

Simon Wiltz College had many presidents through the years that were considered as visionaries. Alan Fargo, Sr. (1897-1943) was to become the most prolific and longest-sitting President to grace the halls of Simon Wiltz College. Two of Wiltz's most outstanding faculty members served during Fargo's tenure. One was a great educator and the other was a distinguished drama professor (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a).

In 1962, Simon Wiltz College was admitted to full membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. This occurred during the administration of Dr. Benjamin Johnson, who was also a graduate of Wiltz College (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a).

Under the administration of Dr. James Conroe (1993-1996), significant accomplishments included the reaffirmation of accreditation by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Dr. Conroe continued the initiative to increase the number of Ph.Ds. on the faculty and brought about outstanding improvements in the educational programs via a Fulbright Faculty Seminar in Japan in 1994 (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a).

Two other presidents were credited with enhancing the academic experience and increasing technological capabilities for students. In 2000, Dr. Nelson P. Truce became the new President and is still holding that office today. He is also responsible for renovating and refurbishing every campus facility. Under Dr. Truce's administration, the college had its accreditation reaffirmed to the year 2013 (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a). During the year of 2013, Simon Wiltz College received another reaffirmation of accreditation (King, 2013).

There is an unyielding conviction among the faculty and administration today that learning occurs best in an environment that is academically challenging, and supportive (Simon Wiltz College, n.d.a). The present enrollment is now 1,392 students under the administration of Dr. Nelson P. Truce (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b).

David Kemmer University

David Kemmer University is affiliated with The United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). The university is a coeducational college of liberal arts and sciences that was named after the legendary Bishop David Kemmer (David Kemmer University, n.d.).

The university is accredited or approved by the following bodies: the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the University Senate of the Methodist Church, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the Association of American Colleges, the National Committee on Accrediting, the Council for Higher

Education of the United Church of Christ, the State Education Agency, and the Association of State Colleges (Handbook of Southern States Online, n.d.).

David Kemmer University awards undergraduate four-year degrees in business, education, the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences and science and technology. As a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith institution, the university welcomes students of all ages, races, and religions. During the early 1970s, new buildings included a classroom-administration building, a chapel, an addition of three wings to the women's dormitory, and an addition of two wings to the men's dormitory (David Kemmer University, n.d.).

Several presidents presided over David Kemmer University through the years. However, B. J. Shumate was the first permanent president of David Kemmer University. Upon Shumate's retirement in 1966, Morgan J. Rice became president. Rice retired in 1988 and Alfred L. Blaine succeeded him. Then, Jacob E. Spencer later became the fifth president of the University in 2000 and moved the institution to university status (David Kemmer University, n.d.). The present enrollment is now 973 students under the administration of Dr. Jacob E. Spencer (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.d).

Participant Selection and Purposeful Sampling Strategy

Merriam (1998) indicated that purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most information about sampling can be learned. To begin purposive sampling, you must first determine what selection *criteria* are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied. Some authors prefer the term *criterion-*

based selection to the terms *purposive* or *purposeful* sampling. In criterion-based selection you “create a list of the attributes essential” to your study and then “proceed to find or locate a unit matching the list.” The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases. You not only spell out the criteria you will use, but you say why the criteria are important.

In my study, a purposeful sampling technique was used. The use of purposively selected participants enabled the researcher to have access to the information that is required for the study. Merriam (1998) believes that the researcher must first identify the case, the bounded system, or unit of analysis to be investigated. In my study, the boundary is established by four institutions and the faculty, administrators or accreditation team who worked on the self-study in order to meet the standards of reaffirmation. The research protocol plan was centered around personnel from different academic programs that were involved in the accreditation process. This included the president, deans, administrators, faculty members and staff who spent time working on the self-study.

In my research, a total of 39 participants were selected from four institutions [pseudonyms]. The following four tables will illustrate site selection, job titles, number of participants, and total student population.

Table 3

Site Selected and Number of Participants at John Aaron College

Institution/Job Titles	Number of Participants	Student Population
John Aaron College	Four	243
President Vice President of Academic Affairs Assistant Professor of English Associate Professor of Biology		

Table 4

Site Selected and Number of Participants at David Kemmer University

Institution/Job Titles	Number of Participants	Student Population
David Kemmer University	Eleven	973
President & CEO Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs Associate Provost Director of Human Resource Planning at the City University near Kemmer University Vice Chancellor for the Office of Strategic Initiatives for the State University System Director of Institutional Planning, Research and Assessment Director of the Center for Academic Excellence Administrative Assistant/Survey Coordinator-Institutional Planning, Research and Assessment Department Chair of Business Administration/Assistant Professor Professor of Psychology Interim Dean of the College of Arts, Sciences/Professor of Kinesiology		

Table 5

Site Selected and Number of Participants at Simon Wiltz College

Institution/Job Titles	Number of Participants	Student Population
Simon Wiltz College	Eleven	1, 392
Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Services Vice President for Information Systems and Technology Dean of the Division of General Education and Special Studies and Assistant Professor of Education Director of Criminal Justice/Assistant Professor Associate Director, Institutional Research, Planning, Assessment/Effectiveness Director, Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment Executive Assistant to the Executive Vice President/Provost and Director of SACSCOC Compliance Faculty Members		

Table 6

Site Selected and Number of Participants at Thomas Henson University

Institution/Job Titles	Number of Participants	Student Population
Thomas Henson University	Thirteen	8, 883
Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs-Institutional Planning and Assessment Director of Institutional Planning and Assessment Executive Director for Community College Initiatives Director of the WRITE Program/Associate Professor for the Department of Languages, Literature, and Philosophy Dean of Libraries and Media Centers Administrators Faculty Members		

The selection of participants to interview was very critical to the study. Each participant played a big part in the accreditation process. The president of the institution and faculty members were selected carefully according to their participation during the reaffirmation of accreditation process. Some participants were asked to be a part of the interview process, but many of them volunteered after recommendations were made by the president of the college or university.

Entry to the Sites

The tasks of contacting appropriate individuals at the inquiry site and of gaining entrée have both formal and informal aspects. These aspects may, moreover, take varying forms depending on whether the inquiry is research, evaluation, or policy analysis. In the case of evaluation or policy analysis, the inquiry is *commissioned* by some person or body that has the authority to do so, that is, official gatekeepers such as the superintendent of schools, the director of a hospital, the board of trustees of a company, or a legislative body. The commission provides the inquirer with de facto access, but that fact does not ensure cooperation at other levels. Access provided by the school board, for example, by no means guarantees that the superintendent or other central office personnel, principals, teachers, parents, or other individuals or groups will automatically provide whatever the inquirer asks of them. Contact must also be made with unofficial gatekeepers, who, while perhaps lacking authority, may nevertheless be empowered by the influence they wield (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher confronts a more difficult task, for an initial commission is nearly always lacking (although some applied research is sponsored by local authorities).

Further, while evaluation and policy analysis are almost always carried out with respect to some particular organization or other well-defined group, research often is not.

Clearly the problems of making contact and gaining entrée are multiplied many times in the research situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The keys to access are almost always in the hands of multiple gatekeepers, both formal and informal. In most cases those gatekeepers, before giving assent, will want to be informed about the inquiry in ways that will permit them to assess the costs and the risks that it will pose, both for themselves and for the groups to which they control access (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Initial Contact

During my initial contact, John Aaron College and Thomas Henson University were experiencing problems with the accreditation of assessment and student learning outcomes. Even though David Kemmer University experienced the denial of reaffirmation in the past because of student learning outcomes, they were able to make improvements. However, Simon Wiltz College has been able to maintain full accreditation for years.

Several administrators assisted me in making contact with the gatekeepers of each institution. I made several contacts through written letters, and e-mails. Also, a telephone call was used as a follow-up plan to contact interview participants at each institution. At each college and university, the president, vice presidents, deans, administrators, faculty members and staff were contacted.

Maxwell (2005) believes that these people are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event. It is important to reach out through a purposeful sampling to the administrators and faculty members who have been involved in the accreditation process.

Data Collection Strategies

Creswell (2009) indicated that in many qualitative studies, inquirers collect multiple forms of data and spend a considerable amount of time in the natural setting of gathering information. He pointed out four basic sources of collecting data. They are: qualitative observations, qualitative interviews, qualitative documents, and qualitative audio and visual materials. However, according to Yin (2009), there are six sources of evidence that can be used for collecting data in case studies. They are: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. No single source has a complete advantage over all the others. In fact, the various sources are highly complementary, and a good researcher will want to use as many sources as possible in his or her study. Among the six sources of data collection strategies, I used the following sources:

Direct Observation

These observations can range from formal to casual data collection activities. This can involve observations of meetings and classroom activities. Less formally, direct observations might be made throughout a field visit, including those occasions during which other evidence, such as that from interviews, is being collected. For instance, the condition of buildings or work spaces will indicate something about the

climate or impoverishment of an organization; similarly, the location or the furnishings of an interviewee's office may be one indicator of the status of the interviewee within an organization (Yin, 2009).

I received permission from the colleges to participate in direct observation of the school activities involved in the accreditation process. This included observing a faculty member in their classroom or sitting in on various meetings that were pertinent to my study. I took field notes of the participants' behaviors and entered them as data in my log. Direct observations were made throughout the field visits while doing my research.

Documentation

Yin (2009) stated that documentary information is likely to be relevant to every case study topic. This type of information can take many forms and should be the object of explicit data collection plans. The following list of items can be considered as documents. Fortunately, most of these documents were available for me to use:

- Letters, memoranda, e-mail correspondence, and other personal documents, such as diaries, calendars, and notes;
- Agendas, announcements and minutes of meetings, and other written reports of events;
- Administrative documents-proposals, progress reports, and other internal records;
- Formal studies or evaluations of the same "case" that you are studying; and
- News clippings and other articles appearing in the mass media or in community newspapers.

Some, but not all of these types of documents are increasingly and legally available through internet searches. The documents are useful even though they are not always accurate and may not be lacking in bias. In fact, documents must be carefully used and should not be accepted as literal recordings of events that have taken place. Yin (2009) pointed out that documents are helpful not only to verify the correct spelling and title of names but can be used to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources.

I conducted a document search for important information to be used in my study. I used the internet search during the first phase of my research by looking for any press releases and news accounts of accreditation and student learning outcomes. As I gathered important documents, I transferred the information to index cards. I found details relating to my study, because the documents revealed who, when, what, and how of the accreditation process.

Archival Records

An archival record is closely related to document analysis. It often takes the form of computer files and records such as those used in the U.S. Census data.

Examples of archival records include:

- “public use files” such as the U.S. census and other statistical data made available by federal, state, and local governments;
- service records, such as those showing the number of clients served over a given period of time;
- organizational records, such as budget or personnel records;
- maps and charts of the geographical characteristics of a place; and

- survey data, such as data previously collected about a site's employees, residents, or participants (Yin, 2009).

These and other archival records can be used in conjunction with other sources of information in producing a case study. However, unlike documentary evidence, the usefulness of these archival records will vary from case study to case study (Yin, 2009). I was able to retrieve some of these archival records while conducting my study. The archival records that I used were: (1) maps and charts of the geographical area, (2) survey data about the participants that I interviewed and (3) organizational records, such as policies and procedures used by the institution. Through analysis of this data, I constructed my dissertation in a format that shows how effective accreditation can be in higher education.

Interviews

Yin (2009) indicated that one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview. Such an observation may be surprising because of the usual association between interviews and the survey method. However, interviews also are essential sources of case study information. The interviews will be guided conversations rather than structured queries. In other words, although you will be pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, your actual stream of questions in a case study interview is likely to be fluid rather than rigid.

Note that this means that, throughout the interview process, you have two jobs: (a) to follow your own line of inquiry, as reflected by your case study protocol, and (b) to ask your actual (conversational) questions in an unbiased manner that also serves the needs of your line of inquiry. One type of case study interview is an *in-depth interview*.

You can ask key respondents about the facts of a matter as well as their opinions about events. A second type of case study interview is a *focused interview*, in which a person is interviewed for a short period of time—an hour, for example. In such cases, the interviews may still remain open-ended and assume a conversational manner, but you are more likely to be following a certain set of questions derived from the case study protocol (Yin, 2009). I used the focused interview while conducting my research because of the large number of participants at these institutions.

Development of the Interview Protocol

Yin's (2009) approach to the development of the interview protocol consists of the who, what, where, how, and why of the issue being investigated. Yin believes in keeping the attributes of systems theory (inputs, throughputs, and outputs) in mind as the protocol is developed. The protocol will be relatively consistent from interview to interview so that findings can be drawn from the differences in how individuals respond to the protocol questions. All interviews will be documented through interviewer notes and by receiving permission to tape the interview. Relevant observations and supporting data will be added later to the interview.

Creswell (2009) stated that in developing an interview protocol or guide, the researcher might ask an ice breaker question at the beginning, for example, followed by five or so subquestions in the study. The interview would then end with an additional wrap-up or summary question.

I chose the questions for my research study based on the requirements for accreditation, and the procedures that each institution used in order to prepare for

reaffirmation. Each institution had different policies and procedures that they used for enhancing and improving the area of student learning outcomes and assessment.

Trustworthiness

I believe that it was important to establish trustworthiness in my case study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is how can the inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked that would be persuasive on this issue? Within the conventional paradigm, the criteria that have evolved in response to these questions are termed “internal validity,” “external validity,” “reliability,” and “objectivity.”

Internal validity may be defined in conventional terms as the extent to which variations in an outcome (dependent) variable can be attributed to controlled variation in an independent variable. *External validity* may be defined, as “the approximate validity with which we infer that the presumed causal relationship can be generalized to and across alternate measures of the cause and effect and across different types of persons, settings, and times” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 291). *Reliability* is typically held to be synonymous with “dependability, stability, consistency, predictability, and accuracy” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 292). *Objectivity* is usually played off against subjectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Yin (2009) believes that in order to increase the *reliability* of the information in a case study, the researcher must maintain a chain of evidence. To ensure trustworthiness in my research findings, I have chosen to implement the following criteria:

- **Triangulation: Rationale for using multiple sources of evidence.** According to Yin (2009), a major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence. Furthermore, the need to use multiple sources of evidence far exceeds that in other research methods, such as experiments, surveys, or histories. The use of multiple sources of evidence in case studies allows an investigator to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues. However, the most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of *converging lines of inquiry*. Yin (2009) pointed out that *data triangulation* is the process of collecting information from multiple sources. However, with data triangulation, the potential problems of *construct validity* also can be addressed because the multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon. I used data triangulation in my research and spent time cross referencing the accreditation procedures that the institutions were using. I then used triangulation by contacting the gatekeepers of each institution. I also asked multiple questions during the interview process and used a variety of records from each institution to guide me in organizing my research.
- Use **rich, thick description** to convey the findings. This description may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences. When qualitative researchers provide detailed descriptions of the setting, the results become more realistic and richer. This procedure can add to the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2009). During the interviews, I listened and observed carefully. This gave me a chance to provide the information that was needed to answer various research questions.
- **Self-reflection.** Creswell (2009) stated that reflectivity has been mentioned as a core characteristic of qualitative research. Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background. I continued to self-reflect so that I could create an open and honest narrative that would resonate well with readers. I kept a professional log of names, locations, dates and times for an audit check. I also used a personal journal to keep track of my methodological decisions.
- **Member checks.** The member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. Member checking is both informal and formal, and it occurs continuously. A summary of an interview can be “played back” to the person who provided it for reaction; the output of one interview can be “played” for another respondent who can be asked to comment; insights gleaned from one group can be tested

with another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the member check process, I took the data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived, and asked the interviewees to comment on the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- **Well-established operational procedures.** Yin (2009) recommended using multiple sources of evidence. During the process of my research, I was very careful in collecting the right data, transcribing the interviews and observations, and transferring that information to index cards. I used reliability and objectivity throughout the interview process. Before the interview, I selected my participants and asked them for permission to record the interview session. After the interview, I reviewed my written notes and cross-referenced them with the recorded conversations that we had. As I found mistakes in my transcriptions, I corrected them by using multiple sources of evidence.
- **Spend prolonged time in the field.** In this way, the researcher develops an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey details about the site and the people that lend credibility to the narrative account. The more experience that a researcher has with participants in their actual setting, the more accurate or valid will be the findings (Creswell, 2009). I organized field visits that were realistic, and that enhanced my knowledge of the study that I pursued.

Researcher as Data Collection Tool

The specification of data collection tools is crucial in the conventional design not only because the instruments are the means for collecting data but also because they are, simultaneously, the *operational definitions* of the variables involved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this sort of research, the researcher is seen as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Qualitative data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through other instruments (Punch, 2006).

Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants. They may use a protocol (an instrument for collecting data) but the researchers are the ones who actually gather the

information. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers. Qualitative researchers also typically gather multiple forms of data, which includes interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. Then the researchers review all of the data, make sense of it, and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources (Creswell, 2009).

Creswell (2009) indicated that a researcher must be able to write a passage into a proposal on the procedures for validating the findings that will be undertaken in a study. Proposal developers need to convey the steps they will take in their studies to check for the accuracy and credibility of their findings. Validity does not carry the same connotations in qualitative research as it does in quantitative research, nor is it a companion of reliability (examining stability or consistency of responses) or generalizability (the external validity of applying results to new settings, people, or samples). *Qualitative validity* means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while *qualitative reliability* indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects.

There are several ways in which qualitative researchers can check to determine if their approaches are consistent or reliable. They are:

- Check transcripts to make sure that they do not contain obvious mistakes made during transcription.
- Make sure that there is not a drift in the definition of codes, a shift in the meaning of the codes during the process of coding. This can be accomplished by constantly comparing data with the codes and by writing memos about the codes and their definitions.

- For team research, coordinate the communication among the coders by regular documented meetings and by sharing the analysis.
- Cross-check codes developed by different researchers by comparing results that are independently derived (Creswell, 2009).

Researchers need to include several of these procedures as evidence that they will have consistent results in their proposed study of research. Creswell (2009) recommends that several procedures should be mentioned in a proposal and that single researchers find another person who can cross-check their codes, for what he calls *intercoder agreement* (or cross-checking). Such an agreement might be based on whether two or more coders agree on codes used for the same passages in the text (it is not that they code the same passage of text, but whether another coder would code it with the same or a similar code). Statistical procedures or reliability subprograms in qualitative computer software packages can then be used to determine the level of consistency of coding.

Validity, on the other hand, is one of the strengths of qualitative research, and it is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account. Terms abound in the qualitative literature that speak to this idea are *trustworthiness*, *authenticity*, and *credibility* (Creswell, 2009).

Creswell (2009) specified that an *interview protocol* can be used for asking questions and recording answers during a qualitative interview. This protocol includes the following components:

- A heading (date, place, interviewer, interviewee)

- Instructions for the interviewer to follow so that standard procedures are used from one interview to another
- The questions (typically an ice-breaker question) at the beginning followed by 4-5 questions that are often the subquestions in a qualitative research plan, followed by some concluding statement or a question, such as, “Who should I visit with to learn more about my questions?”
- Probes for the 4-5 questions, to follow up and ask individuals to explain their ideas in more detail or to elaborate on what they have said
- Space between the questions to record responses
- A final thank-you statement to acknowledge the time the interviewee spent during the interview (Creswell, 2009).

Researchers often record information from interviews by making handwritten notes, by audiotaping, or by videotaping. Even if an interview is taped, Creswell (2009) recommends that researchers take notes, in the event that recording equipment fails. If audiotaping is used, researchers need to plan in advance for the transcription of the tape. The recording of documents and visual materials can be based on the researcher’s structure for taking notes. Typically, notes reflect information about the document or other material as well as key ideas in the documents. It is helpful to note whether the information represents primary material (information directly from the people or situation under study) or secondary material (second-hand accounts of the people or situation written by others). It is also helpful to comment on the reliability and value of the data source (Creswell, 2009).

As a researcher, I served as the instrument used to conduct this qualitative study. I addressed the issues of accreditation that were found through research. I also focused

on the effectiveness of institutional management and the assessment of student learning outcomes at four historically black institutions. This was done through interviews, the self-study report, the unsuccessful accreditation report, school documents, school morale and communication with school personnel.

Other Data Gathering Techniques

Other data gathering techniques consisted of the following:

1. Communications with SACS through e-mails.
2. Letters and e-mails sent to colleges and universities to schedule interviews.
3. Follow-up telephone calls concerning interview scheduling.
4. Interviews with presidents, deans, administrators, faculty members and staff at colleges and universities in this study.

These data gathering techniques were appropriate for the study because they involved all of the faculty leaders who worked on the self-study or written summary of performance. A self-study that is well done identifies weaknesses as well as strengths. These findings are usually corroborated by a site visit team, and the team may also identify additional opportunities through which the institution could be more effective (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2007). Data collected from the list of interview questions will be presented in the following chapter.

Confidentiality

As a researcher, I selected the sites of four HBCUs for conducting my research. After the sites were selected, the next step was to get an approval from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board and identify participants at each institution. An *official letter* (Appendix A) was sent to all participating institutions explaining the

purpose of the study. Several phone calls and e-mails were sent to the Office of Institutional Planning, Research and Assessment at each institution. After a period of time, all four HBCUs responded in reference to their participation in this study.

As the researcher embarked on the campus of each institution, *flyers* (Appendix B) were issued to the gatekeepers in order to contact interview participants. Some participants were recommended by the President or an administrator. Whereas, other interviewees volunteered when they were aware of the research study being conducted on their campus. A list of 26 *interview questions* (Appendix C) was e-mailed to each participant prior to the interview session. Before the interview session began, a *Consent Form of Participation* (Appendix D) outlining the project title, purpose, risk and/or benefits, and confidentiality of the study was signed by the researcher and the interview participant. Each interviewee was also given a copy of *Your Rights as a Research Participant* (Appendix E) and *Your Responsibilities as a Research Participant* (Appendix F). Each interview session ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. During this time, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and why they were asked to participate. The majority of the interview participants held doctoral degrees and were familiar with the significance of the process.

The researcher reminded participants that pseudonyms would be used in place of their names as well as the institutions. Protecting the confidentiality of the participants in this study was a vital component in organizing my research. No data about participants was shared with anyone other than the interviewee and the

Dissertation Committee Chair. For security purposes, I transcribed all of my interviews and kept the information in a locked confidential file cabinet.

Each interviewee was audio-taped during the interview sessions. However, two participants at John Aaron College and two at David Kemmer University did their interviews through dictation. All interviewees answered 26 questions with the exception of one interviewee from David Kemmer University. Due to other obligations, all questions were not answered by this interview participant. *Follow-up e-mails* were sent to each interview participant and/or designated administrator thanking them for allowing the researcher to visit their institution.

The data for this research was collected from August, 2012 through April, 2013. The documents issued by the institution, materials collected and interviews conducted were used to ensure triangulation in the findings. Also, four tables have been designed to illustrate the demographics of each interview participant at the four institutions (Appendices G, H, I, and J). After the visitations were completed, the interviews were transcribed and each transcription was e-mailed back to the participants for member check. The data from the interviews were then broken into units of meaning and concepts.

Analytic Process

Grounded Theory

My data analysis is partially based on Grounded Theory strategies. The presentation of Grounded Theory, developed through analysis of qualitative data, is often sufficiently plausible to satisfy most readers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The

basic idea of the Grounded Theory approach is to read (and re-read) a textual database (such as a corpus of field notes) and “discover” or label variables (called categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships (Borgatti, n.d.).

Grounded Theory is also a comparative method in which the researcher compares data with data, data with categories, and category with category. Coding is the first step in taking an analytic stance toward the data. The initial coding phase in Grounded Theory forces the researcher to define the action in the data statement. By engaging in line-by-line coding, the researcher makes a close study of the data and lays the foundation for synthesizing it (Charmaz, 2005).

Coding gives a researcher analytic scaffolding on which to build. Because researchers study their empirical materials closely, they can define both new leads from them and gaps in them. Each piece of data whether an interview, a field note, a case study, a personal account, or a document can be made to inform earlier data. Thus, should a researcher discover a lead through developing a code in one interview, he or she can go back through earlier interviews and take a fresh look as to whether this code sheds light on earlier data (Charmaz, 2005).

The basic objective of coding is to extract key words and other ‘meaningful chunks’ from the haystack of data that will allow a *Grounded Theory* to be developed. The individual codes thus provide both inspiration and verification. Data that provides the material from which codes are extracted is often largely based on observer notes, logs, diaries, etc. Additional data may also be found in items such as published and

unpublished documents, papers, books, public records, letters, photographs, videos and assorted artifacts (Straker, 2008).

As a qualitative researcher, I started my data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview or observation. Then I read the interview transcripts, and observational notes or documents that I eventually analyzed. During this reading, I wrote notes and memos, and developed tentative ideas about categories and relationships. In qualitative research, the goal of coding is not to count things, but to *fracture* the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category, and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts. Another form of categorizing analysis involves organizing the data into broader themes and issues (Maxwell, 2005).

Open Coding

Coding starts with open coding, in which codes are identified without any restrictions or purpose other than to discover nuggets of meaning. The main secret of open coding is a mental openness that allows for the discovery of the unexpected along with a curiosity that does not allow for final closure, even after texts have been read and codes identified from it. Open coding is particularly about labeling and categorizing of phenomena. This must be a careful activity as names come with many connotations. The constant comparative method may be used by constantly comparing each piece of data with codes and notes already identified. Open coding is about opening up lines of inquiry (Straker, 2008). There are a number of ways to do open coding. However, I used the line-by-line method in which every sentence and every word is coded. This

method allowed me to build concepts and categories in an organized manner (Khandkar, 2009).

Memoing

Memos are theoretical notes that occur to the researcher as they are coding and may at some time lead to the discovery of categories and may cause the researcher to go back to the data to explore more. Memos may identify concepts, half-formed ideas, action notes and other thinking that is a first step towards making cohesive sense from the data (Straker, 2008). I focused on memo writing, because the memo can be used to pose questions about the interview, highlight curiosities and identify puzzles in the data. Memos, categories and codes may be sorted at any time, looking for relationships between them and priorities of the people involved when they need to make choices. This is also called *data ordering* (Straker, 2008).

Categories

A critical aspect of coding is the identification and naming of *categories*, such as ‘greeting people’ or ‘vehicle breakdown.’ Codes that lead to discovery of a ‘greeting’ category might come from observation of encounters with other people in which particular rituals and the significance is identified. Categories can also include *sub-categories*, such as ‘shaking hands’ or ‘removing the wheel.’ Categories can include the following:

- Contextual conditions
- Properties
- Interactions
- Strategies and tactics
- Actions

- Consequences of actions (Straker, 2008).

Category construction begins with reading the first interview transcript, the first set of field notes, and the first document collected in the study. As the researcher reads through the transcript, notes, comments, observations, and queries should be written in the margins. Categories should reflect the purpose of the research and should be as sensitive as possible to what is in the data. The number of categories a researcher constructs depend on the data and the focus of the research. Once the researcher is satisfied with the set of categories derived from the data, the categories can be fleshed out and made more robust by searching through the data for more and better units of relevant information. Four basic strategies for organizing all the data in preparation for further analysis, or for writing the results of the study include using index cards, file folders, information retrieval cards, and computer programs. Each unit of information can be put onto a separate *index card* and coded according to any number of categories ranging from situational factors (who, what, when, where) to categories representing emerging themes or concepts (Merriam, 1998).

As a researcher, I conducted interviews at each institution, and collected additional data from reports and notes from group meetings. The interviews were transcribed and the data was broken into units of meaning and concepts. These units were then coded according to their meaning and placed on index cards. After completing this procedure, I coded the answers from the interview questions and divided them into categories. The following questions were answered as I raised the code to a category:

1. What are the properties of the category?
2. Under what conditions does this category occur?
3. How and when does the category change?
4. What are the consequences?
5. How does this category relate to other categories? (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In the final analysis, I reviewed the data coded on the cards by categories and subcategories. Then I linked them together to represent themes that were used to organize certain topics.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three summarizes the qualitative Methodology approach utilized to examine accreditation at four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the SACS region. The research topic for this study focused on the accreditation experience and how it affected the institutional assessment of student learning outcomes. The case study approach was used in order to investigate accreditation problems and to collect the information that was pertinent to my research.

Data was collected at each institution in the form of interviews, observations, school documents and other school materials. The interview participants consisted of presidents, deans, administrators, faculty members and staff on the accreditation team at each of the four institutions.

An overview of trustworthiness was also used in my study to show the importance of internal validity, external validity, and reliability of the information that I collected. To ensure trustworthiness in my research findings, I implemented triangulation, member check, a rich, thick description to convey the findings, well-established operational procedures, self-reflection, and spending a prolonged time in the field. Other qualitative techniques used in the Methodology section is derived from the *Grounded Theory* approach. This approach includes open coding, line-by-line coding, memoing, comparing categories, and developing themes. The next chapter presents the data collected using the various methods previously mentioned. The primary data collection Methodology were the individual interviews. However, document analysis, archival records, and other data were collected and will be presented in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS OF DATA FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will present the findings and interpretation of the data collected from four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The purpose of my dissertation is to explore the accreditation problems of student learning outcomes and assessment, and evaluate the strategies and procedures used in solving these problems at each institution. Emphasis in this study is placed on the management of academic programs and the improvement of student learning outcomes and assessment on the collegiate level.

In this study, several factors have contributed to the successful accreditation and reaffirmation process of the four institutions. The results of the institutional interviews conducted, news articles, online documentation, the SACS and TRACS evaluation reports and school records were analyzed to demonstrate triangulation in the findings and to strengthen the analysis of the data presented. My data analysis was focused on answering the following research questions. The first research question was divided into three sections. They are listed below:

Research Questions

1. How do HBCUs interpret the types of student learning outcomes that meet regional accrediting agency standards?
 - a. What is a “Student Learning Outcome?”
 - b. What is “Assessment” in relation to Student Learning Outcomes?

2. What are the strategies that the HBCUs under examination currently use to manage academic programs in order to meet student learning outcomes that are compatible with regional accreditation standards?
3. What approaches can HBCUs implement to successfully meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment?

Interview questions with the participants were centered on their involvement in the accreditation process, the goals and objectives from each department and materials used in assessment. Each interviewee was able to explain how their participation contributed to a successful reaffirmation. The reaffirmation was decided by two regional accreditors. In the following section, I will report on findings from the document analysis of accrediting agencies.

Purpose of Regional Accreditation

As a review, the purpose of Regional Accreditation is to provide quality assurance for institutions in order to fulfill their missions and advance academic quality. They also must demonstrate accountability and encourage change for needed improvement. The work of regional accrediting organizations involves hundreds of self-evaluations and site visits each year. Also, thousands of higher education volunteer professionals participate in the accreditation process (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2006).

After analyzing online and written documents from SACS and TRACS, I found that there has been an emergent focus on student learning and assessment that has created new challenges for regional institutional accreditation over the last 15 years (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003). One challenge is the *Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)* which is mandatory for all institutions. A QEP

must include a broad-based institutional process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment and focuses on learning outcomes and the environment that supports student learning. The QEP also identifies goals and a plan to assess achievement as a way of accomplishing the mission of the institution (Provezis, 2010). The following paragraphs will focus on the duties of the two regional organizations that supported the reaffirmation of accreditation for the four institutions in my study.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

SACSCOC, also known as SACS, focuses on educational effectiveness for the academic development of all students in the southern region. SACSCOC has recently been the most active of the regional organizations in its public sanctioning of institutions, because most HBCUs depend on SACSCOC for official endorsement (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, Tudico, and Schmid, 2007). The Commission on Colleges requires that a member institution be in compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* and its Core Requirements, comply with Commission policies and procedures, and provide information requested by the Commission in order to maintain membership and accreditation (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2005). The following institutions (pseudonyms used) in my study were reaffirmed for accreditation and received full membership in SACSCOC:

1. Thomas Henson University
2. Simon Wiltz College
3. David Kemmer University

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS)

TRACS is recognized by both the United States Department of Education (USDOE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as a national institutional accrediting agency for Christian postsecondary institutions, colleges, universities, and seminaries. TRACS is authorized to pre-accredit and accredit institutions offering certificates; diplomas; and associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees; including institutions that offer distance education. TRACS requires that member institutions meet national norms in the areas of curriculum; programs; faculty credentials; and measured student learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional levels. TRACS also encourages each member institution to develop its own distinctives, while providing a quality postsecondary educational experience within the context of the spiritual development of the individual. Today, TRACS provides academic accreditation to many of America's finest Christian institutions of higher learning (Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, 2013). The following institution (pseudonym used) in my study was denied accreditation by SACSCOC:

1. John Aaron College

John Aaron College later received a reaffirmation of accreditation by TRACS based on the amount of improvement made under the leadership of a new President. The evidence that students attained college-level competencies was demonstrated in the students' successful completion of individual courses. In addition, the graduation rate also increased at the college. Under the leadership of the new President, John Aaron

College was able to demonstrate that the students were working to fulfill the mission that was created by the college. The mission of John Aaron College is to provide a quality, faith-based education that addresses the academic, social, and Christian development of students, and prepares them to be servant leaders and agents of change in their communities (John Aaron College, 2016).

Table 7 provides an overview of the four participating institutions in this study. Each institution provided information on their involvement in the TRACS and SACSCOC reaffirmation process. The table also illustrates the enrollment status, number of years required for a college degree, and a listing of the institutions that are public and private.

Table 7

Overview of Participating HBCUs in the Southern Region [pseudonyms]

College or University	Private or Public	Total Enrollment	4-Year or 2-year	SACS/ TRACS
John Aaron College	Private	243	4 year	TRACS
Thomas Henson University	Public	8, 883	4 year	SACS
Simon Wiltz College	Private	1, 392	4 year	SACS
David Kemmer University	Private	973	4 year	SACS

Note. Adapted from “College Navigator,” by National Center for Education Statistics, n.d. Copyright n.d. by U.S. Department of Education: Institute of Education Sciences. Adapted from “About DKU,” by David Kemmer University [pseudonym], n.d. Copyright n.d. by David Kemmer University.

Review of Data Collection

The researcher identified four HBCUs that were located in the southern region. Permission was obtained by the researcher from the institution's president or gatekeeper in order to interview faculty members that were involved in the reaffirmation of accreditation. There were four interview participants at John Aaron College, 13 interview participants at Thomas Henson University, 11 interview participants at Simon Wiltz College, and 11 interview participants at David Kemmer University. Overall, 39 interviewees participated in this study. Focused interviews were conducted by the researcher in order to determine the amount of success achieved in overcoming problems prior to accreditation.

Categories Emergent From Data

The data for this research was collected from August, 2012 through April, 2013. The documents issued by the institutions, materials collected, online articles and interviews conducted were used to ensure triangulation of the findings. Several categories and subcategories emerged after the transcriptions and codes were completed from the interview questions (See Table 8). In this study, pseudonyms are also used as names of the interview participants.

Table 8

Categories and Associated Subcategories That Emerged From the Data

Categories	Associated Subcategories
Definitions of Student Learning Outcomes	Student Learning and Performance Specific Competencies and Critical Thinking
Overall Impression of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment	Student Learning in Higher Education Experience with Accrediting Agencies
Institutional Differences in Measuring Student Learning Outcomes	Advantages of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Disadvantages of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment
Guidelines or Steps Taken by Institution to Improve Student Learning	Administrators and Faculty Involvement Specific Guidelines Taken During the Accreditation Process Goals and Objectives
Methods for Improvement	Formal Methods of Assessment Informal Methods of Assessment
Evaluation by the Accreditation Team	Results of Student Learning Overall Academic Programs
Preparing for the Reaffirmation Process	Challenges at an HBCU Changes in Assessment Students on a Low Academic Level
Strengthening Student Learning Outcomes Assessment	Faculty and Staff Serve as Resources Evidence Gathered for Improvement Other Procedures and Strategies Used to Obtain Accreditation

Definitions of Student Learning Outcomes

During the interviews, participants provided several definitions of student learning outcomes based on their experiences with students. The purpose of asking participants for a definition of Student Learning was to determine how their views affect higher education at their institution. Within the category of Definitions of Student Learning Outcomes, two subcategories emerged: (a) Student Learning and Performance, (b) Specific Competencies and Critical Thinking.

Student Learning and Performance

The way students perform determines the success of student learning outcomes. The interview participants revealed how important student learning is at their institution, and the role that students played in creating a positive atmosphere during the reaffirmation process. Some participants had similar definitions, whereas others shared personal experiences when expressing how well students should perform. At John Aaron College, a special plan called the *Adam Hamilton Plan* was developed to assess student achievement in order to create a positive attitude toward graduating from college. Ms. Lillian Gray from John Aaron College described student performance as, “The ability for the students to apply what they learned in their work environment.” However, Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College feels that a student learning outcome revolves around completing a program of studies. She states:

If a student is coming out of a Business Administration Management program, those sets of outcomes for that program are meant to describe a successful student who is ready to go into graduate school or the workforce in that particular

area. We try to incorporate all of the institutional objectives into our program outcomes. They are definitely in the core, but we also reflect them in our program outcomes.

Some interviewees had a very simple definition, whereas others discussed a more detailed definition of student learning. Dr. Reva Jones-Cabot from Thomas Henson University explained the following:

A student learning outcome is what we want the student to be able to achieve by the end of class, and this is what we want the students to take away. We also expect the students to demonstrate that. So, I was involved many years ago in generating the initial student learning outcomes for several courses in my home department including the initial ones for the first-year writing sequence.

Dr. Jessica Holland is a faculty member from Thomas Henson University who believes that a student learning outcome is an ongoing challenge. She stated that, “Many administrators tend to focus on programmatic goals as opposed to actual student learning outcomes. Also, I think the faculty syllabi is reviewed for student learning outcomes in order to assess its tracks and uses whatever data is developed.”

Dr. Karen Goldstein also from Thomas Henson University feels that student learning outcomes should be measured. She commented that, “It requires a demonstration of learning and it requires an action verb, and it requires conditions and it’s measurable.” Student Learning and Performance is a broad area and all faculty members had a different approach toward teaching and learning on the collegiate level. Dr. Verna Lawson from David Kemmer University shared the following comment, “A

student learning outcome could be performance under standardized testing, or it could be a portfolio approach. It could also be how well students do in graduate school or the workplace.” However, Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey from Simon Wiltz College revealed that, “A student learning outcome is what you expect students to achieve.”

As a researcher, I was able to interview two presidents from two of the participating institutions. President Jacob E. Spencer from David Kemmer University mentioned that, “Students must follow a mission in order to be able to perform well.” He also believes that performance should be measured by the quality of the work that’s being produced. At Kemmer University, they have rubrics for measuring student performance to determine whether or not they have met appropriate standards. According to my research, a *rubric* is a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers or tests (Rubric, 2015). Also, Ms. Roslyn Brody from David Kemmer University stated that, “A student learning outcome is about the skills, capabilities, abilities, and what students will be able to do. It’s how they perform as a result of going through a program or being enrolled in the program.”

Dr. Sarah Ellis from Thomas Henson University defined a student learning outcome quite differently from other interview participants. She commented that, “A student learning outcome at this institution is defined as products that students take from classes and the time they spend at this institution.” Mrs. Darlene Langston-Mohr from Simon Wiltz College noted that attitude has a lot to do with student performance. She disclosed the following:

We must be able to assess their skills, knowledge and attitudes of any academic area. We are looking to see whether they learned or whether they developed a particular skill, improved their knowledge in the area and the attitude towards what we're teaching.

Specific Competencies and Critical Thinking

While analyzing this data, several interviewees defined a student learning outcome as a specific competency that students must acquire. Some faculty members feel that students must achieve a certain amount of competence in an academic area in order to master student learning. Dr. Martin Healey from Simon Wiltz College stated, "A student must be able to identify the three components of the criminal justice system mark. Also, the student must be able to discuss police courts and corrections." This is his way of saying that students must achieve competence in specific areas. Dr. Healey believes that the instructor must be able to teach this information to the students in order for them to be able to do it. At Thomas Henson University, Dr. Joel Abbott commented on his views concerning specific competencies:

I think that a student learning outcome is something that the degree symbolizes, certifies, and represents. If it's a program outcome, it should refer to the specific competencies of that degree. If it's a more general outcome, it should be something that defines the educational goals of the level of degree at the institution.

Dr. Benedict Lopez from Thomas Henson University specifically defined a student learning outcome as having competence to pass certain exams. He stated the following:

When you talk about a student learning outcome, it has to do with what they can do, what they can appreciate, and what they know at the end of their matriculation here at the institution. Now specific to our program, we have certain outcomes that are required. One of which is that our graduates must have the entry level competence in order to pass the licensure exam for physical therapists.

Some professors or participants gave a more personal definition from their teaching experiences. Dr. Ellen Sanders from Thomas Henson University emphasized the following:

Each subject helps to prepare our students here at Thomas Henson University. I take pride in helping my students. I would define a student learning outcome at our institution as that which we can make of it as a course by course perspective, and what we intend for the students to gain out of the class.

At Simon Wiltz College, Dr. Radimir Stuart believes that students should be able to achieve a certain level of proficiency while they are in college. He stated the following:

At its base, a student learning outcome is anything, any bare topic or theory, or knowledge that we expect the students to get out of the class. You know they're often codified and have a syllabi in order to pass their classes. So

as you know in very bare terms, a student learning outcome to me, especially at this college is one phase of the course where we expect a student to gain a certain level of proficiency.

Some participants indicated that student learning outcomes should be related to the required general education learning outcomes set out by the board of regents.

According to Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson from Thomas Henson University:

We should follow the guidelines of student learning outcomes that are presented by the board of regents. For example, a person should have a certain level of mathematical capabilities when they graduate. They should be able to have a certain level of writing competencies. And those are very well spelled out by our board of regents.

According to the State Board of Regents for Thomas Henson University, institutions must structure learning support so that a student who has demonstrated mastery of a competency will not be required to repeat support in that area. Also, delivery of learning support must be based on proven methods of integrating technology as a tool for instruction (Schutz, McDonald, & Tingle, 2013).

Also, Dr. Leonard Owens from Thomas Henson University gave his opinion about student learning outcomes. He indicated, “We expect students to be able to do or know the information upon completing the curriculum. Sometimes we expect students to be able to do more than what is needed in the curriculum.”

When students learn, they are also developing skills for thinking critically. Employers feel that students who have just graduated from college should be able to

use critical thinking skills on the job. That is why student learning outcomes are so important. Dr. Trevor Wesley from Thomas Henson University commented on the following:

Student learning outcomes are what our students are expected to know, be able to do, and have good dispositions, knowledge and skills. They are given the ability to think critically. Also, they must be able to demonstrate their ability in order to communicate clearly. Our student learning outcomes focuses on two levels. There's a level of general education of all students, and then there's a level of knowledge and skills in their specific disciplines.

Dr. Marva Ashford from Simon Wiltz College believes that students should learn how to think critically. She also believes that student learning has to be measured. She indicated, "Well, a student learning outcome has to be measurable. I always say begin with the end in mind. If you say you want your students to demonstrate a certain skill, you need to work your way back to how you're going to help them learn that skill."

Dr. Sharon Norwood, who was a former administrator at David Kemmer University agreed that learning outcomes can be measured too. She indicated that critical thinking skills should be taught in each subject. Dr. Norwood emphasized:

A student learning outcome is an outcome that can be measured related to the progress of a student in a particular course with emphasis on the goals of that course. So, the goals of the course would have to be specific goals like critical thinking or learning about a particular aspect of history. Then the student learning outcome would measure how well the student did in terms of goals.

Critical thinking skills like all other skills must be developed in a classroom setting so that students will be able to achieve success in a particular class. Dr. Carmen Beltran from David Kemmer University explained her views as follows:

I view a student learning outcome as a core set of skills including thinking skills in a particular area that needs to be achieved. Essentially, it's a benchmark and then engaging against that benchmark, wondering whether or not if a program has gotten closer or further away from achieving that benchmark.

Overall Impression of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

The data collected in this category consists of the overall impression that administrators and faculty members have concerning student learning outcomes assessment at their institution. Some participants presented their views according to the experiences they have had while working to prepare for the reaffirmation of accreditation. Within this category, two subcategories emerged: (a) Student Learning in Higher Education and (b) Experience with Accrediting Agencies.

Student Learning in Higher Education

In higher education, many students are faced with the challenges of trying to adjust to a new setting as opposed to secondary education. Some students learn to accept the new challenges of higher education, whereas others tend to fall along the way. College professors have to look at the changes that are being made in higher education so that they can help their students to achieve academically.

John Aaron College is a small college where students often get the individual attention they need in order to improve student learning and do well on assessments. According to Dr. Margaret Janssen, educators tend to have different views toward student learning outcomes assessment in higher education. She indicated:

The process in higher education is still very foggy. I think that people have very different interpretations of what is meant by student learning outcomes and assessment. Any institution that you go into will approach it differently, and on some levels, I think that it is fine to have that different interpretation. Also, on some levels, I think people are still not quite comfortable with what student learning outcomes assessment is. People agree that it's not the same as the assessment that's done in K-12 level. I also think people try to make it their mission, for it is not to be the same. After that, I don't think there is a whole lot of agreement on what it is, how it should be approached, and how the results should be used.

For instance, President Edward Hillcrest feels that students should be competitive so that they can prepare themselves for the world of work. He has faith in all of the students at John Aaron College, because he feels they can all achieve if they are given the right instructions. President Hillcrest explains the following:

I think that the questions of student learning outcomes can be pretty easily evaluated. You can ask, are your students competitive in the market place? Are your students capable of progressing through their jobs in a credible fashion? Are they great writers? Are they great speakers? Are they capable

of leading? Right now, I get it. You got to have some different markers and evaluations for students. At the end of the day, it comes down to a very simple question. Are our students good enough? I think that's critically important to be able to answer affirmatively. So, you have to have the things that we have in higher education to measure the outcomes. I just think that sometimes you can be so focused on the forest that you lose sight of the trees.

At Thomas Henson University, Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson has a very positive, but different attitude toward the student learning outcomes assessment process in higher education. She explained her view of higher education as follows:

I am very pleased with the direction that student learning outcomes are moving in higher education. I understand that outcomes based assessments are more difficult sometimes. But I think it really helps us to understand whether our students really know what we think they ought to know, or if they're really achieving the learning outcomes that we set out for them. So, I think that for me, I'm very pleased with the direction that higher education is going.

Dr. George Wilke from Thomas Henson University, reflects back into the past when he spoke about higher education and student learning outcomes assessment. He mentioned that student learning outcomes and assessment has always been important in higher education. He elaborated on the following:

I think in the last 20 years in higher education in general, student learning outcomes assessment has taken its rightful place not only in the accreditation process, but in all assessments and all kinds of evaluations. I think that in our

own institution we did it well from 1998 to about 2002. But then outside of academics, they quit assessing. And so, we continue to do it even in our own state where student learning outcomes have been important for more than 20 years.

When higher education is mentioned, some instructors take a personal look at their position and how important it is to put emphasis on student learning outcomes and the assessment process in general. Dr. Karen Goldstein from Thomas Henson University disclosed the following:

Well, I think it has value. I think student learning outcomes assist with the student and the faculty member in identifying the purpose of a particular learning module of its program or course. And then, once the students know and the faculty know that they have a shared understanding of what learning is necessary, it contributes to a more accurate assessment of learning.

Dr. Paul Eganu conducted the reaffirmation of accreditation process at Thomas Henson University. He served as Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs with responsibility for Institutional Planning and Assessment of the University. He believes that department heads, directors, and vice presidents have a lot to do with organizing student learning outcomes and assessment in higher education. He also indicated that the Division of Academic Affairs provides leadership and oversight for campus-wide strategy, planning and assessment. He stated, “This office works in collaboration with multiple offices on campus to make things happen.” Also, at Thomas Henson

University, Dr. Reva Jones-Cabot stressed her views by stating, “In higher education, I think the movement in general is very very positive. My one concern is that we move towards making everything measurable.”

Dr. Leonard Owens indicated that at Thomas Henson University, everybody is asking for more accountability. Citizens in the community are very concerned. That’s why there’s a greater focus on student learning outcomes in higher education. Dr. Owens stated, "I think there’s a growing trend focused on assessment and student learning outcomes as opposed to other terms and criteria.”

Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey from Simon Wiltz College feels that emphasis should be placed on regular evaluations as a means of improving the assessment process in higher education. She emphasized the following:

I think that it’s great because the key component of assessment is to consistently evaluate students for strengths and weaknesses. That’s the overall underlying purpose of assessment. And so, once you continuously pursue excellence, then the only way that you can evaluate effectively is to have documentation of assessment. What are your outcomes? What are your intended goals? How are you going to assess it? What are your means of assessment? What does your data show? Also, what are your strengths and what are your weaknesses? Then, what are you going to do to improve? If you implement these steps, then it’s a wonderful tool. However, sometimes we don’t follow those steps, and that’s why some people kind of cringe. They see it more as

a grueling process than seeing it as a tool to assist in the improvement process.

While at Simon Wiltz, I interviewed Dr. Harry Relic who stated that, “In higher education, goals should be set and they should be measured so that the faculty will know if they have been achieved or not.” So far, all of the participants from Simon Wiltz College have placed a great deal of emphasis on student learning outcomes assessment in higher education. Dr. Radimir Stuart asserted that the cultural environment has an effect on student learning outcomes and assessment. He discussed the following:

In higher education in general, I believe we still need to focus on learning outcomes that more accurately represent the changing technological and cultural environment in which students live. The college has actually tried to make and has made good progress. At Simon Wiltz College, we’re trying to revamp our general education offerings, and we’re writing a new set of competencies for those new general education courses.

Dr. Martin Healey, another participant from Simon Wiltz College believes that higher education requires a great deal of planning. In other words, assessments should be based on what is being taught in the classroom. According to Dr. Healey:

Well first of all, I have a very good impression of our student learning here at Simon Wiltz College, and I think it has a very good assessment process. Also, I think it’s very important to make sure that your syllabi

complements your assessment. You cannot just write outcomes and assess outcomes. Your syllabi must reflect the learning that the student needs to obtain, and whatever you're trying to get them to obtain.

In other words, your syllabi and your assessments have to mirror one another. If not, that can be a problem down the line, especially when it comes to assessing.

David Kemmer University experienced some complications with the reaffirmation process several years ago. However, today they have been reaffirmed by SACS with the help of the faculty and President Jacob E. Spencer. When President Spencer arrived on the scene, the college achieved university status and each department began to develop current goals and objectives that led to the improvement of student learning outcomes assessment. When Ms. Barbara Tucker was interviewed, she was a former employee of David Kemmer University. She expressed her overall impression of student learning outcomes assessment. She also indicated that she did not have a lot of involvement with setting those standards. She stated, "The institution spent a lot of time looking at how they assessed student learning, whether it was effective measures or making sure that we could measure and report what those outcomes were."

President Jacob E. Spencer expressed his overall impression of student learning outcomes assessment at David Kemmer University. He stated, "I think almost that every area has improved in its ability to garner the assessment data, and then to be able to use it to improve instruction." As I continued to interview the participants at David

Kemmer University, I met Dr. Dana Morrow who invited me to sit in on one of her class discussions. However, during her office period, I had a chance to interview her. Dr. Morrow proudly spoke about her overall impression of student learning outcomes assessment in higher education. She stated:

We are responsible for creating our own student learning outcomes.

We had to identify an external evaluator and give our documents to that person so they could objectively evaluate our program. We had to present those documents to be looked over by the external evaluator, and ask questions about the program. Each academic major developed its own student learning outcomes called *WEAVE*.

Dr. Audrey McVey from David Kemmer University also shares a positive outlook on the student learning outcomes assessment process in higher education. She commented on the following:

I think that the move towards student learning outcomes is a good move in theory. The schools are evaluated on their ability to demonstrate the impact the school is having on the students. It's all about learning for every student at David Kemmer University, and each faculty member worked diligently to move their department toward being reaffirmed by SACS.

When I spoke to Dr. Verna Lawson, she emphasized that student performance is of utmost importance at David Kemmer University. She went on to explain:

The student learning outcomes assessment process is all about the academic performance of the student. The student academic

performance is measurable, and that can be quantitative or qualitative.

It should be documented and a timeline should be kept of that documentation. We should analyze the data that we use, and the results of the data should be used to improve student performance with academic content.

Dr. Arnold Perreau, who also came from David Kemmer University mentioned that when it comes to assessment, there are many ways that students can be evaluated. He stressed the importance of assessment in higher education as follows:

I think the student learning outcomes assessment process is evolving in higher education. My impression used to be focused on test scores, but now we're trying to have a broader view of assessment. People are using other things like portfolios, and assessment measures are not only focused on test scores.

Experience with Accrediting Agencies

In higher education, colleges and universities depend on accrediting agencies to make important decisions when it comes to evaluating their academic programs. The accrediting agency is that part of a legal entity, that conducts accrediting activities through voluntary, non-federal peer review and makes decisions concerning the accreditation or pre-accrediting status of institutions, programs, or both (U.S. Department of Education: Office of Postsecondary Education Accreditation Division, 2012).

At John Aaron College, Dr. Margaret Janssen gave her opinion about the accrediting bodies. She stated, “I think that the accrediting bodies whether its SACS or TRACS have gotten better with the findings, and how they should be used to improve the institution. In between the start process and in between using them, it still was a very gray area.”

Thomas Henson University was the largest institution that I visited. While I was there, I spoke with Dr. Benedict Lopez who gave a personal outlook on his experience with SACS. He disclosed the following information:

When I came to this committee to address the SACS concern, I was in charge of looking at health sciences. And others were in charge of looking at other departments. We see other departments that may not have had a stretch of professional accreditation, nor have they had problems with looking at student learning outcomes. So, it varies. It depends on the accountability of each department and to whom they are accountable for.

Each interview participant had their own perspective concerning the accrediting agencies. President Jacob E. Spencer from David Kemmer University elaborated on his point of view as follows:

I think it's important to have student learning outcomes, and I think they should be the harder parts of accreditation reviews. In higher education, it's different because of the regional offices. Each regional accreditation agency or each accrediting agency, whether it's regional or not has it's

own set of guidelines about student learning outcomes. I think SACS is one of the few that started out with the Quality Enhancement Plan as a means to an end to assess student learning outcomes.

Mrs. Joanne Rice spent many long hours at Simon Wiltz College preparing for the reaffirmation process. She stated, “My impression of SACS is you have a process that is ongoing. You’re demonstrating that you’re improving student learning. And I think it’s about consumer protection. It’s about the student and protecting the student. It’s also for your own protection as an institution.”

When faculty members and administrators prepare for accreditation, it involves everyone, especially when it’s concerning student learning outcomes assessment. Dr. Marva Ashford from Simon Wiltz College has been at this institution for many years and is quite familiar with the accreditation process. She stated, “SACS tends to be ahead of the other agencies in how it has the schools to work with their students. SACS has always been concerned about preparing students and whether they are in fact learning, and how we know they are learning.”

Dr. Paul Eganu from Thomas Henson University made it possible for me to meet all of the participants at the university. He selected the staff that he worked with during the time that they were being reaffirmed. Dr. Eganu served as the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs. He explained some important highlights about SACS:

The office here focuses on Continuing Improvement in two major areas of the SACS requirements. The 2.5 which is called Requirements speaks about the planning processes and how that is aligned to the

university's mission. Another part is Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1 which has to do with assessment. This is assessment of student learning, which is what you're focusing on. Both the instructional units at the university and the non-instructional units assesses student learning.

Institutional Differences in Measuring Student Learning Outcomes

Each institution provides a different method of learning for their students. This is usually found in the mission statement of every college and university. However, it takes a dedicated group of faculty members to explore the advantages and disadvantages of student learning outcomes assessment. Within this category, two subcategories emerged: (a) Advantages of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment and (b) Disadvantages of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment. All institutions provide advantages for students to succeed academically. However, some students may be at a disadvantage when it comes to interpreting time management and certain test taking skills for standardized tests.

Advantages of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

The following interview participants discussed the advantages of how their students learned. They felt that the assessment methods used allowed the students to perform well academically. Ms. Agnes Stoner from David Kemmer University stated, "The advantage of commercially standardized exams is that it's convenient and can be adopted and implemented quickly." Also, Dr. Sharon Norwood who represented David Kemmer University asserted that student learning outcomes should be documented in

order to reflect back on the performance of the students. She stated, “You know a lot of people ended up revising their curriculum to make sure the student outcomes were included in the curriculum with documentation.”

Dr. Karen Goldstein from Thomas Henson University spoke about the advantages she encountered. She indicated, “Both the students and the faculty are clearer on what the learning outcomes are and can work together to achieve those goals.” Another faculty member from Thomas Henson University that I interviewed was Dr. Ellen Sanders. She expressed her point of view as, “We want to make sure that we’re utilizing our assessment dynamics by having the *Compliance Assist!* tool mechanism available. This tool allows us to input information or data, and then we can generate a report.” When I interviewed Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson from Thomas Henson University, she spoke about the *Compliance Assist!* program as well. She explained:

I would say the advantage in helping our students learn is using the *Compliance Assist!* program. This is an online documentation system using the *Six Step Process*. The *Six Step* assessment process was used to help our students improve in their performance on various tests or exams. We believe in focusing on quality in order to help our students.

During my stay at Simon Wiltz College, I listened to Dr. Marva Ashford who expressed her opinion by stating:

We planned ahead and designed our instruments to assess our students. Then we have students demonstrate what they have learned. You can ask students

to do what is called a *Minute Paper*. You just ask them to answer two or three questions to see how well they perform. That's assessment too.

I also spoke to Mr. Norbert Rutledge from Simon Wiltz College and he emphasized, "The needs of the students are most important. It is important to prepare the students for graduation and to make sure they have met the learning outcomes in various academic areas."

Dr. Verna Lawson from David Kemmer University stated, "The advantages are that we have benchmarks against which to measure our student progress not only with other students at David Kemmer but students nationally." However, Dr. Martin Healey from Simon Wiltz College stated, "An advantage is that we actually have various levels of assessments, because we have developmental courses and regular courses. The assessments are very consistent with what is being taught in each course. This helps to enhance our student learning outcomes." When I visited John Aaron College, I spoke to Dr. Phillip Onkean who explained the advantage of student learning outcomes. He stated:

It is an advantage to be able to identify the students that are weak and need more help, as compared to the students who are self-motivated.

The students who need help can be directed to the Student Success Center, or you can open your door to students with tutorial help.

Also at John Aaron College, Dr. Margaret Janssen stated, "If you have the information that will help or improve a program, then the results of the students'

achievement will let you know if the program is working or not working. Also, when you are assessing student satisfaction, you must have the attention of your students.”

Disadvantages of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

All of the institutions that I visited experienced problems with accreditation. However, Simon Wiltz College was able to successfully maintain their status with SACS by following the Principles of Accreditation. In this section, the interview participants explained how the disadvantages of student learning outcomes assessment played a part in delaying the reaffirmation process that they worked so hard to achieve. Ms. Agnes Stoner who is an employee at David Kemmer University stated, “When some students take standardized exams, it measures a superficial knowledge of learning, and will not match the specific goals and objectives for an institution’s programs.” At John Aaron College, Dr. Margaret Janssen explained:

Sometimes it’s hard for some students to do well on assessments because of their lack of attention in the classroom. Sometimes you feel that students are doing the assessment for the teacher. If the assessment is a survey, then they feel that it’s not going to be part of their grade. However, students need to know that surveys are also assessments.

I listened as President Edward Hillcrest spoke about disadvantages, because John Aaron College had many problems with SACS and the reaffirmation process. President Hillcrest stated:

Well, one disadvantage for student learning outcomes is that teachers and students spend a lot of time focused on things that involve checking a box instead of making the needle move. I feel that moving a needle means to address our mission and the ability to impact change at John Aaron College.

Also, Dr. Phillip Onkean realized that John Aaron College had several problems with student learning outcomes and assessment. Therefore, he stated, “The disadvantages are that students can be lazy, and you have to push them too much. You must give them the facts of life so that they can work hard to achieve their goals.”

When I met with Mrs. Joanne Rice at Simon Wiltz College, she expressed, “I think the disadvantage at my institution is that student learning and assessment is so mandated. People do it out of compliance as opposed to being motivated to do it. I also think that’s a huge disadvantage and disservice to the people.” While at Simon Wiltz College, I spoke to Dr. Martin Healey who explained:

One of the disadvantages of our student learning outcomes and assessment is that in my opinion, we don’t take enough time to find out whether or not if the students are actually grasping the assessments. We have to make sure that we have the proper assessments available to help these students.

I noticed at David Kemmer University that Dr. Verna Lawson stated, “As an administrator, I feel that we need to do a better job of convincing the faculty that they need to study the way that students learn. They need to adapt to the way students learn as opposed to students adapting to the way they teach.”

I would like to reflect back on something Dr. Harry Relic from Simon Wiltz College elaborated on. He stated, “Students are not motivated enough for exams. Some students need an incentive to do good on an exam. Some of them need some kind of a reward other than a grade to influence their work habits.” Also at Simon Wiltz, I met with Dr. William Begley who mentioned, “Even though the majority of our students do well, some of them just don’t participate well on assessments. The participation of some of our students need improving.”

Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson from Thomas Henson University didn’t feel comfortable talking about their disadvantages. However, she knew that they had to make a lot of changes before they could be reaffirmed. She commented on the following:

It wasn’t that we didn’t have good student learning outcomes or that we weren’t actually assessing those student learning outcomes, but our problem was that we were not documenting them. The main problem we had was with institutional effectiveness. The SACS report indicated that Thomas Henson University doesn’t document student learning outcomes.

After speaking with Dr. Drew-Nelson, I interviewed Dr. Karen Goldstein who is also from Thomas Henson University. She stated, “The only disadvantage I see is that the student learning outcomes are not measurable, or they could be unclear. Changes would have to be made in a specific course or program in order to enhance student learning.”

Guidelines or Steps Taken by Institution to Improve Student Learning

All institutions have to follow certain guidelines or a course of action in order to prepare for the reaffirmation of accreditation. The faculty at each institution fulfilled the standards and requirements of SACS or TRACS by preparing students for advancement in student learning. Students and families believe that the accreditation of a school or program will offer them a worthwhile education that will lead to positive outcomes (Mitchell, 2016). Within this category, three subcategories emerged: (a) Administrators and Faculty Involvement, (b) Specific Guidelines Taken During the Accreditation Process, and (c) Goals and Objectives.

Administrators and Faculty Involvement

Each interview participant discussed their role in the reaffirmation process. Some participants were involved more than others. Ms. Lillian Gray from John Aaron College worked tirelessly preparing for their institution to be accredited by TRACS. She stated, “I worked on various teams, and I also worked on rewriting and discussing learning outcomes for the course syllabi.” I listened to Dr. Margaret Janssen who was an administrator that led John Aaron College toward reaffirmation. Dr. Janssen was also Vice President of Academic Affairs during the reaffirmation process. I asked her about her involvement and she disclosed the following information:

I was pretty involved. When the process started with TRACS, there were actually two site visits. I joined the staff of John Aaron as a faculty member of the Chair of Teacher Education in January of 2010. During that process,

I assisted as a faculty member in terms of the course level outcomes programs. I answered a few questions about Teacher Education, and that was probably the extent of my involvement for the first site visit. So, a lot of the major work had already been done for the initial application to TRACS when I came on board. And then for the rest of the year, I was involved with the subjects of rewriting parts of the college catalog, updating course syllabi, submitting assessment data, whether it was from a course level outcomes assessment, or program outcomes assessment. Then we submitted that to the research office and they compiled it for reporting. At that time, my role switched to being an administrator.

When I visited David Kemmer University, I was impressed with the amount of work displayed by the faculty members that were involved in the accreditation reaffirmation process. Before President Jacob E. Spencer came on board at David Kemmer, there were several problems that were addressed by SACS and student learning outcomes was on the agenda. However, President Spencer created a new learning environment that prepared the institution to meet the guidelines and standards of accreditation. President Spencer stated, “I was involved with the Steering Committee, and actively involved in reviewing of the reports as they were developed.” Dr. Audrey McVey worked along with President Spencer and she pointed out, “I attended all of the meetings with the SACS Leadership Team in which we put together the Compliance Report. I also was the person that led the process of selecting and developing our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP).”

While visiting David Kemmer University, I was able to locate Dr. Sharon Norwood, who is now employed by the State Coordinating Board. During the last reaffirmation process, Dr. Norwood was employed at David Kemmer University. She stated, “I was the accreditation liaison for SACS. I was also the Director of the Office of Institutional Research for a time, and I was an Interim Associate Provost.” In addition to Dr. Norwood, I spoke with Ms. Barbara Tucker who is also no longer employed at David Kemmer University. She is presently working at another university and was eager to participate in the interview process. Ms. Tucker indicated:

I was responsible for the sections that had to do with faculty credentialing, and I also was asked by President Spencer to put the report together by doing the physical typing and making sure the report read as one voice. Each faculty member sent their responses to me, and I put them together in the report.

There were many participants involved in the accreditation process at Thomas Henson University. As I listened to Dr. Eganu, I wrote notes and highlighted important ideas. He went on to explain the following:

When we started the reaffirmation process, the university did engage in assessment. However, assessment was one of the problems we had at the institution. We were not documenting in a comprehensive organized manner the assessment and planning workload. So, when I came here, we then agreed under my leadership to utilize the online documentation system called *Compliance Assist!* This is what *Compliance Assist!* does. It helps in planning, and this is our website.

During the interview process, I spoke to Dr. George Wilke at Thomas Henson University. He stated that, “I was Director of the Institutional Self-Study and the university’s Accreditation Liaison as well as a Professor of English. I was the director of the accreditation process and I coordinated all of the activities and responses.” Dr. Wilke worked closely with Dr. Eganu during the reaffirmation process. I also spoke to Dr. Leonard Owens at Thomas Henson University. He was an administrator and the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences during the reaffirmation of accreditation. He explained his role as follows:

My initial involvement was to ensure that the programs in the college were entered into our assessment documentation system which is *Compliance Assist!* I was on the committee to oversee or respond to the questions that the accreditation body of SACS had for the institution. I was part of that committee that responded to those issues or concerns. Whatever findings they had, we had to do some additional steps to help our institution.

Another interesting interview participant was Dr. Joel Abbott from Thomas Henson University. Dr. Abbott spoke about all of the titles that he had during the reaffirmation process. He commented on the following:

I was an Associate Professor of History, Chair of the University’s General Education Committee, and the Chairperson for the Quality Enhancement Plan Development. As the Chair of the Quality Enhancement Plan and Development Committee, I was responsible

over a period of about two years for working with colleagues to develop our QEP. I was responsible for the drafting of the document, and I was responsible for the presentation of the QEP to the visiting team.

While at Thomas Henson University, I had a chance to visit the library and interview Dr. Christine Farley. She spoke briefly about her library duties. She stated, “I wrote the report for the library and media center. We made adjustments for library hours, and some adjustments for noise. Then we gave the committee a list of all the improvements that we made concerning student learning and assessment.”

Dr. Reva Jones-Cabot spoke about her involvement with the QEP at Thomas Henson University. She stated, “I was a member of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Development Committee. I was chosen for the committee when they decided to focus on writing. I was also the Coordinator of the First Year Writing Program here at the university. So, I was brought in as a content expert.” Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson worked side by side with Dr. Eganu from Thomas Henson during the preparation stages. Some things of interest that she pointed out were as follows:

I was a member of the Reaffirmation Leadership Team. I am also both a faculty member and an administrator. I am the accreditation liaison and the Director of our Title III project. I’m also the Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Research which includes aggregated data. My staff manages all of the federal reporting and state reporting requirements of the institution. As the accreditation or SACS liaison,

I am responsible for reporting to our accrediting body as well as keeping the institution's constituents informed of what's going on in terms of accreditation. I even managed our *Compliance Assist!* Program. I was also the lead person in gathering and documenting information for the original reaffirmation report. Being the SACS liaison, I was responsible for the overall report.

As I continue to engage myself in the interview process, I spoke with several educators from Simon Wiltz College. The interview participants were very proud of their college, because Simon Wiltz had the reputation of being reaffirmed during every 10-year period. Their last reaffirmation for accreditation took place in 2013. Dr. Martin Healey described his involvement in the reaffirmation process. He discussed the following:

In preparation for accreditation, I was involved in several areas. I was involved with the QEP, which is the Quality Enhancement Program. I was also involved with Criminal Justice in providing all the assessments for the three programs that I oversee at the college. I also brought our syllabi up to date in presenting information as it pertains to our strategic plans and our program reviews.

While at Simon Wiltz College, I spoke with Mrs. Joanne Rice who was the Associate Director of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment/Effectiveness. Mrs. Rice elaborated on her involvement as follows:

I was a member of the leadership team, and I had a huge stake in the

accreditation process. I did a lot of organizing that started probably three years ago. I started the process along with the Executive Vice President. Also, I did a lot of hands on kind of work with getting things moving and getting them done as we got closer to the process. We hired a SACS Director and we worked closely with her. We also had several different groups that we started out with to organize and get documentation. So, I pretty much met with all of the teams, led the teams in facilitating and putting the paper work together. I wrote probably about 50% of the narratives that we had.

As I listened to Dr. David Parnika, he spoke about his role when the accreditation team visited Simon Wiltz College. He stated, “One of the things that I was involved in was to chair one of the sessions or programs that was dealing with the Office of the President and Office of the Vice President. I wrote about how they worked, and how they prepared themselves for the reaffirmation of accreditation.” Mr. Norbert Rutledge was another interview participant who spoke about all of the duties he had to perform at Simon Wiltz College. Mr. Rutledge served as Vice President for Information Systems and Technology. He stated, “I served on three different committees. The first was the planning committee and the second was the committee for logistics. The third committee I served with was coordination and redevelopment of the website. I had to make sure that the information on the website was clear, correct and up to date.”

I later spoke to Dr. Radimir Stuart at Simon Wiltz College. He mentioned that he was Dean of the Division of Science and that he had several duties to perform. He

explained, “As Dean, my primary duties consisted of making sure that my faculty completed their annual preliminary and mid-year assessments on time, as well as completing their program reviews and strategic plans on time.” I also interviewed Mrs. Darlene Langston-Mohr, who was Assistant Professor of Hospitality and Tourism. She indicated, “My full participation was toward the end of the information process with SACS arriving on campus and interviewing the faculty. I basically worked on the Quality Enhancement Plan at Simon Wiltz.”

As I maneuvered around the campus of Simon Wiltz, I met with Dr. Harry Relic who was the leading professor of the Computer Information System. He stated, “I would describe my role as a supporting role in the reaffirmation process. I had to make certain that we had all of the commands in two of my fields which is the Computer Information System and Assessment.”

A professor that spent many years working with the SACS team while employed at Simon Wiltz College was Dr. Marva Ashford. Dr. Ashford proudly spoke about her position and duties as follows:

I was and still am the director of what we call SACSCOC Compliance Campus Director. I’m also the Executive Assistant to the Executive Vice President and Provost. I was very involved in the reaffirmation process. My involvement consisted of assisting the faculty in developing their intended outcomes for student learning. I also helped to train the faculty and the use of the *TracDat* which is our management system for reporting assessment results, and action plans to use those results. We also had

the steering committee of compliance which had a separate auditing team working with them. I was the facilitator for the QEP topics selection committee. Once we got 10 topics that people were interested in from a survey, we narrowed it down and had an open call for abstracts. This is where people could recommend what they thought would be good initiatives for the QEP.

Specific Guidelines Taken During the Accreditation Process

Each college or university created specific guidelines that were used to prepare for the reaffirmation of accreditation. These guidelines were followed by each institution so that the outcomes of student learning and assessment could be improved. According to Dr. Paul Eganu from Thomas Henson University, the faculty worked in several groups trying to build up their credibility for the SACS team. One group worked on the area of service and the community, and another group worked on administrative units. Dr. Eganu emphasized the following:

The President met with us and provided us with advice and suggestions. She also reviewed the documents and pointed us out in the right direction. We had multiple drafts, and then finally the President brought in cabinet members for us to work with. I had a leadership team that worked with me, and we had the accreditation liaison team who worked on the Institutional Self-Study.

Dr. Martin Healey from Simon Wiltz College indicated that, “We’re very proactive. We’ve been working on our reaffirmation for about two years now and

making sure that our website is up-to-date and that our strategic plans are up-to-date. We have to follow the guidelines of SACS and doing what we say we're doing.” Since Thomas Henson was the largest institution that I visited, I spent more time interviewing the participants. While I was there, I had an interesting discussion with Dr. George Wilke. He commented on the following:

There were organizational things to do in committees. Our group spent time setting up schedules, collecting information on data that we knew people would need and purchasing a promotional product called *Compliance Assist!* This product was an online means of responding to each of the parts of the Principles of Accreditation. It gave us the place for the narrative, a place to attach electronic copies of documents, and provide a link from narrative to the supportive documentation.

When I interviewed Mrs. Joanne Rice from Simon Wiltz College, she spoke about several guidelines or steps that were taken during the preparation stages. She discussed the following:

We went through a lot of steps in preparation for it. We actually put everything together when Dr. Ashford came on board. We literally met every day and designed several templates where we identified several groups. We had different groups. We divided them into governance, administration, academic programs, and faculty. I did several training sessions on how to look at the standards, and how to break the standards down. I also explained to the groups how to read

the standards based on the resource manual. I had a folder for every person who was part of the team, and they had access to their folders.

While at Simon Wiltz, I interviewed Mr. Norbert Rutledge who spoke about some of the guidelines or steps taken. He stated, “Our program is very comprehensive. Actually, our preparation started the day after the first accreditation ended. We looked at building assessments based upon the mission, strategic plan, and the goals and objectives of the college.” According to Dr. Audrey McVey from David Kemmer University, she stated:

There were two things happening at once. One was the development of the certification document that was done primarily with the SACS Leadership Team. And then there was the process of getting community involvement and input on the Quality Enhancement Plan. I was involved in both of these strategies happening at once.

When I interviewed Dr. Sharon Norwood, a former employee of David Kemmer University, she spoke about her experience during the last accreditation period. She talked about documenting data on student learning outcomes, which was also a problem at that time. She disclosed the following information:

One of the things that I did was I looked at our process for documenting student learning outcomes. Then, I tried to develop a new process for documenting compared to what we had done in the past. Student learning outcomes was one of the weak areas at one time. The university had trouble demonstrating to SACS that the students were

actually learning. They want to see for example, how students are doing in capstone courses or on a major field test. SACS is looking for a rubric to grade the students, or maybe in the class project which is also graded by a rubric. So, it's really about trying to document using some sort of credible evidence that the students are actually learning the skills that you say you're going to teach them in the classroom.

When I spoke to Dr. Radimir Stuart at Simon Wiltz College, he placed emphasis on the guidelines and steps at his institution. He stated, "We began at least two years compiling the data and writing the documentation showing how we met the federal requirements, the core requirements, and the comprehensive standards. We made sure that the faculty completed their assessment instruments, program review, mid-year review, preliminary, and the annual *TracDat* assessments."

I also interviewed Dr. Harry Relic from Simon Wiltz College who spoke about the Quality Enhancement Plan. He stated, "One of the steps that I am aware of is the philosophy of the Quality Enhancement Plan. Every faculty member is familiar with the QEP and also every student knows what this is all about." To coincide with Dr. Relic, Ms. Agnes Stoner voiced her opinion concerning the guidelines that were taken at David Kemmer University. She stated, "We had monthly SACS leadership committee meetings, which led the process and provided guidance for sub-committees created specifically for SACS preparation. Such sub-committees consisted of compliance certification, institutional effectiveness, and assessment and evaluation. We also fellowshipped with neighboring institutions who had already gone through the process."

When I visited Thomas Henson University, I listened to Dr. Joel Abbott who reflected on the guidelines or steps taken by his institution. Some important ideas mentioned were:

The Quality Enhancement Plan process started about three years prior to the site visit, and there were breakout sessions and faculty meetings that were used to refine the QEP topics. A survey was done to determine which of the topics were enjoyed the most among the faculty. Then finally some proposals for the QEP topics were developed by faculty teams.

When I spoke about guidelines or steps taken to Dr. Karen Goldstein, she commented on something that got my attention. She stated, “We, at Thomas Henson University like every other institution, prepared a self-study and collected the data that was necessary, and put together a document that we submitted to SACS.”

During my stay at David Kemmer University, I spent time interviewing Ms. Roslyn Brody who was the Director of Institutional Planning and Research Assessment. As we spoke, I discovered we had some things in common. During the interview process, she informed me that she was also a doctoral candidate at a nearby university. Ms. Brody pointed out that:

We have the software system, *WEAVE*, that has been around for a few years before the accreditation review. When we were reaffirmed a few years ago, we used *WEAVE* which is like *TracDat*. Even though I wasn't here during the review, the core curriculum committee did very well. So, it's my job to communicate with SACS to follow up whenever we turn reports in to them.

When I visited Simon Wiltz College, Mrs. Darlene Langston-Mohr informed me that there were standards that had to be met in order for their institution to be reaffirmed. She stated, “Committees were formed, particular meetings, and external meetings were attended. This was going on throughout the campus. We were pretty involved in getting all the information together and making sure that our institutional assessments were in shape.” Dr. Leonard Owens also placed a great deal of emphasis on the self-study at Thomas Henson University. He mentioned that, “The university understood the standards and the process used for developing a self-study. The university campus was also aware of the site visits and the requirements for completing the self-study.”

Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson, who was the Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Research at Thomas Henson University, discussed the following developments:

I was a member of the leadership team, and we each had assigned areas that we were to contact and collect or gather information and compile it. Our original response was simply gathering the information from the various areas so we could be prepared for SACS. At that time, we did not receive our full reaffirmation, but we received a warning. To correct those things, the President established a task force on assessment and I chaired that task force. We made recommendations as to how we were going to start our improvements. We started a SACS Reaffirmation Committee which consisted of the faculty and staff from every division in the institution. Then we were able to address the specific issues based on the persons’ reviewing the data from areas that have been submitted in *Compliance*

Assist!, which is our online documentation system.

Dr. Marva Ashford was the SACSCOC Compliance Campus Director at Simon Wiltz College who wore many hats on her job. She also spent many years working to keep the college reaffirmed. She spoke with confidence about the following:

Assessment is just part of our nature. It is not something that we just came up with last week. Since this president has been here, this college has had the type of climate that meets the requirements of SACS. So, it's understood that if you are planning something, you got to evaluate it and set your goals ahead of time. You have to align it with the college's mission, and you have to do all those things when you're planning.

When I visited John Aaron College, President Edward Hillcrest expressed what his institution did and what guidelines or steps were taken. He commented on the following:

We thought about it as trying to deliver the best product to our student. I didn't need an accrediting body to tell me that I had a sick institution at this point, and we were failing at our core mission. So, whether it was accrediting or something else, I have to see it as a business. So, we addressed the staff issue and discussed that we needed more talent and different skills. From that point on, we were considered by TRACS as improving in other areas as well as student learning outcomes and assessment.

At John Aaron College, the faculty, staff and students were so jubilated to receive their reaffirmation from TRACS. When I interviewed Dr. Margaret Janssen,

Vice President of Academic Affairs, she indicated that, “The TRACS review was very positive, and they looked for progress. They also looked to tell you where you needed to improve, and they were very detailed in providing assistance so you would know what areas needed improvement.”

Goals and Objectives

The faculty and the accreditation team at all four institutions developed current goals and objectives for assessment and student learning outcomes. The goals and objectives helped each faculty member to prepare for the reaffirmation process. As I spoke to Dr. Trevor Wesley from Thomas Henson University, I noticed that he was quite involved in developing certain goals and objectives. Dr. Wesley emphasized the following:

My direct involvement has been more in my particular area in my faculty department. My involvement university-wide is more in structure of the assessment system, in providing training and support through faculty, administration, and staff in developing clear, successful student learning outcomes. It’s a *Six Step Process* from outcome to criteria to measurements used to analyze the data on a periodic basis. My current involvement is in support for the system and the *Compliance Assist!* software.

Dr. Carmen Beltran from David Kemmer University elaborated on how she was involved in developing current goals and objectives. She discussed the following:

At the university level, I was not involved. However, at the departmental level, all the faculty were involved in planning the learning outcomes.

All of the faculty and our administrator took a look at the department's mission, vision, and what was happening in the operating environment both internal and external while developing a five-year plan. The learning outcomes were part of the five-year plan and from that perspective, we were involved in the process.

I was quite impressed with Dr. Sharon Norwood who was a former employee at David Kemmer University. She spoke about her role in developing current goals and objectives. She also spoke proudly about her following responsibilities:

Well, I saw my role as really more of leading and organizing the process. I did little name lessons or seminars on how to write a student learning outcome. However, it was the faculty themselves who developed the course goals and objectives. I did some PowerPoint presentations and worked with the faculty. I also sat on the core curriculum committee. As Accreditation liaison, it was my job to really evaluate the institution in terms of where they were, and what they needed to do to meet their goals in becoming reaffirmed.

Dr. Karen Goldstein from Thomas Henson University placed emphasis on her involvement with goals and objectives. She described her involvement as follows:

I was very involved in reviewing goals and objectives for assessment and student learning outcomes. Our accredited programs are assessed by the accrediting agencies periodically. So, I've been involved in the professional accreditation process. The university also has a program

review process for unaccredited programs, and when I was the Chief Academic Officer, I provided oversight for that. Developing goals and objectives really involve the faculty and how they want to improve student learning outcomes and assessment.

Thomas Henson University is a very large institution that had many problems with student learning outcomes and assessment. However, after hard work, organization and dedication, they were able to achieve reaffirmation.

When I interviewed Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson at Thomas Henson University, she mentioned that she has always been involved in developing goals and objectives for student learning outcomes and assessment. Dr. Drew-Nelson has been on the faculty for many years. Now that she is an administrator, she has been able to make many changes toward helping the faculty in developing their goals. She discussed the following developments:

I was very involved with the development of specific student learning outcomes and competencies. At one time, I served as an audiologist and developed goals and objectives for student learning outcomes. We also had a Task Force on assessment. That Task Force looked at both academic programs as well as non-academic programs. After a 10-year period, our non-academic units kind of fell down on the job when it came to performance outcomes. So, one of the things that I did was conduct what we call an assessment audit. We used the *Six Step Process* in order to measure little results that enabled us to be successful. When we audited, we

had 100 percent participation of all academic units. Every unit at this university was assessing, using assessment results to make improvements. The problem was we weren't documenting it in an integrated manner, and then relating it to the mission of the university. That's the part we had to fix. We had a full year to get started, because we knew we were not completely reaffirmed.

At Thomas Henson University, I also interviewed Dr. Leonard Owens who spoke about his involvement with assessment, and how he tried to develop the assessment committee within the college. His remarks are as follows:

Before I became Interim Dean of the College, I was the Department Head in Sociology, Social Work and Urban Profession. When I moved over to be Interim Dean of the College, assessment was one of the things that I focused on, and I tried to develop the assessment committee within the college. We had started an inventory of assessment, and tools that were placed within the college with various programs. We had compiled that, and then we were in the process of moving through to see where the gaps were in particular areas. Our intent was to fill those gaps, and to make sure that all the areas had appropriate and sufficient assessment tools in place. It's all part of a general movement within the university for greater accountability and to make data driven decisions.

Dr. Paul Eganu who was the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Institutional Planning and Assessment spoke briefly about his role with goals and objectives. As an organizer at Thomas Henson University, he stated:

We have a three person committee to go over the documents that are turned in by the faculty. We look at assessment and how many student learning outcomes were met last year. Then we do an analysis of that, and then we provide a campus-wide assessment report that goes to both the President and the Provost.

I also spoke to another professor, who was Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey from Simon Wiltz College. She spoke willingly about her duties:

As Dean of General Education and Special Studies, I facilitated the direction of the General Education program. All students are currently required to take 53 hours of General Education courses. So, in 2008, we integrated our General Education competencies and learning outcomes into our General Education courses. We developed a three-year assessment cycle. At the same time, we developed our curriculum map. The map indicated where competencies are integrated, introduced, reinforced and assessed. I worked with each department to ensure that they review their learning outcomes and their competencies and do a comparative analysis to look at the state core requirements for General Education, as well as looking at peer institutions and benchmarking.

I spent time interviewing Dr. Marva Ashford who has been employed at Simon Wiltz College for many years. She serves as the Executive Assistant to the Executive Vice President and Provost. She described her duties as follows:

My involvement has more to do with working with the faculty to help them develop goals and objectives. I give them feedback on how relevant the proposed objectives or outcomes are that they intend to assess. I also look at the results to see what they are going to do about it once they see how the students did. I also worked with the faculty to help them write their goals and improve them. They eventually had a better understanding of how to assess, what to assess, and how rigorous to make the performance levels.

Simon Wiltz College was the only institution that really did not have major accreditation problems with student learning outcomes and assessment. They managed to work with their students so they could achieve success through assessment and student learning. The dedication of the students and the motivation that was inspired by the faculty enabled the institution to secure a reaffirmation every 10 years.

Mr. Norbert Rutledge also from Simon Wiltz College held the position of Vice President for Information Systems and Technology. He spoke about his involvement in developing current goals and objectives in the area of technology. Some of his important ideas are as follows:

We actually looked at the whole process. We were asked to do two things. The first was to look at the process globally as a complete entity. This is where each division of this college impacted student development from a

different perspective. We had to look at how we impact student's success, and the student learning outcomes from our advantage. Where does technology fit in that student's learning achievements? We have access to resources, like the internet for example. The students used those resources to achieve their academic outcomes. The second thing we did was to meet the needs of the student. I can put a whole lot of technology out there, but if it's not being used or meeting those needs, then that's all a bunch of stuff. So, we have to make sure that we're getting students access to various resources.

Methods for Improvement

The faculty and staff of the four HBCU's described the different assessment methods they used to improve the accreditation process. Within this category, two subcategories emerged: (a) Formal Methods of Assessment and (b) Informal Methods of Assessment.

Table 9 provides an overview of the differences between Formal and Informal Assessments. The table also illustrates a listing of each assessment that is used in determining the success of student learning outcomes in higher education.

Table 9

Formal and Informal Assessments

Formal Assessments	Informal Assessments
Standardized Tests	Non-Standardized Tests
Scores Are Considered	No Scores
Scores Are Compared	No Comparing to Other Students
Summative Tests	Observing and Interviewing
Class Projects	Normal Classroom Environment
Objective Tests	Surveys
Subjective Tests	Conduct Record
Lab Reports	Portfolios
Oral Tests (Vocabulary)	Oral Discussion
Class Presentations	Work Samples

Note. Adapted from “Difference Between Formal and Informal Assessment,” by Difference BTW, 2016, *Difference BTW*. Copyright 2016 by the Difference Between.

Formal Methods of Assessment

Formal assessment methods are basically the official ways of finding out the learning advancement of the students that have improved or decreased during the selected instructional period. The major examples of the formal assessments are exams, diagnostic tests, and achievement examinations. In every kind of formal assessment, the standardized methods of administering the tests are utilized (Difference BTW, 2016).

The following interview participants discussed the formal methods they used in the reaffirmation process. Each interview participant believed that their methods enhanced student learning outcomes. Dr. Reva Jones-Cabot from Thomas Henson University believes that formal methods are more effective than informal methods. She pointed out the following:

The formal methods obviously are the formal graded assignments that you know allows the students to demonstrate what they learned, and what they still need to work on where they might be weak. On Monday, they had a journal due which is one type of assessment. The students turned in their journals for me to evaluate. This demonstrates their ability to apply the theory. They also had a brief quiz that was asking them questions about different passages. I made this a multiple choice quiz, because I found that our students perform well on more open-ended assessments. So, I tried to balance the different ways that I assess their knowledge and their skills.

Dr. George Wilke also from Thomas Henson University elaborated on how he used the formal methods of assessment. He indicated:

Well, our formal methods are easy. We used the Senior Exit Exam, which is a content exam from the Educational Testing Services. We also used what we called a departmental profile assessment. It's not just a student assessment, but it is a compilation of writings from students. We assess from that viewpoint, and we look at institutional data, persistence and

graduation. We also expect our students to do well in English.

Dr. David Parnika from Simon Wiltz College indicated that students should be tested in order to determine how much they have learned. He stated:

To test a student, you have to see what kind of student learning outcome you want to draw from your testing. One of the formal ways we do testing is to have students write papers. There are some students who are able to express themselves through writing even though they may fail an objective test.

I spoke to Dr. Radimir Stuart from Simon Wiltz College who placed emphasis on using pre-and post-tests. He also stated, “There are standardized tests in addition to regular exams and homework. You know various grading instruments do exist and are in place to assess the student learning outcomes on campus.”

When I visited John Aaron College, I spoke to Ms. Lillian Gray who definitely believes in the formal methods of assessment. She stated, “I always give quizzes, tests and major assignments to evaluate my students. The results will help me to determine if the student learning outcome is improving.” Dr. Verna Lawson from David Kemmer University indicated that, “We review the scores that students make on standardized tests in order to find their strengths and weaknesses.” While at David Kemmer, I also spoke to Dr. Dana Morrow concerning her formal methods of assessment. She specified, “I use pre and post-tests. I also use research papers, and I look at internships and the evaluations by the field supervisors. I even do an exit GRE in order to prepare my students for graduate school.”

Dr. Phillip Onkean from John Aaron College discussed why the formal method is important to him. He shared the following information:

First and foremost, I introduce the chapters to the students. In each of these chapters I have quizzes, exams, take home questions, and student classroom participation. What I look for in all my students is to go through all of that, which is a good way to assess them. Also, I assess them through a 10 page research paper which helps most of them to get a very high grade. We have to follow a syllabus that shows what you expect from your students in all science classes. I believe in getting my students highly involved.

Informal Methods of Assessment

The main target of informal assessment is to assess and evaluate the performance of the learners along with their practical skills by avoiding the use of the standardized tests and scoring patterns which are officially in practice. For the sake of performing the informal assessments, various kinds of projects, experiments and presentations can be established for the students whether in the classrooms or on any other platform (Difference BTW, 2016).

The following interview participants discussed the informal methods they used in the reaffirmation process. These participants believe that informal methods should be used, because some students can do well through this process. Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College talked about the use of surveys. She stated, “We use surveys to address institutional goals and retention rates. Each semester a survey is given, and

we continue to tweak the questions so that we are asking better questions. The survey helps us to understand the needs of our students.”

Also from John Aaron College, President Edward Hillcrest discussed the informal methods that he used in order to motivate students to learn. He placed emphasis on the following:

I test students through work samples. Our mission is to introduce leadership to students. We are trying to create leaders that affect change in a global market place. Some of our students were active in student organizations, and many of them became members of the Student Government Association. This gave them the opportunity to observe things that needed to be changed on campus. I feel that this great informal analysis has expanded the outcome of student learning.

Dr. George Wilke from Thomas Henson University also believes in conducting surveys among his students. He stated, “We use employer surveys to evaluate students and the National Survey of Student Engagement. We also use other means of evaluation such as oral discussions and observations.”

Evaluation by the Accreditation Team

During my research, I discovered that student learning is at the heart of the mission’s statement at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Student learning has been known to be an essential component that leads to institutional effectiveness. As we know it today, student learning is an ongoing activity. At the HBCUs, the SACS

Commission on Colleges accreditation team focuses on learning outcomes, and the environment that supports student learning and assessments. The accreditation team evaluates how well the students are learning and the success of the academic programs at each institution. Within this category, two subcategories emerged: (a) Results of Student Learning, and (b) Overall Academic Programs.

Results of Student Learning

When I visited each of the HBCUs, I had a chance to discuss with interview participants the results of students learning, and how they were evaluated by SACS. Dr. Sharon Norwood, a former employee from David Kemmer University stated, “The accreditation team examined the electronic programs and the documentations made during the preparation for accreditation. I think accreditors have to be reasonable because we’re peers for each other. SACS tries to select visiting teams based on campuses that are alike.” According to Dr. Ellen Sanders from Thomas Henson University, “The visiting team took the information provided in the self-study and analyzed it, reviewed it, discussed it, and then rendered a recommendation for our institution.”

When I spoke to Mr. Norbert Rutledge from Simon Wiltz College, he stated: If your assessment is going to measure certain things for the first year, then we must go back and compare against previous years. The accreditation team would like to know if you’re really meeting those changes and are those anticipated outcomes being addressed. The accreditation team told us that we are addressing the right thing.

Dr. Marva Ashford also from Simon Wiltz College expressed her views. She stated:

They look at the top of the chart. At the top of the chart is the intended outcome, the needs of assessment and the criteria for success. They look at the summary of assessment data and the use of results. SACS is trying to find out if you set the right goals and how effective those goals are.

Looking back at Thomas Henson University, Dr. Trevor Wesley explained, “The primary purpose of the accreditation team is to analyze the systems we have in place for data collection and utilization toward accomplishing the university’s mission.” Dr. Robert Hoffman from Simon Wiltz College expressed, “They look at the goals and objectives that you clearly define for yourself. Then they try to determine if you reached those goals and objectives. They look at the way that you’re teaching your students and the learning outcomes in terms of assessment.” Dr. Audrey McVey from David Kemmer University explained:

The accreditation team challenged us a little on the QEP. The documentation was very heavy on student learning, but they gave us a recommendation even though we did not include a program assessment. So, we had to go back and rewrite our assessment process to include a program assessment in addition to the student learning outcomes.

Also, from David Kemmer University, President Jacob E. Spencer stated, “The accreditation team expected to see documentation of how the institution measured

student performance and student attainment of certain goals. They also looked at how the students mastered certain skills on assessments.”

I spoke to Dr. George Wilke from Thomas Henson University who explained, “The SACS team wanted to see proof of the methods of assessments that we were using. We explained the *Six-Step Process* to identify what’s an outcome and how we measured it. The team also looked for how student learning outcomes and assessments are documented.” According to Dr. Leonard Owens from Thomas Henson, he stated, “The accreditation team has access to all of the program level assessments through *Compliance Assist!* Those are reviewed to make sure that there are student learning outcomes from every area and that they are regularly assessed.”

When I interviewed Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson at Thomas Henson University, she expressed her opinion as:

They look at whether or not if your students have achieved stated goals. Then they look at the students that didn’t achieve those goals and how you plan to make improvements. They are also concerned about how the curriculum promotes student learning. They are looking for the use of assessment results and how they are improved in that cycle.

As I listened to Ms. Agnes Stoner from David Kemmer University, her views on the accreditation team were “I believe their focus is to determine whether or not an institution provides evidence that students actually master what they have learned within their major. They want to know if their skills are transferable upon graduation.”

Dr. Martin Healey from Simon Wiltz College also elaborated on how the accreditation team evaluates student learning. He stated, “They actually look at your syllabus and see what your outcomes are. They even look at your lesson plans. They want to know about the courses you are teaching and how successful your students are in achieving their learning outcomes.” Also, Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College describes how the accreditation team evaluated student learning outcomes at their institution. She commented:

They looked at a lot of documents, and they only ask to speak to someone to clarify something. They focus in on the goals and objectives for different programs. Then they look at the syllabi and the course content for different courses. They look at how the outcome is assessed, whether it’s exams, quizzes or projects. They even look at how the college collected that information overtime. Then the most important step is how the college uses those results to improve the academic programs.

Overall Academic Programs

When the accreditation team visited the four HBCUs, they evaluated the overall academic programs in each department. When I interviewed Mr. Norbert Rutledge from Simon Wiltz College, he emphasized:

The accreditation team actually looked at the type of resources that we used in order to address the learning outcomes of students. They also looked at whether or not we were in compliance with other areas. We had to make sure that we identified what those learning outcomes were. We also had to

make sure that faculty credentials were up to part, and that the faculty was teaching in the areas they were trained in.

While at Simon Wiltz, Dr. Marva Ashford elaborated on, “The SACS team used the comprehensive standards of accreditation during the evaluation process. They are concerned about the faculty and how well the students are progressing in the educational programs.” When I interviewed Dr. Audrey McVey at David Kemmer University, she indicated:

We used a system called *WEAVE* where each year we put in our goals with our targets. Then at the end of the year, we provide responses as to whether or not we have met those goals. *WEAVE* is a software program that’s kind of a tracking system for the whole campus. The SACS team uses *WEAVE* in order to see if we have addressed all of our goals.

Simon Wiltz College did not face the same accreditation problems with student learning outcomes and assessment that the other three HBCUs had. Therefore, Dr. Martin Healey stated:

The accreditation team evaluated the overall academic program in the Criminal Justice department as excellent. SACS has been known to be the most difficult accrediting body in the United States. However, we did not receive not one recommendation in our department. They were very impressed with our academic program.

Also at Simon Wiltz, Dr. David Parnika stated, “We were told to submit documents for review. We had a strategic plan for our department that we submitted. We listed short-term and long-term goals as part of our plan.”

During the interview with Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College, she pointed out some important areas that the accreditation team paid particular attention to. She commented:

They evaluated the assessment data collected over a year for TRACS purposes. They looked at a graduation survey that seniors took. They also looked at faculty evaluation surveys and how the faculty responded. They wanted to make sure we were assessing the programs and we were reporting and documenting the programs. We were asked to make changes in certain areas. Once the changes were made, the way we used the results actually improved. They described it as closing the assessment loop.

According to Dr. George Wilke from Thomas Henson University, there were no issues made about the quality of their academic programs. He implied, “The issues were with our assessment measures. That was the only academic issue that remained as a question during the accreditation visit.”

Preparing for the Reaffirmation Process

Preparing for the reaffirmation process takes years of planning. During my research, I noticed that many institutions often fall along the way side and experience trouble in maintaining an effective academic program for their students. Most of them are challenged with curriculum problems, departmental problems, and planning effective

assessment programs. Some institutions are even plagued with leadership problems. Also in my research, I noticed that each of the four HBCUs worked long endless hours preparing for reaffirmation. In this category, there are three subcategories: (a) Challenges at an HBCU, (b) Changes in Assessment, and (c) Students on a Low Academic Level.

Challenges at an HBCU

Many HBCUs are challenged in the area of assessment and student learning outcomes. Some of the interview participants felt comfortable in exploring this area. They discussed the weaknesses that each institution encountered while preparing for the reaffirmation process. President Edward Hillcrest from John Aaron College spoke about the assessment program that needed improving. He disclosed the following:

This is the area that presented the greatest amount of trouble, because the group that was here before my arrival had done no assessment. We were actually stuck in a bad place. You implement the system and you gather the data to see if that system works. Then whatever changes you need to make, you make those changes and do the cycle again. This is what we call closing the loop.

Dr. Benedict Lopez from Thomas Henson University stated:

SACS held their decision back for a year and gave us a rating of an incomplete. At that time, we did not have enough evidence to show that we were following the standards of accreditation. We now have a new

system called *Compliance Assist!* that helped us to renew our accreditation status.

At Simon Wiltz College, Mrs. Joanne Rice felt very proud of their accreditation status. She pointed out, “I wouldn’t say that we really had a great challenge, because we started planning for reaffirmation years in advance. We have been developing student learning outcomes and assessment within all of our academic programs so that we could stay ahead of the SACS requirements.” Then at Thomas Henson University, Dr. Joel Abbott described the challenge at their institution as, “I think that the QEP was a positive challenge for us. The QEP had to have a meaningful impact on student learning as opposed to other aspects of the institutional mission.”

I was impressed with Dr. Karen Goldstein from Thomas Henson University, because she explained about the warning they had. She stated:

We got reaffirmed, but we were put on warning before that. We were advised to take a careful look at assessment, and it was because assessment was not university-wide. We needed evidence in all academic areas. So, our main problem was that it was not university-wide.

Also at Thomas Henson University, Dr. Christine Farley explained:

Closing the loop was our biggest problem. We were not connected. This is how *Compliance Assist!* came about and everybody had a goal to achieve. We had to measure the learning outcomes and summarize the results of each assessment activity. Then we had to close the loop by describing how the goals were related to our mission.

When I spoke to Dr. Paul Eganu from Thomas Henson University, he stated, “The challenge we faced was organizing a very strong administrative arrangement for managing institutional planning and assessment.”

Thomas Henson University had a new president that helped them to get through the reaffirmation process. Dr. Ellen Sanders stated:

Here at Thomas Henson University, we didn’t have university-wide academic and non-academic units. We were functioning more as individual islands. This is why we received a warning. Now with all the improvements that we’ve made, we have been reaffirmed by SACS.

Mr. Norbert Rutledge described his experience at Simon Wiltz College. He explained, “The challenge was learning how to address student learning outcomes through assessment. We actually had to go back and look at how we were addressing them. We had to look at the assessment measures and decide if our data was really valid.”

While at David Kemmer University, I spoke to Dr. Audrey McVey. She stated, “The challenge that we faced was that we did not have strong data in assessment. We needed to do more standardized testing in some of our programs. We also faced a challenge in organizing the QEP.” Dr. Leonard Owens at Thomas Henson University expressed his greatest challenge. He stated, “The challenge came with getting people to document what they were doing and to maintain the records.” Also at Thomas Henson, Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson had the same expression. She stated, “We were challenged because we were not documenting student learning outcomes in an ongoing,

integrated research based institution wide manner. The challenge for us was mainly in the structure of planning and assessment.”

At Simon Wiltz College, Dr. Martin Healey explained, “Our challenge was to prove to them that we are doing what we said we were doing, and we did that. Then when we had our exit interview with SACS, they had no recommendations for our college.” When I visited John Aaron College, Dr. Margaret Janssen spoke about their challenge. She stated:

Student learning outcomes is not necessarily new, but it’s new in terms of how it’s attached to accreditation. I think a lot of HBCUs are still coming to terms with that because it’s not going away. We are now accredited by TRACS, but we intend to reapply to SACS two years down the road. We understand the process now, but it was a learning experience for the institution.

Dr. George Wilke from Thomas Henson University talked about their challenge. He expressed:

Our biggest challenge was that we didn’t have commitment at the very top. If you don’t have the commitment at the top, it’s not going to work and it didn’t. We worked under two presidents who didn’t continue to use the assessment plan that was already established. We also weren’t necessarily documenting the use of results consistently. We were challenged because we started the student learning outcomes and assessment process, and then we stopped it university-wide. Now

our new Provost and Academic Vice President came in to help us so that we could be committed to the assessment process again.

Changes in Assessment

As I continued my interviews, I noticed that the changes in assessment were different at each school. Dr. Benedict Lopez from Thomas Henson University placed emphasis on accountability. He stated, “The assessment program has brought about many changes. There’s more accountability in each academic program since the assessment process has improved.” President Edward Hillcrest from John Aaron College feels the same way. He stated, “Assessment has made us a little more accountable. It’s important when you know that someone is going to look at this and see that it really matters.” Dr. Joel Abbott from Thomas Henson University explained:

I think assessment and student learning has helped to shape curriculum decisions, and also the way courses are structured internally. Even though standardized instruments have not been used effectively to enhance learning at the institution, I don’t think that those assessments have really led to specific decisions.

When I encountered Dr. Radimir Stuart at Simon Wiltz College, he spoke about the changes in assessment at his institution. He explained, “Within the mathematics department, assessment has shown certain deficiencies. The mathematics department changed all of the sections of College Algebra and spent more time discussing functions. Each mathematics course now has a coordinator which oversees all the sections of that course.”

I had an interesting discussion with Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey from Simon Wiltz College. She discussed various changes:

We had to revise some courses in order to meet certain goals. The first time we assessed writing after we integrated our general education competencies, we noticed some problems. We found that 50% of the research papers were plagiarized. We had to find out why the students weren't writing good papers. Some of them took the easy way out by going to the internet and finding papers that were already written. So we developed a workshop within our plan of action entitled *The Art of Writing and Plagiarism*. We required that every student in the English courses attend that workshop. We also had faculty members to encourage their students to come and give incentives concerning the workshop. The workshop did help but when it comes to assessment, you have to consistently assess so that students can successfully achieve the necessary goals.

Mrs. Joanne Rice of Simon Wiltz College discussed the same problem that Dr. Brown-Healey was concerned about. She stated:

With our general education assessment, we found out from assessing our writing competency that some students were plagiarizing. Some students just didn't know how to paraphrase. We wanted authentic papers to indicate that the students were improving their writing skills. Along with the workshop, we did a series of tutorials. This really helped the students to improve their writing skills.

Dr. Paul Eganu from Thomas Henson University spoke about the importance of a workshop as well. He stated:

We have a workshop for the faculty on assessment, and it's required.

We focus on the *Six-Steps*. Right now, we're looking at steps 4 and 5.

Step 4 is the results and how you write your results. Step 5 is how you use the results to plan for the next assessment cycle.

Dr. Audrey McVey from David Kemmer University talked about the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) assessment. She stated:

We went with MAPP as part of our Quality Enhancement Plan, because a number of students passing their exams had very low scores. So we decided to revise the whole program, and we now have students doing the pre-test and a post-test in different areas. I would say that our assessment is improving.

According to my research, the MAPP exam gave the faculty members at David Kemmer University a chance to take a "multiple measures" way of assessing student learning by measuring their academic skills that were developed through the core curriculum courses.

Dr. Martin Healey from Simon Wiltz College placed emphasis on adding classes. He commented:

We noticed that our students were not faring well in research methods and statistics. While going through the assessment process, we developed two classes. We have decided to teach research methods separate from statistics. As a result, the test scores have actually

improved since they are taking two classes instead of one. Adding those two classes has really made a change in our assessment program.

Dr. George Wilke from Thomas Henson University emphasized:

We have made some curriculum decisions and completely revamped our curriculum. We have major curriculum changes in music because of the assessment process. Also, our assessment tests usually address the skills and concepts that students need to learn. We even have one standardized instrument that every student takes. It's called the Senior Exit Exam, which assesses student achievement of specific program goals.

When I interviewed Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College, she spoke about their changes in assessment. She described the following:

We have a writing across the curriculum program, and we have a traditional college placement exam where we begin to use it differently because of the assessment process. When the students take the ACCUPLACER exam, that places them in an intro college level or a developmental course, or places them into a regular college course. We noticed that the students were either being grouped according to very weak reading and writing scores, or they have better reading scores but weaker writing scores.

Students on a Low Academic Level

At most HBCUs, you will find students working on a low academic level. However, Dr. George Wilke at Thomas Henson University had a different perspective of students who were not high achievers. He stated, "We no longer have remedial

courses at the university. Even though some students work on a low academic level, it did not affect our accreditation report at all. We were teaching and the students were learning the same courses, and they were performing the same way.” Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College felt that students working on a low academic level had nothing to do with their accreditation report as well. She explained:

I don’t think that it affected the accreditation report, because as long as that group of students is part of your focus and you have identified how you are serving and addressing them, then your record in your accreditation report will follow that. That group of students wouldn’t necessarily change the validity of the accreditation report.

Dr. Trevor Wesley at Thomas Henson University indicated that the university no longer had any developmental studies. Students who were not performing high enough to enter a four-year college would start their education at a community college. He stated, “I don’t think that students working on a low academic level had much impact in terms of our SACS accreditation. We have historically served an underserved population. Most HBCUs fall in this category.”

Dr. Martin Healey from Simon Wiltz College stated, “I don’t think we got penalized for students working on a low academic level at Wiltz College. The students would have to be doing real bad in order to affect our accreditation report. We have student success centers and learning centers with tutors to help students achieve academically.” When I visited Thomas Henson University, I interviewed Dr. Jessica Holland who gave me her point of view. She stated:

We certainly do have some students who arrived unprepared for a traditional college life. This is an HBCU and there has been a struggle since its inception. I think that it is an issue to be addressed, but I don't see that as affecting the accreditation report. You can still strive for meeting the goals that you set for your institution.

During my visit at Thomas Henson University, I also spoke to Dr. Leonard Owens concerning this issue. He explained, "Even though we take in students that are not prepared for college, we are still suppose to follow certain standards in educating them. That's what I think the accreditation body is looking at. They look at the students perception of those standards and those processes." At Simon Wiltz College, Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey pointed out:

It didn't affect us significantly, because we have assessments from developmental to senior level. If you're looking at your objectives, and you're working toward implementing plans for them to be successful, and you're doing what you say you're doing, then it won't affect you. However, you have to have documented evidence to show that your students are achieving academically.

When I interviewed Ms. Agnes Stoner at David Kemmer University, she felt quite elated about their accreditation report. She stated:

To my knowledge, students working on a low academic level did not affect it at all. As a matter of fact, we were commended for being one of the few

HBCUs that had time out for students performing at a lower level in order to bring them up to the level they needed to graduate.

Mr. Norbert Rutledge who is employed at Simon Wiltz College stressed: Most of our students came to Simon Wiltz underprepared for college. Even though we have a large percentage of students working on a low academic level, it did not affect our accreditation report. SACS wants to know if these students are achieving certain outcomes. So far, we have been real successful.

Strengthening Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Each of the four institutions persevered as they endured the many tasks involved in strengthening student learning outcomes assessment. The reaffirmation of accreditation is a major milestone that every college or university embraces. The administrators, faculty and staff of each institution created astounding academic programs which provided assurance that they would be accredited. Some curriculum revisions and new methods of assessing are found in the subcategories that follow: (a) Faculty and Staff Serve as Resources, (b) Evidence Gathered for Improvement, and (c) Other Procedures and Strategies Used to Obtain Accreditation.

Faculty and Staff Serve as Resources

As I interviewed the faculty and staff members, they discussed how they used various resources in order to develop assessment instruments. Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey from Simon Wiltz College stated, “Faculty members are driven when it comes to assessment. If the department decides they’re going to use a rubric, then they check to see how effective a rubric is used at another institution.” Mrs. Joanne Rice from Simon

Wiltz College also indicated, “Faculty members actually develop their own assessment instruments. However, we encourage the use of a rubric in testing.”

I can remember Dr. Audrey McVey from David Kemmer University discussing how the faculty and staff focused on general meetings when it comes to developing assessment instruments. She stated, “There is a core curriculum committee that is responsible for collecting data as it relates to the general education program. Then all the faculty and staff provide input in the *WEAVE* program that gives us a report of our yearly goals and outcomes.” When I interviewed Mr. Norbert Rutledge at Simon Wiltz College, he did not speak about the rubric. He spoke about diversity on the campus. Therefore, he emphasized:

Now that we’re looking at the diversity of our campus, we’re beginning to develop assessment instruments that actually address the cultural aspect of the students. Probably one-fifth of our campus right now is made up of international students. I am interested in addressing diversity because I am from the Caribbean. Since we are looking at a cultural perspective, students are beginning to meet the learning outcomes that are expected of them.

Ms. Agnes Stoner from David Kemmer University discussed the importance of the QEP when it comes to developing assessment instruments. She stated, “Our QEP was used in developing instruments for assessment. These instruments were definitely needed in the math department because it was the most difficult subject for the majority of students on campus.” At John Aaron College, Dr. Margaret Janssen placed emphasis

on the faculty from the business department and how they improved their methods of assessment. She pointed out, “In a Communications course like writing, the faculty used the rubric, and students responded very well to working on the computer.”

Dr. Martin Healey at Simon Wiltz College always enjoyed discussing important things about the Criminal Justice department. He stated, “We develop our own assessment instruments. If we want to change something in our assessment program, we do that. However, when you change your assessment, that means you have to change your syllabi and several other things. So, we try to stay consistent in developing new methods.” Thomas Henson University had several faculty members involved in creating new ideas for improving student learning outcomes. Dr. Jessica Holland stated, “I think at Thomas Henson, there are faculty members who have expertise in assessment. There are also some faculty members who are assessment specialist. I think they even teach assessment in their discipline. There are resources on this campus that are available to assist all faculty members.” At Thomas Henson University, Dr. Benedict Lopez stressed:

When we talk about assessments, we talk about feedback from among the faculty. Then they decide how to approach the assessment problem. We pretty much have a structured way of communicating every week as faculty members and twice a year for faculty retreats. During this process, we’re able to develop assessment instruments among ourselves.

Dr. Phillip Onkian from John Aaron College had a different perspective concerning assessment instruments. He stated, “We have faculty senate meetings to

discuss student learning outcomes and assessment. We compare notes, and every semester we review our assessments and make the adjustments needed.”

I discovered at David Kemmer University that several faculty members believe in developing rubrics. Dr. Verna Lawson indicated, “Faculty members are going to be involved in curriculum mapping and developing rubrics. There are a number of templates out there. However, the faculty would have to apply their individual expertise in their subject areas to tweak the rubrics to fit the content.” Also, I noticed at Simon Wiltz College that the use of the rubric is an important tool to be used in assessment. Mrs. Darlene Langston-Mohr stated, “Through meetings, we come together to see how we can develop a particular instrument. When it comes to certain objectives, we have to come up with a standardized rubric to be used. We are often involved in the process of developing a rubric from scratch.”

When I interviewed Dr. Harry Relic at Simon Wiltz College, he spoke about the comprehensive exam that he was involved in organizing. He explained:

We created the comprehensive exam that we use here at Simon Wiltz College. Every faculty member was involved in developing this exam. The faculty is aware of what they need to assess in a certain project in order to achieve a common goal. Our goal is to improve student learning outcomes.

Evidence Gathered for Improvement

When the faculty and staff members served as resources for developing assessment instruments, they used the evidence to improve the performance of student learning. Dr. David Parnika from Simon Wiltz College stressed, “We’ll use that

information to make changes in our academic programs.” Also from Simon Wiltz College, Dr. Robert Hoffman stated, “We actually analyze the data, and when the data is crystal clear we react to that data. We utilize that data to improve the area and to talk about the next step.” Along with Dr. Parnika and Dr. Hoffman, Mrs. Joanne Rice added, “We have the faculty to do a follow up. When they summarize the assessment data, they also write an action plan based on those results. We also use *TracDat* to assist in this process.”

I enjoyed listening to President Edward Hillcrest from John Aaron College as he spoke about the campus-wide tutorial program that he used in motivating students to learn. When it comes to the evidence gathered, he commented, “Well, they gather the data and then they analyze it. They measure it against whether or not it’s actually accomplishing the goals that they articulated for college. We then identify the weaknesses that we can improve, and then we tweak it. That’s how we do it.” At Thomas Henson University, Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson feels that their success is centered around the *Six Step Process*. She stated:

We use the evidence for improvement. We make a plan which is part of our *Six Step Process*. In step four, the analysis of your data shows if your goals have been met or not. Step five tells me to make a plan and decide how to use the data. And then step six of the following year will let us know if our goals have been achieved.

At David Kemmer University, Dr. Verna Lawson disclosed, “I know one thing they did in mathematics was to change the learning materials. They started using a

different software. They even changed textbooks, and decided that the students needed more time to master the material for their classes.” Dr. Carmen Beltran also spoke about how she used the evidence gathered at David Kemmer University. She stated, “At departmental meetings, we talk about the evidence gathered monthly. At the faculty and staff institute, they’ll talk about training initiatives and how a university as a whole is progressing. We also look at what we can do to add more critical thinking in the classroom.”

Dr. Joel Abbott placed emphasis on the History Department at Thomas Henson University. He indicated, “When the History Department meet as a group of faculty members, we look at the outcomes of our assessment and discuss ways to improve the program. We work together as a department placing emphasis on the historical reasoning and testing skills of our students.” Dr. Benedict Lopez also from Thomas Henson University placed emphasis on feedback. He implied:

We conduct faculty retreats twice a year, and we discuss how to get feedback from graduates. We also expect feedback from our students, and from this feedback we start looking at what outcomes we have.

We’re now in the process of revising some of our subjects and rearranging our subjects based on this feedback.

During an interview session, Dr. George Wilke at Thomas Henson University explained, “We always set goals for the next year. We can’t improve everything in one year, so we take the weak areas and make a plan to improve these areas.” When

I interviewed Dr. Sarah Ellis at Thomas Henson University, her focus was on retention and graduation. She pointed out:

We focus on offering courses at a time that's convenient for students and support them if they need tutoring. We often make adjustments in order to improve the retention and graduation rate. We let them know that it's not embarrassing to go to a tutor. We put signs up everywhere and even offer them online tutoring.

When I visited John Aaron College, Dr. Phillip Onkian spoke about departmental meetings. He stated:

The faculty members in my department meet and compare notes on issues that need attention in particular areas. We try to get all of the faculty members to be on the same wave length in evaluating their students. I teach general biology and we share notes on a regular basis.

During my visit to John Aaron College, I also listened to Dr. Margaret Janssen who believes that any evidence gathered to improve the performance of students should be kept on file. She stated:

We keep all data on file for future use. We're actually in the process of going through old data to determine what should be kept and what should be discarded. We look at the summaries of faculty members and analyze each one. During the site visit, SACS wanted to see the documentation that supports the self-study.

As I interviewed the participants at David Kemmer University, I remember Dr. Audrey McVey speaking about how they handled the evidence gathered in her department. She described:

That's where we don't close the loop. The new department chair looks at the specific domains in which students are not doing well, and targets those in the upcoming curriculum. We did that a little bit in kinesiology. However, in our general education program, problems are created because everyone doesn't look at the evidence gathered.

Mr. Norbert Rutledge from Simon Wiltz College believes that collecting data is a very important part of student progress. He mentioned, "We live by the data. We cannot progress if we don't look at the data, and the quantitative data is what provides us with that information. We have to be able to read the data and understand the trends that are involved."

Dr. Marva Ashford believes that data is very important at Simon Wiltz as well. She stated, "I used the evidence that I have to write the report on our accomplishments. The reports or data can be in the form of strategic plans or program reviews. If necessary, we will change procedures and teaching methods in order to improve assessment and student learning outcomes." Dr. Harry Relic at Simon Wiltz College has a different approach to student learning. He stressed, "We need to look at students taking comprehensive exams and determine why they didn't do well. Maybe we need to give them a tryout or practice test before the real exam." At Thomas Henson University, Dr. Ellen Sanders discussed her point of view:

The department heads are required to prepare annual reports. We utilized the data that we collected within the last five years. We looked at the aggregate data to see if our student learning outcomes were met with the university's mission and goals. Then we take those results that haven't been met and bring those back for discussion through our departmental programs.

When it comes to evidence gathered, the interview participants were able to give me the information I needed. This also includes Dr. Reva Jones-Cabot from Thomas Henson University. She explained:

We need evidence to determine what's working and what's not working. We have to make sure that we never allow that evidence to make us complacent about anything, because we could really drop down in progress. The purpose of evidence is to make sure that we're improving. Sometimes in measuring the perception of students, you have to use different kinds of evidence.

While at David Kemmer University, I interviewed Ms. Emily Weston. She described that the evidence gathered in her department is used as a way of improving the study skills of students. She stated:

We kind of just look at the lesson plans that were done, and see what areas we need to improve in. For example, we encourage the students to mark their textbooks as each chapter is explored in the classrooms. Marking the

text and engaging in the text a little bit more has shown a significant amount of improvement in student learning.

Other Procedures and Strategies Used to Obtain Accreditation

Each HBCU followed certain procedures and developed strategies that would give them the opportunity to become reaffirmed while fulfilling the requirements of accreditation. At Thomas Henson University, Dr. Reva Jones-Cabot elaborated on her experience. She stated, “Each student learning outcome ties into the program outcomes. We also need to be cognizant of the fact that student learning outcomes are tied to the mission of the university, and the mission should serve the needs of the citizens.”

During an interview with Dr. Audrey McVey at David Kemmer University, she revealed, “I think a strategy to be used is to map the curriculum to see what needs to be taught, and where it will be taught within the curriculum.” Looking back at Dr. Marva Ashford from Simon Wiltz College, she shared the following information:

I believe that working with the writers and the assessors has helped to strengthen our academic programs. We look at our entire curriculum and our syllabi to correct the procedures that we need to follow. We don't just keep doing the same stuff for 10 years. We have to make sure we're keeping up with the knowledge base in our discipline and the changes in all of the academic fields.

Interviewing Dr. Arnold Perreau from David Kemmer University was quite interesting. He spoke about their computer software program. He stated, “I think we have something in place when we use our database to record all of the learning

outcomes. It's not only just input, it's a way of letting us know the strengths and weaknesses of our students when it comes to assessments." During my interview with Dr. Ellen Sanders from Thomas Henson University, I can remember how she spoke about the procedures she used. She commented:

From an individual perspective as it relates to being a faculty member, I looked at my syllabi and made sure that I was consistent with the texts and what I wanted my students to learn. Then I looked at the overall grades when the students completed their assessment to see how many passed and how many didn't pass. In other words, I also used our new program methods to assist me in helping my students improve their learning abilities.

Back at Simon Wiltz College, Dr. Sandra Brown-Healey placed emphasis on her method of assessing students. She disclosed:

I would recommend that absolutely everyone should be aware of the outcomes from the beginning. Students should be assessed from day one. You cannot start assessment in mid-year and expect to get quality outcomes. If you say you're going to use a rubric, but you don't include the rubric in your syllabus, then you are not informing students of what the expectations are from the very beginning. Again, if you don't start from the very beginning, you're constantly playing catch up. And that makes it more stressful for everyone. Also, you have to make sure that everything is documented.

Mr. Norbert Rutledge talked about his experience at Simon Wiltz College on procedures and strategies. He stated:

The procedures have to be institutionalized. First and foremost, the faculty and staff members must understand the core requirements, and how those core requirements address specific academic areas. Then the QEP is next. The total Quality Enhancement Plan shows how the faculty and staff worked to support student learning, and identified goals and a plan to assess their achievement.

Mrs. Darlene Langston-Mohr from Simon Wiltz College further indicated, “This year we changed our objectives of student learning to actually align with the Quality Enhancement Plan.” When I interviewed Dr. Margaret Janssen from John Aaron College, she spoke about the procedures and strategies that they used. She discussed the following:

We assess the program, collect the data, and then decide if something in the program needs to be tweaked, like the writing program. Now once we’ve done that, and implemented new classes, implemented the new in-house writing assessment, then it is now time for us to assess based on those changes. You really have to look at every single program and what it’s objectives and outcomes are. Then make sure that every single course in that program is aligned to those objectives.

Also at John Aaron College, Dr. Phillip Onkean replied:

The first procedure is to identify the method of assessment. Then

identify the take home tests, assignments, involve the students in class discussions, and identify the problems that students have and see what help they need. The computer lab is available for students, and the faculty and students have personal access to their CAMS.

Dr. Sarah Ellis at Thomas Henson University elaborated about the procedures she used. She shared, “Losing accreditation is a scary process. That’s why we worked hard to improve assessment. A team or set of individuals worked with the institution to internalize the process by using a new software program.”

While at Thomas Henson University, I spoke to Dr. Benedict Lopez who stated, “We do constant communication between faculty and students and all of our stakeholders. They want to know how effective the program is in meeting its mission and goals. So, the strategy we used was involving more communication between us.”

Dr. Verna Lawson from David Kemmer University discussed her strategies. She stressed, “We need more faculty and professional development. We used curriculum mapping and spent time developing rubrics and matching those rubrics with the desired outcomes. We’re also developing specific programmatic measures to see if students are mastering the content and integrating more standardized testing in our curriculum.”

Also at David Kemmer, Dr. Carmen Beltran indicated, “In strengthening student learning outcomes, those outcomes are derived in a planning session and then tracked overtime. Assessment strategies have to be consistent and parallel from term to term.”

I can remember Dr. George Wilke discussing the procedures and strategies he used at Thomas Henson University. He stated:

I would recommend that we keep doing what we're doing. Before our online system was developed, we had student learning outcomes and we had assessment, but we didn't have a program of student learning outcomes assessment. People were doing it individually in their departments. Now assessment and planning is a unified process.

When I visited John Aaron College, I listened to President Edward Hillcrest talk about the strategies that their institution used. He expounded by saying:

I think you really have to take a hard look at the curriculum. You know one of the things that we did when we first got here was to provide tutors for students to be able to take the courses they needed. We had to develop a system that would work. So, we developed the *Adam Hamilton Plan* to help motivate the students to learn so they could pass their exams. I just want you to know that we are very serious about assessment and we try to measure everything.

According to Dr. Carolyn Drew-Nelson from Thomas Henson University, their institution experienced many changes during the reaffirmation process. She explained:

Student learning outcomes were not our problems. Our problems were centered around leadership. We had several presidents in the past years who were unable to help us solve our problems. Also, we needed to improve documentation of duties being performed. I would say that planning and assessment processes need to be deliberate and university-wide. We have made some university guidelines in

terms of whether or not our programs are effective. We look at enrollment, graduation rates, and faculty evaluations. All of these things determine whether a program is effective or not. We also used the *Six Step Process* that provided us with the data and the guidelines that made an impact on our assessment program. We now have an effective planning and assessment program at our institution.

During my research, I noticed that all four institutions followed the Principles of Accreditation so they could reach the height of the reaffirmation process. Each institution now has an effective planning and assessment program in progress. The participants placed emphasis on the computer software programs, the Self-Study, and the implementation of the QEP as a means of enhancing the quality of student learning.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four is centered around the interviews of 39 participants who were employed at four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This chapter identified the problems that each institution encountered in the area of Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment. Various procedures and strategies were used by three institutions to overcome the challenges that led to the reaffirmation of accreditation. Whereas, the fourth institution was able to maintain the standards of accreditation by fulfilling the guidelines needed to promote the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP).

This study discussed the different programs that were used in higher education to elevate learning and assessment. John Aaron College used a tutorial program called the *Adam Hamilton Plan* to help disadvantaged students prepare to meet the consequences that revolve around the academic programs. In this plan they learned motivational techniques, time management skills and test-taking skills. The *Adam Hamilton Plan* increased the retention rate and gave the students an awareness that cultivated their self-esteem. John Aaron College had a multitude of problems, but with the direction of new leadership they were reaffirmed by TRACS.

More specifically, Thomas Henson University devised a plan called the *Compliance Assist!* program which gave the faculty and staff the opportunity to use the *Six-Step Process*. This process solved many of the learning and assessment problems that delayed the reaffirmation process. The *Compliance Assist!* is a software program that helped the faculty and staff to become more accountable. They listed all of their

assessments in the computer and documented each one so they could retrieve this information when needed.

Even though Simon Wiltz College was reaffirmed, and had only a few recommendations, their computer programming system was used on a regular basis by faculty and staff. The program they used is called *TracDat!* This system allowed the faculty to manage and document academic assessment. It also helped Simon Wiltz to overcome assessment obstacles.

Finally, participants at David Kemmer University emphasized the importance of the *WEAVE* software program that they used to enhance student learning outcomes and assessment. Three institutions purchased a promotional product from various software companies in order to expand their academic programs. However, all of the institutions used the *Rubric*, which is a scoring tool that divides the assigned work into component parts. It can be used for grading a large variety of assignments and tasks (Stevens & Levi, 2013). David Kemmer University had many problems with student learning and assessment several years ago, but within the last few years they have been able to follow the accreditation guidelines.

The categories and sub-categories that emerged provided insight into all of the areas that were explored by the accrediting agencies. In Chapter Four, all of the institutions have been reaffirmed either by SACS or TRACS. The findings revealed in this chapter involves the challenges at an HBCU, specific guidelines taken, different methods of assessment, the changes in assessment and strategies used, evidence gathered for improvement, and the evaluations rendered by the Accreditation Team.

In the next chapter, an analysis of the data will be presented, and the recommendations and conclusions will be discussed. More importantly, I will make connections between the data presented here and the larger issues of accreditation. Also, I will revisit my research questions and provide definitive answers to those questions. Each question will be answered in detail with emphasis on the requirements that institutions must meet in order to achieve student learning outcomes through assessment.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND
CONCLUSIONS

Chapter V provides a discussion, recommendations and conclusions based on the findings from the data collected and interviews reported in Chapter Four. This chapter is centered around six topics. They are:

Overview of the Study

Findings Related to Research Questions

Relation to Theoretical Framework

Implications of the Study

Recommendations for Future Research

Conclusions

Overview of the Study

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) continue to play a unique and vital role in higher education. According to this research, students seem to find that the HBCU experience offers more nurturing, more congruent mentoring, more remediation, smaller classes, and more cultural and extracurricular activities. African American students realized that they must be able to meet the challenges of learning and assessment in order to fulfill the graduation requirements and prepare for a future career.

Awarding more degrees will only be meaningful if those degrees reflect a high level of student accomplishment, persistence and learning. It is important for educators

to pay close attention to student engagement in learning and learning outcomes so that students will remain enrolled and graduate. College graduates entering the workforce will increasingly be asked to apply a broader range of skills to think critically, solve problems, utilize existing knowledge, and learn on the job. Therefore, accrediting agencies are expecting institutions to be accountable for assessing student learning (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012). All of the regional accrediting agencies have incorporated some level of effectiveness or student learning outcomes assessment activities into their criteria for accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation. In addition, a majority of the states have also mandated some form of effectiveness assessment activity (Erwin, 1991). Most accrediting agencies require institutions or programs to examine student achievement or *institutional effectiveness* as part of their Self-Study and review process, usually in the form of some kind of *assessment* (Ewell, 2001).

Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have taken steps to address student learning outcomes and assessment by becoming more competitive and responsive in their curricular offerings. HBCUs must continue to raise the expectations for students to graduate so they can fulfill the mission of the institution and comply with the Principles of Accreditation. A significant number of HBCUs are reevaluating their institutional missions primarily in terms of their program offerings: the mix of degrees they offer and the methods of instruction. To consider such changes is significant, because for most institutions their program offerings are tied to their mission (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2014). Each

college and university is encouraged to articulate its specific goals for student learning and prominently announce these goals to various stakeholders and the public. Students should also understand and be able to articulate the relationship of their coursework and cocurricular experiences to the specific learning goals (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012).

From the research gathered, it is clear that many HBCUs will continue to struggle with student learning while *closing the assessment loop* and preparing for the reaffirmation process. However, further research is needed in the area of student learning outcomes and assessment so that the survival of HBCUs will be ongoing.

Closing the Assessment Loop

According to Wehlburg (2008), there have been calls to *close the assessment loop* for decades. Closing the feedback loop or the assessment loop refers to the process of using results from appropriate and meaningful student learning outcomes to make modifications in the teaching and learning activities within a course. These should lead to changes in the results of student learning outcomes. Unfortunately, institutions and faculty often stop short of completely closing the loop. They create student learning outcomes, they measure those outcomes, and they may even analyze these outcomes. Then these results are written up in a report and filed away in a drawer or stored on a computer and never to be seen again. The assessment or feedback loop consists of four steps. They are: (1) Creating Student Learning Outcomes, (2) Measurement of Outcomes, (3) Analysis of Data, and (4) Modifications in Teaching/Learning Activities.

Although calls to close the assessment loop have been going on for some time, many institutions still have little interaction between those who collect and report assessment data, and those who focus on improving teaching and learning. It is essential for the assessment data to inform teaching/learning decisions and for faculty to create student learning outcomes with a focus on what is important for students to learn. Without this interaction, a lot of effort is going to be spent on collecting data with little impact on teaching and learning. Assessment is very important today. This is why the accrediting agencies are mandating that institutions develop a process that they can use (Wehlburg, 2008).

The HBCUs in my study realized that closing the loop was sometimes difficult to conquer. However, they continued to work toward closing the loop by enhancing the learning skills that would allow them to achieve the satisfaction needed for approval by the accrediting agencies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the accreditation problems of four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and evaluate the strategies and procedures used in solving these problems. Emphasis in this study is placed on the management of academic programs and the improvement of student learning outcomes and assessment on the collegiate level.

Findings Related to Research Questions

The data analysis was focused on answering the following research questions that guided this study. The first research question was divided into three sections. They are listed below:

1. How do HBCUs interpret the types of student learning outcomes that meet regional accrediting agency standards?
 - a. What is a “Student Learning Outcome?”
 - b. What is “Assessment” in relation to Student Learning Outcomes?
2. What are the strategies that the HBCUs under examination currently use to manage academic programs in order to meet student learning outcomes that are compatible with regional accreditation standards?
3. What approaches can HBCUs implement to successfully meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment?

Research Question # 1

Research Question # 1 asked ***How do HBCUs interpret the types of student learning outcomes that meet regional accrediting agency standards?***

The best measure of an institution’s effectiveness is to determine if students will succeed academically in achieving their educational and career aspirations. Institutions with a record of accreditation instability cannot expect to attract students who have options for pursuit of a college degree. Similarly, it would not be prudent for students to enroll at an institution with accreditation problems whether it’s an HBCU or not. If HBCUs expect to thrive, they must develop and deploy a comprehensive enrollment management strategy wherein they aggressively recruit, retain and graduate students who can benefit from the cultural of caring for which Historically Black Colleges are

known. HBCUs must be able to deliver high-quality academic programs and services that students need for academic success (Nelms, 2015).

The participants at the four HBCUs in this study considered student learning outcomes and assessment as a top priority, because they had to fulfill the requirements of the mission statement for their institution. The administrators, faculty and staff of each HBCU knew they would be challenged by the accreditation team during the site visit. HBCUs interpreted the types of student learning outcomes as a major milestone that had to be accomplished in order to meet the standards of accreditation. They knew the accreditation team expected to see documentations of how each institution measured student performance and student attainment of certain goals and objectives. Evidence of student learning would indicate that their skills are transferable upon graduation.

When the accreditation team visited the four HBCUs, the overall academic programs were evaluated in each department, and emphasis was placed on assessment policies. They evaluated the assessment data and the procedures used in developing assessment programs. Each institution knew that in order to attract and retain students, they would have to comply with the Principles of Accreditation. Therefore, they were able to create strategies that would improve student learning outcomes and assessment while meeting the regional accrediting agency standards.

Research Question # 1: Section A

Research Question # 1: Section A asked ***What is a “Student Learning Outcome?”***

A Student Learning Outcome is commonly defined as a change or consequence occurring as a result of enrollment in an educational institution and involvement in its programs (Lubinescu, Ratcliff & Gaffney, 2001).

The institution's statements of learning outcomes clearly articulate what students should be able to do, achieve, demonstrate, or know upon the completion of each undergraduate degree. The outcomes reflect appropriate higher education goals and are stated in a way that allows levels of achievement to be assessed against an externally informed or benchmarked level of achievement or assessed and compared with those of similar institutions (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012).

In recent years, accreditation standards developed and used by most of the regional accreditors have changed to incorporate the assessment of student learning as a central process in evaluating institutional effectiveness. The incorporation of student learning outcomes into accreditation evaluation processes reflects a decade-long movement in higher education to assess student learning. This movement itself is both a product of the concern of higher education practitioners with the quality of their own institutional and professional practices, and an effort to identify and better address diverse student learning needs (Beno, 2004).

Student learning outcome is properly defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences (Ewell, 2001).

Evidence of student learning can take many forms but must involve a direct examination

of student levels of attainment. Examples of the types of evidence that might be used include (but are not limited to):

- faculty-designed comprehensive or capstone examinations and assignments
- performance on external or licensure examinations
- authentic performances or demonstrations
- portfolios of student work over time
- samples of representative student work generated in response to typical course assignments (Ewell, 2001).

Systematic processes for gathering evidence allow colleges and universities to discover how well students are progressing toward the institution's overall and programmatic learning outcomes. Evidence-gathering efforts that are ongoing, sustainable, and integrated into the work of faculty and staff can suggest where the institution is succeeding and where improvement is needed. Gathering evidence concerning the degree to which students are actively engaged in academically challenging work can also suggest ways in which student learning can be enhanced (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012).

Research Question #1: Section B

Research Question # 1: Section B asked ***What is “Assessment” in relation to Student Learning Outcomes?***

The most common meaning of assessment refers to the collection and use of aggregated data about student attainment to examine the degree to which program or institution-level learning goals are being achieved (Ewell, 2001). In other words,

assessment determines if student learning is taking place. From a student's point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum (Ramsden, 1992). Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. If you want to change student learning, then change the methods of assessment (Ramsden, 1992). Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been trying to change their methods of assessment, because they have not been able to achieve the learning goals that were established for the university.

Educators whose focus is on quality improvement assert that assessment involves not just finding out whether students learned, but also using assessment results to improve learning and teaching. Assessing student learning outcomes involves several steps. Assessment steps include:

- Clearly articulating the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes we expect students who successfully complete a segment of a course, an entire course, or a program to have and be able to demonstrate at the end of the learning experience.
- Identifying appropriate approaches to measure whether this learning has occurred and whether the student has achieved a specific threshold of performance to be considered "successful."
- Creating and following an assessment plan that not only specifies desired learning outcomes and assessment approaches, but also identifies individuals responsible for administering and interpreting assessments, as well as reporting how results are communicated and how results were or will be used for institutional improvement (Bers, 2008).

Assessment is often referred to as various procedures that institutions and programs use to collect and interpret evidence of their educational effectiveness. It also

embraces the processes used by institutions and programs to apply what they learn about learning in order to make improvements in teaching and learning (CHEA Institute for Research and Study of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2003). Assessment is also a method for analyzing and describing student learning outcomes or program achievement of objectives. Assessment is concerned with student mastery of material, as well as outcomes and areas in need of improvement (Northern Illinois University: Office of Assessment Services, Division of Academic Affairs, 2016).

According to the findings, the outcomes assessment movement has been increasing in momentum over the past decade. Every higher education accreditation agency now requires the assessment of learning outcomes as an accreditation criterion. The outcomes assessment movement is about agreeing on what is most important in courses, communicating that to all stakeholders, and finding out what's working and what's not. Great assessment results can and should be used to trumpet success, market programs, motivate faculty and students, and justify increased resources (Northern Illinois University: Office of Assessment Services, Division of Academic Affairs, 2016). Each of the HBCUs in this research demonstrated the importance of the assessment movement by justifying the need for the improvement of academic programs.

This research indicated that the primary purpose of program assessment was to improve the quality of educational programs by improving student learning. Even if you feel that the quality of your program is good, there is always room for improvement. It is important to share results reflecting programs strengths and weaknesses to make assessment a collaborative and transparent process for the benefit of students' learning

(Northern Illinois University: Office of Assessment Services, Division of Academic Affairs, 2016).

Assessment has many benefits for students. Some of the benefits that students need to be aware of are listed below:

- Empowers students to monitor and direct their learning processes
- Improves student awareness and understanding of their learning
- Provides clear expectations about what is important in a course or program
- Improves student retention by better preparing students for courses
- Informs students how their learning will be evaluated
- Reassures students of common core content across all course sections
- Provides for informed decisions about academic programs based on outcome results (Northern Illinois University: Office of Assessment Services, Division of Academic Affairs, 2016).

Assessment also provides critical evidence for maintaining and/or improving teaching effectiveness. While preparing for assessment, faculty members will focus on course content, programs, and institution-level goals and objectives. Administrators will have a chance to demonstrate accountability to accrediting bodies, and provide evidence to parents, employers and legislatures concerning student learning and assessment (Northern Illinois University: Office of Assessment Services, Division of Academic Affairs, 2016).

Additionally, accrediting agencies and the federal and state governments are calling for increased transparency of learning goals and assessments. Therefore, the connection between academic quality, program offerings, and overall student learning

outcomes is one that needs to be more readily addressed among HBCUs and kept as a key priority (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2014).

Research Question # 2

Research Question # 2 asked ***What are the strategies that the HBCUs under examination currently use to manage academic programs in order to meet student learning outcomes that are compatible with regional accreditation standards?***

All four institutions had newly designed strategic plans that assisted them through the reaffirmation process. Each HBCU expected to highlight how a campus self-study and accreditation collectively could facilitate institutional improvement. A high-quality self-study can bring the members of an educational institution together in search of a common course with resilient leadership and vigorous community involvement (Alstete, 2007). A general model of the campus self-study can be broken down into five steps:

1. Identify student learning and assessment programs or processes on campus common to multiple departments.
2. Of these programs or processes, select one that should be given high priority for a campus self-study.
3. Identify and prioritize goals for the self-study of this program or process.
4. Determine the methods and audience(s) for the self-study.
5. Determine how the results of the self-study will be used to achieve the intended goals (Shapiro, 2006).

The main purpose of the self-study is to identify strengths and make them public so that all departments benefit, and to make common challenges visible to collaborative problem solvers (Shapiro, 2006).

Each institution also followed an institutional assessment and improvement plan that bridged the gap for students to achieve success in the area of student learning outcomes and assessment. All of the HBCUs followed the Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1 (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012) in which the institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following educational programs:

- Administrative support services
- Educational support services
- Research
- Community/public service (Thomas Henson University: Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2012).

In order to be compatible with the SACSCOC regional accreditation standards, three HBCUs promoted the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in their academic programs. The QEP describes a carefully designed course of action that addresses a well-defined and focused topic or issue related to enhancing student learning and should be embedded within the institution's ongoing integrated institution-wide planning. The QEP must be forward looking and launches a process that can move the institution into the future characterized by creative, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences for

students. The QEP is a key component of the reaffirmation process (Texas A&M University: Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President, 2011).

By implementing the QEP, the institutions were able to create a culture that emphasizes critical thinking. They were also able to connect critical thinking to the university assessment system, the accreditation process, and the universities mission and strategic plan (Martin & Williams, 2010). The QEP also included clear goals that specified realistic, measurable student learning outcomes. The QEP is an essential part of an institution's ongoing planning and evaluation process (Texas A&M University: Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President, 2011).

John Aaron College promoted the QEP when they were accredited by SACS. However, since they are now accredited by TRACS, other resources including the Self-Study is available for the college to use. Through the Self-Study process, an institution conducts a systematic and thorough examination of all its components in light of its stated mission and against an established set of TRACS standards. Such an evaluation allows an institution to determine the success it is having in accomplishing its self-established goals and objectives (Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, 2014).

Accreditation standards are revised periodically by all regional commissions. Over the past five years, each regional commission has significantly modified its standards and evaluation practices with a renewed focus on increased institutional accountability and enhanced student learning assessment. Years ago, the evaluation of quality focused primarily on institutional resources, structures, and processes.

Accreditation reviews relied heavily on such tangible characteristics as fiscal solvency, faculty credentials, curricular coherence and governance structures. While such institutional capacities continued to be important in accreditation, regional commissions and their constituencies now recognized that “capacity” alone is not sufficient for demonstrating institutional effectiveness. Based on public attention to issues of educational effectiveness, accrediting commissions have revised their standards and evaluation processes to make the focus on student learning outcomes central to the accreditation review process (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003).

There are five principles that an accrediting commission should reasonably expect of its institutional members. From my research study, all four of the HBCUs were able to follow these principles and use them as strategies to manage their academic programs in order to improve student learning outcomes and assessment. The five principles are listed below:

1. *The role of student learning in accreditation.* The role of student learning is centered around educational quality. The institution must provide an environment that leads to the development of knowledge, skills and behaviors. Also, an institution’s “learning mission” reflects its aspirations for students and is stated in terms of how students are expected to benefit from its course of study.
2. *Documentation of student learning.* The institution demonstrates that student learning is appropriate for the certificate or degree awarded and is consistent with the institutions own standards of academic performance. The institution accomplishes this by: setting clear learning goals, collecting evidence of goal attainment by using assessment tools, applying collective judgment to the meaning and utility of the evidence and using evidence to show improvements in its programs.

3. *Compilation of Evidence.* The institution derives evidence of student learning from multiple sources, such as courses, curricula, and co-curricular programming, and includes effects of both intentional and unintentional learning experiences. Evidence collected from these sources is complementary and demonstrates the impact of the institution as a whole on the student.
4. *Stakeholder Involvement.* The collection, interpretation, and use of student learning evidence is a collective endeavor, and is not viewed as the sole responsibility of a single office or position. Those in the institution with a stake in decisions of educational quality should participate in the process.
5. *Capacity Building.* The institution uses broad participation to reflect upon student learning outcomes as a means of building a commitment to educational improvement (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003).

Since all of the colleges and universities in this study were able to apply these principles, it became of utmost importance to the general public. The principles provided a basis for assessing the accrediting practices across the regions so that institutional learning goals could be accomplished.

Research Question # 3

Research Question # 3 asked ***What approaches can HBCUs implement to successfully meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment?***

HBCUs have been able to implement several approaches successfully in order to meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment. Each college and university developed an institutional assessment and improvement plan that could be used to help the faculty prepare their students in each academic course. This plan helped Thomas Henson University and the other institutions in the

study to clearly identify student learning outcomes and unit performance outcomes and utilize both quantitative and qualitative measures to assess the extent to which these outcomes were achieved. Equally important, the revised assessment and improvement plan provides a uniform integrated institutional effectiveness model for developing and implementing an assessment plan, and the improvement process that documented the ways in which assessment results are used to improve the university or college (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability, 2010).

As a review of the discussion, three HBCUs implemented a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), whereas one HBCU focused more on the Self-Study. The QEP gave students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, an application of a well-formulated argument that uses evidence to support their position. The QEP was designed to improve students' critical thinking while strengthening their communication skills. Also, students will be able to recognize opposing viewpoints and utilize researched evidence to champion their position through the exchange of verbal questions and answers. Simon Wiltz College developed a timeline for completing the QEP document, identifying the student learning outcomes and other performance measures for the initiative, developing the implementation plan, writing the final document to be sent to SACSCOC and disseminating information campus-wide (Simon Wiltz College, 2012b).

Simon Wiltz College placed a great deal of emphasis on measurement and evaluation of student learning outcomes. In order to develop a baseline of critical thinking and reading skills, each freshman student was assigned to take the Collegiate

Learning Assessment (CLA) during orientation. They were also scheduled to take the same assessment at the end of the year. Results from the data were compared in order to measure the development of skills over the course of the year as well as program effectiveness. The quantitative data gathered by the participating institution provided the opportunity for faculty and administrators to measure whether the desired outcomes are being achieved and to correct the course of action as needed. The benchmarking regime is also important to the success of the QEP (Simon Wiltz College, 2012b).

During this research, I noticed that each institution reflected on the writing skills of students. They had different programs that allowed students a chance to work diligently so that they could successfully write essays, research papers, and letters to prospective employers. Simon Wiltz College organized writing workshops and emphasized that students should learn to write their own papers rather than plagiarize them. John Aaron College offered tutoring to help their students learn how to write research papers, and David Kemmer University focused on developing a new process for documenting student learning outcomes in order to enhance their writing skills.

Thomas Henson University created the *Write Program* as the QEP for their students. Through participation in the *Write Program*, students were able to develop not just the required, minimum level competency in writing, but a level of competency in writing specific to their disciplines and vocations. The *Write Program* provided a broad range of support for students, faculty, and programs to enhance and refine writing competency throughout the upper level curriculum. At Thomas Henson, English 1010 and 1020 will continue to focus on the development of writing competence but will

also introduce students to an online portfolio. Students who complete the *Write Program* will enter into their futures with a strong advantage in terms of significant writing samples and enhanced writing skills (The WRITE Program at Thomas Henson University, n.d.).

The Rubric was another approach that all four HBCUs were able to use. The Rubric is a scoring tool that explicitly represents the performance expectations for an assignment or piece of work. A rubric divides the assigned work into component parts and provides clear descriptions of the characteristics of the work associated with each component, at varying levels of mastery. Rubrics can be used for a wide array of assignments: papers, projects, oral presentations, artistic performances, group projects, etc. Rubrics can be used as scoring or grading guides, to provide formative feedback to support and guide ongoing learning efforts, or both. Grading rubrics are also valuable to students. A rubric can help instructors communicate to students the specific requirements and acceptable performance standards of an assignment. When rubrics are given to students with the assignment description, they can help students monitor and assess their progress as they work toward clearly indicated goals. When assignments are scored at an HBCU and returned with the rubric, students can more easily recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their work and direct their efforts accordingly (Eberly Center: Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, 2015).

Thomas Henson University has had a long history of assessment. The Institutional Assessment and Implementation Plan initiated during the last academic year was an attempt to bring together the assessment initiatives at the university and

its on-going, and institution-wide, research-based planning processes into a unified integrated institutional effectiveness model. Lessons from the first year of implementation of the university's Institutional Assessment and Implementation Plan, as well as recommendation No. 1 in the SACS Visiting Committees' Report have resulted in major enhancements to the Plan. The enhanced Plan is titled *Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan* (IAIP). The addition of "Improvement" to the title and its consistent pairing with "Assessment" throughout the enhanced Plan represents the university's commitment to use assessment to prompt and guide continuous improvement in institutional quality at Thomas Henson University (James, Goldstein, Eganu, Wilke, Drew-Nelson & Hudson, 2010).

There are four key components of the enhanced plan:

1. *A fully integrated institutional effectiveness model* as seen in the enhanced plan that links program mission and goals and student learning outcomes and performance outcomes to the institutional mission and goals;
2. *A common process for assessment and improvement* that consists of:
 - a.) Formulating assessable student learning outcomes or performance outcomes,
 - b.) Establishing the criteria for success,
 - c.) Describing how outcomes will be assessed (direct or indirect methods),
 - d.) Analyzing assessment data,
 - e.) Using assessment results to make improvements, and
 - f.) Documenting improvements.

3. *A significantly strengthened administrative arrangement for management of assessment planning and improvement* from the organizational plan; and
4. *An online documentation system, Compliance Assist!*, that enhances reporting of each unit's assessment work as various assessment activities are completed (James et al., 2010).

In addition to Institutional Effectiveness, the planning process at David Kemmer University consists of several components, an academic program review, an administrative program review, annual reports, new student surveys, senior exit surveys, and unit satisfaction surveys. Academic departments also conduct regular formal program reviews. As part of the program review process, the university identifies ways to improve student learning by promoting excellence in offerings to students as well as in teaching, research, and service (David Kemmer University: The Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2010).

In order to assess students' attainment of common general education areas using an externally validated instrument and to make comparisons with other institutions, David Kemmer adopted the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) Test. The MAPP test is a measure of college-level reading, mathematics, writing, and critical thinking in the context of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The MAPP measures proficiency in the areas of reading, writing, critical thinking, and math. The addition of the MAPP allows David Kemmer to take "multiple measures" of assessing student learning by measuring academic skills developed through the core curriculum courses. Results

from the MAPP offer multiple performance indicators for individuals and groups of students. The results are used to assess comparability of student performance across similar institutions (David Kemmer University, 2009).

The development of student learning outcomes follows the Commission on Colleges' broad definition of student learning characterized as a change in knowledge, skills, behaviors or values (Spencer, Norwood & Anderson, 2009). The QEP at David Kemmer is an essential component of SACS reaffirmation of accreditation. The title of David Kemmer's QEP is **The ACADEMY (Achievement in College Algebra During the Matriculation Year)**. The goal of The ACADEMY program is to equip students with the conceptual understanding and computational proficiency for success in the gateway mathematics courses. This will be accomplished through a commitment to active learning strategies, enhanced student support services, and innovation in curriculum design (David Kemmer University: Office of Institutional Research & Assessment, 2009).

The ACADEMY supports the David Kemmer mission by providing its increasingly diverse student body with an exemplary education. It supports the David Kemmer strategic plan by offering innovative academic programs in a learner-centered environment which provides a challenging and exemplary educational experience. The ACADEMY also supports the David Kemmer Core Curriculum Competency of Analysis/Problem Solving/Critical Thinking defined as the ability of students to think clearly and critically and to diagnose problems, to propose solutions, and evaluate the effectiveness of the solutions (Spencer et al., 2009).

All four HBCUs engaged in course-level assessment activities such as exams, special class projects, term papers, presentations, service learning projects, essays, and internships. Standardized national exams are also used to measure student learning. At John Aaron College, these exams include the ETS Profile Exam (General Education), the Major Field Achievement Exam (Biology, Computer Science and Business Administration majors), and the State Licensure Exam (Education Majors) are used to measure learning in the academic programs. Also, course embedded assessment is used in the senior level courses such as capstone projects or cases, exam questions, essays, reflection papers and student-teaching internships. Additionally, indirect measures such as annual surveys allow students to self-report their understanding of knowledge, attitudes and skill level. Credit by examination is also available to freshmen that plan to enter John Aaron College as well as to students who are currently enrolled. The college will award credit for acceptable scores on certain tests published by the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and the American College Testing (ACT) (John Aaron College, 2010).

According to the findings, Academic Excellence lies at the heart of each HBCU's mission, along with the values of integrity, responsibility and accountability. The approaches listed in this section prepared HBCUs to successfully meet the requirements for achieving student learning outcomes through assessment. In essence, the ultimate goal of each institution is to enhance achievement and prepare students to successfully graduate and enter the workforce.

Relation to Theoretical Framework

Learning Defined

Each HBCU agrees that learning is important, but they hold different views on the causes, processes, and consequences of learning. There is no one definition of learning that is universally accepted by theorists, researchers, and practitioners (Schunk, 2012). Although people disagree about the precise nature of learning, many educational professionals consider learning as an enduring change in behavior, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience. Most educational professionals consider the following criteria for learning:

- Learning involves change
- Learning endures over time
- Learning occurs through experience (Schunk, 2012).

The first criterion is that *learning involves change* in behavior or in the capacity for behavior. People learn when they become capable of doing something differently. Learning is assessed based on what people say, write, and do. The second criterion is that *learning endures over time*. This excludes temporary behavioral changes brought about by such factors as drugs, alcohol, and fatigue. Such changes are temporary because when the cause is removed, the behavior returns to its original state. However, learning may not last forever because forgetting occurs. The third criterion is that *learning occurs through experience*. This criterion excludes behavioral changes that are primarily determined by heredity. People may be genetically predisposed to act

in given ways, but the actual development of the particular behaviors depends on the environment (Schunk, 2012).

The roots of contemporary theories of learning extend far into the past. Many of the issues addressed and questions asked by modern researchers are not new for HBCUs, but rather reflect a desire for students to understand themselves, others, and the world about them (Schunk, 2012).

Learning, Theory and Philosophy

A *theory* is a scientifically acceptable set of principles offered to explain a phenomenon. Theories provide frameworks for interpreting environmental observations and serve as bridges between research and education (Schunk, 2012). From a philosophical perspective, learning can be discussed under the heading of *epistemology*, which refers to the study of the origin, nature, limits, and methods of knowledge. Two positions on the origin of knowledge and its relationship to the environment are rationalism and empiricism. These positions are recognizable in current learning theories (Schunk, 2012).

Rationalism

Rationalism refers to the idea that knowledge derives from reason without recourse to the senses. The distinction between mind and matter, which figures prominently in rationalist views of human knowledge, can be traced to Plato, who distinguished knowledge acquired via the senses from that gained by reason. Plato believed that things (e.g., houses, trees) are revealed to people via the senses, whereas individuals acquire ideas by reasoning or thinking about what they know. The

HBCUs in this study revealed that students have ideas about the world, and they learn (discover) these ideas by reflecting upon them. Reason is the highest mental faculty, because through reason students can learn abstract ideas (Schunk, 2012).

Empiricism

In contrast to rationalism, empiricism refers to the idea that experience is the only source of knowledge. This position derives from Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who was Plato's student and successor. Aristotle drew no sharp distinction between mind and matter. The external world is the basis for human sense impressions, which, in turn, are interpreted as lawful (consistent, unchanging) by the mind. The laws of nature cannot be discovered through sensory impressions, but rather through reason as the mind takes in data from the environment (Schunk, 2012). The students at the HBCUs were able to experience the methods of assessment through the different academic programs which enhanced their learning skills.

Assessment of Learning

Assessment involves "a formal attempt to determine students' status with respect to educational variables of interest" (Schunk, 2012, p. 14). In school, the educational variable of interest most often is student achievement in such areas as reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. Although accountability often leads to testing being the means of assessment, the latter includes many measurement procedures besides testing. Researchers and practitioners want to know whether learning has occurred, and there may be procedures other than testing that provide evidence of student learning. Second, students' skills in content areas often are the

learning outcomes assessed, but researchers and practitioners may also be interested in other forms of learning. For example, they may want to know whether students have learned new attitudes or self-regulation strategies or whether students' interests, values, self-efficacy, and motivation have changed as a result of content learning (Schunk, 2012).

According to Dale H. Schunk (2012), providing students with feedback, stressing a learning-goal orientation can enhance self-efficacy, motivation, self-regulatory activities, and achievement more than providing feedback emphasizing performance goals. Achievement goals affect students' task persistence and effort expenditure. Research shows that achievement goals can affect how students study and what they learn. Learning-oriented students tend to use deep processing strategies that enhance conceptual understandings and that require cognitive effort. David C. Leonard (2002) indicated that self-efficacy is achieved through positive past experiences, reinforcement from the environment, and encouragement from the mentors. Students at the HBCUs in this study were encouraged to observe and model themselves after others who have already successfully achieved the goal of self-efficacy.

This section also covers ways to assess the products or outcomes of learning. These methods include direct observations, written responses, oral responses, ratings by others, and self-reports. The self-reports are people's assessments of and statements about themselves. These reports are in the form of questionnaires, interviews, stimulated recalls, think-alouds, and dialogues. The interview findings indicated that

these methods of assessing learning were also used at each institution. Table 10 illustrates the methods of assessing learning.

Table 10

Categories and Definitions of Assessing Learning

Category	Definition
Direct observations	Instances of behavior that demonstrate learning
Written responses	Written performances on tests, quizzes, homework, papers, and projects
Oral responses	Verbalized questions, comments, and responses during learning
Ratings by others	Observers' judgments of learners on attributes indicative of learning
Self-reports	People's judgments of themselves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questionnaires 	Written ratings of items or answers to questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interviews 	Oral responses to questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stimulated recalls 	Recall of thoughts accompanying one's performances at given times
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Think-alouds 	Verbalizing aloud one's thoughts, actions, and feelings while performing a task
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dialogues 	Conversations between two or more persons

Note. Adapted from *Learning Theories An Educational Perspective* (6th ed.), by D.H. Schunk, 2012, p. 15. Copyright 2012 by the Pearson Education, Inc.

Implications for Instruction

Theories attempt to explain various types of learning but differ in their ability to do so. However, an explanation of behavioral and cognitive theories will provide a background against which to frame learning theories and emphasize a better

understanding of the concepts underlying human learning principles. Behavioral theories emphasize the forming of associations between stimuli and responses through selective reinforcement of correct responding. Behavioral theories seem best suited to explain simpler forms of learning that involve associations, such as multiplication facts, foreign language, word meanings, and state capital cities. Cognitive theories explain learning with such factors as information processing, memory networks, and student perceptions and interpretations of classroom factors (teachers, peers, materials, organization). Cognitive theories also appear to be more appropriate for explaining complex forms of learning, such as solving mathematical word problems, drawing inferences from text, and writing essays (Schunk, 2012). Each HBCU in this study demonstrated the importance of using behavioral theories and cognitive theories in order to enhance learning.

Effective teaching requires that we determine the best theoretical perspectives for the types of learning we deal with and draw on the implications of those perspectives for teaching. When reinforced practice is important for learning, then teachers should schedule it. When learning problem-solving strategies is important, then we should study the implications of information processing theory (Schunk, 2012).

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study revealed the process of assessing student learning outcomes at four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). It is necessary to imply that the planning and implementation of institutional and programmatic assessment to ascertain what students have learned, and how well they have learned it

encompasses a number of challenges. According to the findings, some of these major challenges involve gaining institutional resources for assessment, designing faculty development plans, determining student learning outcomes and measuring them, and making changes based upon assessment results. Institutional administrators and senior academic leaders become the “public advocate, leader, and facilitator for creating an institutional culture that is open to change, willing to take risks, and fosters innovations by providing real incentives for participants” (Shipman, Aloï & Jones, 2003, p. 335).

Some of these real incentives can be quite challenging. However, the main challenge is to gain institutional resources to facilitate assessment-related faculty development and to use that development to subsequently energize the assessment effort. Some faculty may serve as institutional programmatic assessment coordinators. Whereas, other faculty members may be responsible for major components of the plan such as assessment instruments, data analysis, writing reports, or dissemination plans (Shipman et al., 2003).

Recommendations for Practice

Based on interviews and data collected, each HBCU implemented a criteria for developing assessment strategies that enabled them to successfully meet the requirements of accreditation. In order to improve student performance, it is recommended for practice that the following programs remain in existence on the collegiate level. They are: The Adam Hamilton Plan, Compliance Assist! Program, TracDat Program, and WEAVE Program (Table 11).

Table 11

Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Programs that Created a Path Toward Achieving a Successful Accreditation [pseudonyms]

Institution	Program	Type of Program	Accrediting Agency
John Aaron College	Adam Hamilton Plan	Tutorial	TRACS
Thomas Henson University	Compliance Assist!	Software	SACSCOC
Simon Wiltz College	TracDat	Software	SACSCOC
David Kemmer University	WEAVE	Software	SACSCOC

Note. This is a summary of the programs that were discussed during the interviews at the four institutions.

John Aaron College: The Adam Hamilton Plan

The *Adam Hamilton Plan* at John Aaron College has always provided free on-campus tutorial services. Also, additional tutoring services are offered through the Center for Student Success, and library literacy workshops through the library’s freshman orientation sessions. John Aaron College is in the process of piloting a 24-hour online tutorial service, establishing a new writing lab, and creating a new credit-bearing skill building course.

Weekly self-help seminars are also offered through another free on-campus center called the Center for Student Support. Some of the topics discussed at the center

include Improving your Writing, Developing Leadership Skills, Understanding Credit, and Test Taking Skills. The presenters are usually faculty and staff members.

Academic progress is reviewed at the end of the semester by the Chief Academic Officer, Chairs, Registrar, and Institutional Effectiveness Director. Earned credit hours and GPA results are reviewed, and students who do not make satisfactory progress are typically placed on probation and provided with a customized development plan (John Aaron College, 2010). Based on the findings, I feel that colleges and universities with accreditation issues related to student learning should consider offering free on-campus and online tutorial services.

The *Adam Hamilton Plan*, which is also considered as the Aaronite Plan, is an educational experience that places a premium on a rigorous and comprehensive learning environment that simultaneously draws inspiration from the study of the classical liberal arts, and provides students with the room to express their creativity in a modern context. This philosophy is woven throughout the degree requirements in various academic departments. A new project that was developed at John Aaron College is called *Leave No Aaronite Behind*. The purpose of this project was to establish academic boundaries for students who start together as freshmen and who will continue and finish together. Emphasis is placed on the first two years of college. During these two years, a learning environment is created that is both nurturing and vigorous (John Aaron College, n.d.). As a result of the findings, I believe that other colleges and universities should consider developing a cohort plan that focuses on helping their students during the first two years of college.

Some of the programs that the Aaronnites have to endure during the first two years include the *Aaronnite Reading List*. This is a list of almost 100 literary works that help to frame the students' intellectual development. Another program is the Bridge Program which is a summer program designed to prepare students for the demands of college life. It is also tailored to meet the needs of each individual student. The Bridge curriculum consists of classes from the core curriculum. In 2010, the college revamped its core curriculum which now includes courses in Speech, Composition, Personal Finance, Investment Strategy, Spanish, Chinese, Math, History, Science, Political Science, Health and Wellness, Servant Leadership and Social Entrepreneurship. The college also offers students the opportunity to explore the subject matter of various courses with no risk to their grade point average (John Aaron College, n.d.).

Finally, John Aaron College decided to create the Post-Christmas Final Exams Project for students enrolled during the first two years. This project enables the students to prepare for their final exams during the Christmas holidays. After returning from the holidays, a Post-Christmas final exam is administered to all students. These extra two weeks has been known to create a positive impact on student success (John Aaron College, n.d.).

Thomas Henson University: Compliance Assist!

Thomas Henson University acquired a commercially online system called *Compliance Assist!* in order to document assessment activities during the second year of the assessment plan. Also, this online service has been guided by the recommendation

of the SACS Reaffirmation Committee, and the experience with the implementation of the first year of the institutional assessment plan. Thomas Henson's assessment process remains on-going and broad-based, resulting in improvements in a number of academic areas, while requiring the institution to provide evidence of a fully integrated institutional effectiveness model (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability, 2010). *Compliance Assist!* is the software that the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment utilizes for assessment and accreditation purposes. The software is for campus wide use for outcomes assessment, scorecards, five-year reports, and program review. The software can also be utilized for external accreditation if departments would like to implement that feature (The University of Alabama in Huntsville: Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2017). The *Compliance Assist!* program has been very beneficial for Thomas Henson University. It would be intriguing if other colleges and universities would develop a similar online system in order to improve student performance.

Compliance Assist! also allows departments and programs to align their goals, strategies, and outcomes with the colleges' mission statement and five-year strategic plan. By aligning goals and strategies with the college, the organization is able to better work towards a common goal, strategy, and outcome in unison. The system is completely online which allows for the faculty and staff to securely work on a plan from any location with an internet connection. Finally, according to the research findings, the plan that each faculty or staff member uses can be linked back to the accreditation of the college for further support of accreditation. *Compliance Assist!* is not only for regional

accreditation processes; it can also be utilized for program-specific accreditation submissions (The University of Alabama in Huntsville: Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2017).

Compliance Assist! has provided an electronic platform for many institutions using the following SACS reports:

- Membership Application
- Application for seeking Accreditation at a Higher or Lower Degree Level
- Reaffirmation of Accreditation Compliance Reports
- Fifth-Year Interim Reviews
- Focused Reports
- Referral Reports
- Monitoring Reports
- Substantive Change Applications/Reports (Campus Labs, 2017).

Thomas Henson University invested in the *Compliance Assist!* software program in order to document assessment activities. The university also developed the *Six Step Process* that allowed the faculty and staff room to expand their assessment programs. The *Six Step Process* and the *Compliance Assist!* programs were both part of the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan. The *Six Step Process* was a strategic plan that enabled the faculty and staff to clarify and improve the assessment process one step at a time (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Six Step Process is a strategic plan that enabled the faculty and staff to clarify the assessment process at Thomas Henson University. Adapted from “Planning for Improvement Workshop: For Non-Instructional Units,” by Thomas Henson University [pseudonym], Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2012, p. 5. Copyright 2012 by Thomas Henson University.

The *Six Step Process* helped to maneuver Thomas Henson University out of the accreditation loop so that SACS would grant the university a reaffirmation.

Step 1 specifies an assessable expected outcome. This is where we state what the students are expected to accomplish. This is followed by a start and end date (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability,

2010). Under step 1, student learning outcome describes what a student knows, thinks, demonstrates, or learns in a class or a program. The performance outcome is also a part of step 1 (Thomas Henson University: Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2012).

Step 2 determines the criteria for success using direct and indirect measures. Step 2 also should specify the criteria that indicates that the outcome specified in Step 1 have been met (Thomas Henson University: Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2012).

Step 3 specifies the methods of assessment that will be employed to measure the performance (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability, 2010). This step also specifies the direct and/or indirect measures that will be used to assess the performance on the expected outcome given in Step 1. Examples of Direct Assessment Methods include comprehensive exams, writing proficiency exams, standardized tests, reflective journals, capstone courses, certification exams, and licensure exams. Examples of Indirect Assessment are employer surveys, focus group discussions, exit interviews, alumni surveys, and job placement tests (Thomas Henson University: Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2012).

Step 4 is where you observe, collect data, analyze and summarize results of the assessment activity. The results of the data collected from the methods of assessment in Step 3 will be summarized (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability, 2010).

Step 5 explains how to develop/refine the improvement plan based on assessment results. The improvement plan is the place to enter actions to be taken based on the results reported in Step 4 (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability, 2010). The data analysis should be reviewed from Step 4. Planning should be both an intentional and a collaborative process (Thomas Henson University: Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, 2012).

Step 6 involves documenting changes/improvements resulting from the action plan. Documenting the changes verifies that the refinements suggested have been acted on. Even when the data (Step 4) shows that the criteria (Step 2) were met, it is still necessary to discuss the use of the results (Step 5) and document that action here in Step 6. In many cases, the results through Step 6 of one outcome may provide insights that would lead to Step 1 of a new outcome for the next year's assessment cycle (Thomas Henson University: Division of Institutional Planning and Accountability, 2010). Other HBCUs may want to incorporate the *Six Step Process* into their curriculum so that student learning outcomes and assessment issues can be culminated.

Simon Wiltz College: TracDat

The tool selected by Simon Wiltz College that was used for managing the evidence collected for assessments is *TracDat*. This is a Web-based assessment management system designed to help institutions manage assessment, planning, and quality improvement processes, and overcome common assessment obstacles.

TracDat is not assessment, nor does it teach individuals how to assess; its sole purpose is to assist the faculty in organizing and managing the process (Texas Tech University: Office of Planning and Assessment, 2017).

The *TracDat* software system allows for institution-wide viewing of assessment plans and uniform reporting of assessment data across departments. Simon Wiltz College utilizes the *TracDat* tool in order to document institutional effectiveness processes, including strategic planning and assessment. *TracDat* results can be used to improve all aspects of the college, and make informed decisions regarding programs, budgets, services, and facilities (SFA Office of Institutional Research, n.d.). Other HBCUs of interest may also want to consider using the *TracDat* software system in order to view the necessary assessment plans. As a result of the findings, all of the online systems serve the same purpose when it comes to enhancing the performance of students.

As demonstrated by the data, Wiltz College also acknowledged the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as a monumental plan that helped them through the reaffirmation process. The QEP is a document developed by the institution that includes the following:

1. A process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment.
2. Focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution.
3. Demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP.
4. Identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: Commission on Colleges, 2012).

With the approval and broad-range participation of the local college community, Wiltz College has chosen the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) topic *Communicate Through Debate* to focus on enhancing student’s critical thinking skills through the medium of debate: an instructional strategy that will strengthen their communication skills. The Debate Across the Curriculum model ensured that students at every level received the training and mentoring needed to meet the intended student learning outcomes. Every academic department has embraced this effort by proposing courses for implementing the QEP (Simon Wiltz College, 2012b).

Simon Wiltz College did a QEP Survey that resulted in the top 10 themes that needed attention in the area of student learning outcomes and assessment (Table 12).

Table 12

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Survey Resulted in Top 10 Themes in Need of Improvement

QEP SURVEY RESULTS: TOP 10 THEMES	
Critical/Analytical Thinking	Listening
Career Readiness Skills	Communication Skills
Reading	Mathematics
Writing	Technology Literacy
Speaking	Advising

Note. Adapted from *Communicate Through Debate: The Simon Wiltz College Quality Enhancement Plan*, by Simon Wiltz College [pseudonym], 2012, p. 9. Copyright 2012 by Simon Wiltz College.

To determine the significance of the themes identified from the QEP survey results and the extent of improvement needed in learning, the college reviewed its institutional data from 2007 to 2010, which included assessment results of the general education competencies and standardized exams, and surveys such as the ETS Proficiency Profile and the college outcomes survey. The ETS Proficiency Profile captured students' level of achievement and provided data for skill areas to include critical thinking, reading, and writing. Finally, the QEP student learning outcomes are (1) students will be able to compile and analyze evidence, (2) students will be able to draw conclusions by evaluating an argument, (3) students will be able to demonstrate knowledge and application of a well-formulated argument and (4) students will be able to recognize opposing viewpoints and utilize researched evidence (Simon Wiltz College, 2012b). It is imperative that other HBCUs consider devising a QEP Survey in order to evaluate the top ten themes that need attention in student learning outcomes and assessment. The QEP survey is just one example of how certain areas of student performance can be recognized.

David Kemmer University: WEAVE

After experiencing accreditation problems in the past, David Kemmer University decided to place emphasis on a new software program called *WEAVE*. *WEAVEonline* is a web-based assessment management system that is intended to help manage accreditation, assessment, planning, and quality improvement processes for colleges and universities. *WEAVE* was developed originally at Virginia Commonwealth University in response to an upcoming SACSCOC visit (WEAVE, 2017b). *WEAVEonline* is a

central repository for a program assessment process and documentation. Each degree-granting program and many student, administrative, and academic support offices are required to use *WEAVEonline* to document assessment processes and program improvements (Texas A&M University: Office of Institutional Effectiveness & Evaluation, 2017). Other HBCUs in search of an online program to help document the progress of student learning outcomes and assessment may also consider the *WEAVEonline* program.

WEAVEonline increases the understanding of, and commitment to, ongoing planning and sustainable evaluation from the level of individual programs up through the entire institution. In so doing, *WEAVEonline* also promotes collaboration within and across academic and administrative units, and helps build institutional commitment to continuous improvement (Tarleton State University: Academic Assessment, 2017). *WEAVE* has made the path to accreditation simpler and more successful for many institutions (WEAVE, 2017a).

David Kemmer University placed a great deal of emphasis on student learning outcomes and assessment. They believe that student learning outcomes or SLOs are statements that specified what students will know, be able to do, or be able to demonstrate when they have completed or participated in a program, activity, course or project. Some of the best practices for student learning outcomes are:

- An outcome must align to a program mission and designated goal.
- An outcome must be observable and measurable.
- An outcome must be student-centered.

- An outcome must consider using behavioral verbs for student learning (Brody, 2011).

Each one of these practices is considered as promoting institutional effectiveness. According to the findings, institutional effectiveness is at its heart, about quality. So, what is quality? Quality is not just doing things excellently, but doing the right things excellently. A quality institution is always excellent in fulfilling its responsibilities (Suskie, 2014).

The term institutional effectiveness first appeared in 1984 when adopted as part of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) revision of their institutional accreditation requirements (Central Piedmont Community College, n.d.). Rooted in the method of scientific inquiry, institutional effectiveness is the systematic collection, analysis, organization, warehousing, and dissemination of quantitative and qualitative information concerning the characteristics and performance of a university or college. HBCUs need to be cognizant of the fact that the goal of institutional effectiveness is to provide quality information so that informed decisions and effective planning can be accomplished by the faculty, staff, and administrators (Martin University: Division of Institutional Effectiveness, 2014). At most institutions, institutional effectiveness consists of a set of ongoing and systematic, institutional processes and practices that include:

- Planning
- The evaluation of programs and services (including administration and student services)

- The identification and measurement of outcomes across all institutional units (including learning and program outcomes in instructional programs) and
- The use of data and assessment results to inform decision-making (culture of evidence) (Central Piedmont Community College, n.d.).

As part of institutional effectiveness, David Kemmer University identified expected outcomes, and provided evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas (Table 13).

Table 13

Institutional Effectiveness is Determined by the Evidence of Improvement Made and the Analysis of the Results

INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

3.3.1.1	Educational programs, to include student learning outcomes
3.3.1.2	Administrative support services
3.3.1.3	Academic and student support services
3.3.1.4	Research within its mission, if appropriate
3.3.1.5	Community/public service within its mission, if appropriate

Note. Adapted from *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (5th ed.), by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012, p. 27. Copyright 2012 by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

The table above was created by SACS so that all colleges and universities could follow the institutional effectiveness plan. Each HBCU followed the guidelines of institutional effectiveness in order to improve student learning outcomes that would

meet the core requirements of regional accreditation. Based on school documents, David Kemmer University included the following types of assessments in their annual report:

- Learning Outcomes Assessment
- Needs Assessment
- Environmental Assessment
- Satisfaction Assessment
- Assessing Cost Effectiveness (Brody, 2011).

It is pertinent that other HBCUs organize and incorporate the same assessments listed and placed in their annual report. The faculty at David Kemmer University also developed an annual assessment cycle that they could follow in order to improve student learning outcomes and assessment (Figure 3). HBCUs should also consider adopting an annual assessment cycle that includes some or all of the following components listed in Figure 3.

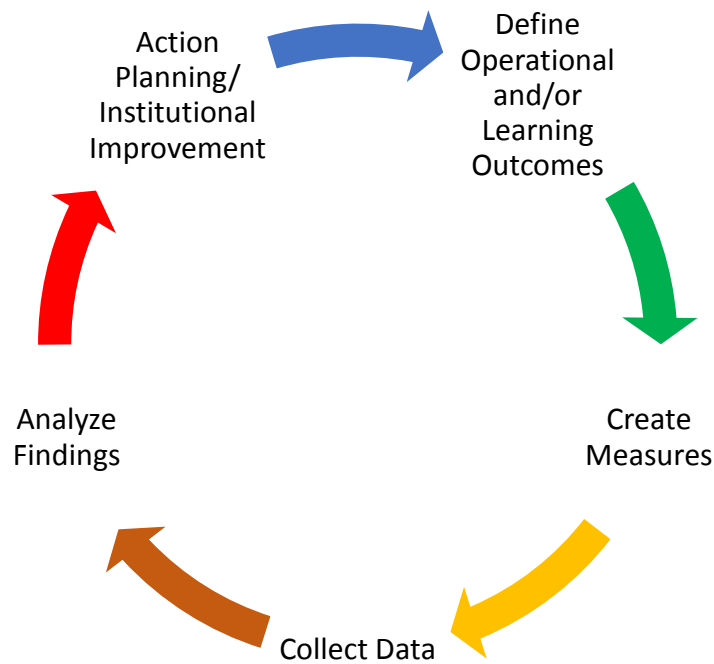


Figure 3. The Annual Assessment Cycle is a step by step plan that each faculty member followed during the Assessment Process at David Kemmer. Adapted from “Creating Effectiveness Assessment Plans: Part 1,” by R. Brody, 2011, *David Kemmer University* [pseudonym], p. 4. Copyright 2011 by David Kemmer University.

It is obvious that current trends and those yet unimagined will continue to influence and shape higher education in the future. The degree to which David Kemmer University can harness their resources to achieve the objectives in the annual assessment cycle will depend upon the clarity of these objectives and the institution’s willingness to set priorities and solve its problems. This is a recommendation that requires assessing current status, designing a change process, developing and educating senior leaders, and the obligation and nimbleness to make significant widespread changes at all levels (American Council on Education, 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

Currently, most of the research surrounding HBCUs and the impact of student learning outcomes and assessment has come a long way. All of the HBCUs in this research study were able to maintain their accreditation standards with SACS or TRACS. However, there's always room for improvement when it comes to developing statements of intended learning outcomes and focusing on the assessment process. Even though each institution was able to develop certain strategies and procedures that enabled them to achieve a culture of academic excellence, there were still some limitations involved. Therefore, the results of this study will include recommendations for future research. The following recommendations are:

1. *It is recommended that researchers explore paths that will create a foundation for HBCUs to establish and maintain high expectations of students.* The high expectations will encourage students to build a high self-esteem of themselves, and feel confident about their ability to achieve high academic standards. When students feel good about themselves, their study habits improve, they become self-motivated to learn and self-disciplined. If administrators and faculty members continue to provide an atmosphere where students can consistently work toward excellence, then the retention and graduation rates will go up. As students prepare to remain in school, their test scores will rise during the assessment periods, and the goals for improving student learning outcomes will be accomplished.

2. *It is recommended that researchers examine the procedures that school leaders should follow in order to be held accountable for student success.* I feel that school leaders should be held accountable for institutional effectiveness. When leaders are held accountable, they are more likely to make better decisions that have a direct impact on student success. At one HBCU in this research, each faculty member was working individually while assessing student learning outcomes rather than working as a team. The regional accreditation team expects HBCUs to follow the steps provided for institutional effectiveness in order to meet accreditation requirements. It is obvious that HBCUs need to do more research on the core requirements of the regional accrediting agencies.

3. *It is recommended that researchers explore how HBCUs should learn to embrace change.* The failure of HBCU leaders to embrace change is perhaps the greatest threat facing the vast majority of HBCUs in the foreseeable future. In order to maintain accreditation standards, HBCUs will have to engage in more research that will enable them to stay abreast of change. It seems that everyone wants change, but few want to change. When it comes to student learning outcomes and assessment, the President and his/her leadership team must be the point people for implementing needed institutional changes. Every activity must be focused on student success and institutional effectiveness. It begins with an objective and vigorous assessment of every university program to determine its effectiveness in meeting institutional objectives and culminates in a commitment to follow through with needed changes (Nelms, 2014).

4. It is recommended that further studies examine the process of how student learning outcomes and assessment activities are organized and documented on a regular basis. The four HBCUs in the findings made progress in this area, but more research is needed so the institutions will understand the importance of documentation during the accreditation process. If assessment drills and learning activities are not documented, then there will be little evidence to share with the accreditation team. Accreditors focus in on how goals and objectives are organized for different academic programs. They look at the syllabi and the course content for different courses. They also look at how the outcome is assessed, whether it's exams, quizzes or projects. They even look at how the college collected that information over time. Then the most important step that accreditors look for is how the college uses the results to improve academic programs.

5. It is recommended that extensive research is needed for HBCUs to learn more about the online software programs that are available in higher education. The programs that were used by HBCUs in my research are *Compliance Assist!*, *TracDat*, and *WEAVE*. With the development of these software programs, HBCUs have been able to document various academic programs and fulfill the requirements of the assessment process so that the outcomes of student learning can be improved. However, more research is needed in this area so that faculty and staff members will be more knowledgeable of how to incorporate these programs into their daily lesson plans.

6. *It is recommended that researchers investigate the strategies that HBCUs should use in order to strengthen institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes through assessment.* More research is needed in assessment, evaluation and training of both faculty and staff. Demonstrating institutional effectiveness which encompasses the evaluation of both academic and administrative performance in supporting the mission, goals and objectives of the institution, is critical for the success of all institutions of higher education. HBCUs must improve their institutional practices and create a culture of evidence that guides the institution in data-based decision-making. The ultimate goals are:

- To create a culture of assessment guided by the institutions' strategic plan.
- To improve student learning outcomes and demonstrate such improvement.
- To train faculty and staff to assess, document, and use the analysis of outcomes data to improve student learning (Office of Sponsored Programs, n.d.).

7. *Further research is recommended in various academic areas so that HBCUs can continue to incorporate writing skills, communication skills, critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills in their curriculum.* All of the HBCUs provided special programs in writing, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving. These programs helped to improve student learning outcomes, but more research is needed in these areas so that instructors will be able to implement new methods that will help students to build their academic skills. It is important that the HBCUs try to foster a campus-wide academic culture that cultivates writing, communication, critical

thinking, and problem-solving skills as a lifelong learning activity essential to civic engagement, leadership, professional success and personal fulfillment (Office of Sponsored Programs, n.d.).

8. *It is recommended that in-depth research is needed in order to create a plan that will enable HBCUs to prepare for the reaffirmation process years in advance.*

Since the reaffirmation of accreditation occurs every 10 years, it is important that each institution begin planning for the reaffirmation right after they have been recently reaffirmed. This is done through careful planning with emphasis on teamwork by administrators, faculty and staff. More research is definitely needed in this area, because many institutions wait and plan two or three years before the actual reaffirmation occurs. I have noticed from this research that many HBCUs are having accreditation problems with student learning outcomes and assessment. Therefore, future research in this area will enable these institutions to be more accountable for their actions. It is important that HBCUs apply different strategies that will assist them in developing procedures for improving student learning outcomes and assessment within all of the academic programs. Emphasis must be placed on the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in order for the student learning outcomes to be transferable. After all, the QEP can be used in developing instruments for assessment. Also, an approved strategic planning process must exist and be ready to use. This process should include a timetable, personnel involvement, and procedures for advancement.

Conclusions

The research done in this study was centered around the impact of accreditation on student learning outcomes and assessment at four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). HBCUs are an integral and proud part of black heritage and culture. For generations, these institutions have educated blacks and produced many leaders in government, business, entertainment, and academia (Fryer & Greenstone, 2010).

HBCUs have sustained a tradition of enrolling many students who might not otherwise have an opportunity for a quality postsecondary education, and they perform admirably at helping these students successfully complete their educational goals and improve their post-graduation prospects (Richards & Awokoya, 2012). Despite their past successes and historical importance, some HBCUs are at a crossroads today when it comes to the accreditation of student learning outcomes and assessment.

With the pressing need for accountability in higher education, standardized outcomes assessments have been widely used to evaluate learning and inform policy. Policymakers often call for a transparent demonstration of college learning. Accrediting associations have raised expectations for institutions to collect evidence of student learning outcomes and use such information for institutional improvement. For instance, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the primary organization for voluntary accreditation and quality assurance to the U.S. Congress and Department of Education, has focused on the role of accreditation in student

achievement by establishing the CHEA Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes (Liu, Bridgeman & Adler, 2012).

Various accountability initiatives press higher education institutions to provide data on academic learning and growth. Facing mounting pressure, institutions turn to standardized learning outcomes assessment to fulfill accountability, accreditation, and strategic planning requirements. Outcomes assessment provides a direct measure of students' academic ability and is considered a powerful tool to evaluate the institutional impact on students (Liu, Bridgeman & Adler, 2012).

The importance of the findings extends well beyond the United States as outcomes assessment is being used in international studies assessing college learning across multiple countries. For example, the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project sponsored by the Organization of Economic and Cooperation Development (OECD) test what college graduates know and can do in regards to general skills such as critical thinking, writing, and problem solving which has attracted participation from 17 countries (Liu, Bridgeman & Adler, 2012).

In conclusion, efforts should be made to identify effective and robust strategies that HBCUs can adopt to boost student motivation and enhance student learning outcomes through assessment. Knowledge about effective and practical strategies that institutions can use to enhance student learning will greatly help improve the validity of outcomes assessment, and largely contribute to the evidence-based, data-driven, and criterion-reference evaluation system that U.S. higher education is currently developing (Liu, Bridgeman & Adler, 2012).

Today, HBCUs are knowledgeable of the fact that the reaffirmation process occurs every 10 years, and involves an in-depth internal evaluation and report of all of the institutions, their programs and operations. Therefore, reaffirmation is not only important to the college or university with regard to its ability to offer federal financial aid, but it is also an indicator that university programs must meet or exceed regional and national accreditation standards.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER REQUESTING AUTHORIZATION TO DO STUDY

Jesse M. Lewis
P.O. Box 1201
College Station, TX 77841-1201
Date

Name
Job Title
Institution
Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear _____:

My name is Jesse M. Lewis and I am a graduate student at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. My credentials consist of a Master's Degree from Louisiana State University and a Bachelor's Degree from Grambling State University. My research interest is in higher education, and I am presently pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of Educational Administration. I am also in the process of identifying participants for my dissertation research. The title of my dissertation is "The Impact of Accreditation on Institutional Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes: A Case Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities." I have decided to select four Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the SACS region as participants for my research. As a result, a few years ago your institution was identified as experiencing some problems with student learning outcomes and assessment. Therefore, David Kemmer University could be a possible participant for my study.

The intent of my study is to examine the academic areas at David Kemmer University, and review the learning goals and assessment methods. My focus will be on the management of academic programs and the strategies that were used for improving assessment and learning outcomes. I will use the case study approach to do a comparative study that will show the amount of progress that was made by your university over the last few years. I believe that this study is critical for higher education, because institutions have to be accountable for the outcomes achieved through the accreditation reaffirmation process.

Once I have been given permission to enter your university, I will select individuals to participate in several interview sessions. My focus will be on the personnel that worked on the Self-Study Report. This may include the Vice President of Academic Affairs, Director of Student Support Services, Deans, Department Heads, other administrators, faculty and staff. I plan to meet with participants prior to the interview and then conduct one open-ended interview session with each person. Each interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. With each participant's permission, the interview will be tape recorded to facilitate the gathering of accurate information. After all of the interviews have been completed, a follow-up interview session will be scheduled. During this session, an interview transcript will be typed and given to each participant for a review. All tapes, transcriptions, reports and administrative documents will be coded, reviewed and secured by me. If I am given the opportunity to enter David Kemmer University, your participation will be greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this study, please feel free to contact me. My home telephone number is (979) 268-2304, and my cell number is (337) 351-6887. You can also reach me at my e-mail address. My e-mail address is jlewi27@neo.tamu.edu. If you need additional information, you can also contact my dissertation committee chairperson. His name, office phone number and e-mail address is listed in the closing remarks. Your response to this letter will enable me to complete my research in a timely manner. Thank you very much for your kind consideration and support.

Respectfully yours,

Jesse M. Lewis
EDAD Doctoral Candidate
Texas A&M University

Dr. Vicente M. Lechuga
Committee Chairperson
Office Phone Number: (979) 845-2716
E-Mail Address: vlechuga@tamu.edu

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE OF FLYER TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS FOR STUDY

ATTENTION FACULTY AND STAFF

A Research Study will be conducted
on the Impact that Accreditation has
on Student Learning Outcomes and
Assessment. If you participated in the
Self-Study Review and/or the Accreditation

Process, please contact:

Mr. Jesse M. Lewis
Doctoral Candidate
Texas A&M University
(979) 268-2304 or (337) 351-6887
jlewi27@neo.tamu.edu

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was your position when the accreditation team visited your institution?
 - A. Administrator
 - B. Faculty
 - C. Staff
2. How were you involved in the accreditation/reaffirmation process?
3. Were you accredited by SACS or TRACS?
4. What guidelines or steps were taken by your institution to prepare for the accreditation/reaffirmation process?
5. What is your overall impression of the student learning outcomes assessment process in higher education?
6. How would you specifically define a student learning outcome at your institution?
7. How do you interpret the kind of information the accrediting agency provides on student learning outcomes?
8. How involved were you in developing current goals and objectives for assessment and student learning outcomes?
9. What kind of formal or informal methods do you use to enhance student learning outcomes and assessment?
10. How would you describe the student learning outcomes assessment culture in your institution?
11. What are the advantages and disadvantages of student learning outcomes assessment at your institution?
12. Describe how the accreditation team evaluates student learning outcomes.

13. How did the accreditation team evaluate the overall academic program in your department?
14. Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities have been challenged by the reaffirmation of accreditation. How was your institution challenged in the area of assessment and student learning outcomes?
15. What procedures would you recommend to improve student learning outcomes assessment in order to further institutional learning?
16. How has assessment changed various programs at your institution?
17. What procedures are used to determine if the programs are effective?
18. Provide details on adjustments made in developing those procedures.
19. What does your department or program do with the evidence gathered to improve its performance and student learning?
20. How are standardized instruments used to enhance learning at your institution?
21. How did the percentage of students working on a low academic level affect the accreditation report?
22. Explain how faculty and staff members serve as resources for developing assessment instruments.
23. In order to prepare for a successful accreditation, describe the strategies that you used in strengthening student learning outcomes and assessment.
24. Could you possibly share with me the materials that you offer on student learning outcomes assessment?
25. Is there any other information on assessment and student learning outcomes that I can use related to your institution's success in overcoming the accreditation process?
26. Do you know of anyone else I should speak to who might be willing to provide information for my study?

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE OF CONSENT FORM

Project Title: The Impact of Accreditation on Institutional Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes: A Case Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Texas A&M University. You are being asked to read this form so that you know about this research study. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part in the research. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefit you normally would have.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to explore the academic areas that are weak at four institutions and evaluate the strategies that were used to help maintain the reaffirmation of accreditation. This study will focus on the management of academic programs and the improvement of assessment and learning outcomes on the collegiate level.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You worked on the Self-Study Report and/or participated in the accreditation review process.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

10-12 people (participants) will be enrolled in this study locally. Overall, a total of 40-48 people will be enrolled at four study centers.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The alternative is not to participate.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this study will last up to 60 – 90 minutes and will include three visits on your campus. The procedures you will be asked to perform are described below.

Visit 1 – First Week (This visit will last about 60 minutes)

- (a) Meet with the investigator of the study in a private classroom, conference room or office. Observations will take place during this time by the investigator.
- (b) Preview the interview questions.
- (c) Discuss the Consent Form.
- (d) Receive a copy of the Rights and Responsibilities of the Research Participant.

Visit 2 - First Week (This visit will last up to 60 – 90 minutes)

- (a) Meet in a private classroom, conference room or office with the investigator.
- (b) Sign the Consent Form and receive a copy of the form.
- (c) Answer several open-ended interview questions.
- (d) Discuss interview questions.
- (e) Share information on assessment and student learning outcomes.

Visit 3 – First Week (This visit will last about 60 minutes)

- (a) Review the transcription of the interview for accuracy.

WILL VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDINGS BE MADE OF ME DURING THE STUDY?

The researcher will make an audio recording during the study so that the data collected will be accurate and complete. If you give your permission to be recorded by audio, or do not give your permission, indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

_____ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

_____ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

The things that you will be doing have no more risk than you would come across in everyday life.

Although the researcher has tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

There is no direct benefit to you by being in this study. What the researcher finds from this study may help your institution with the next reaffirmation process.

WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO ME?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

WILL I BE PAID TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

WILL INFORMATION FROM THIS STUDY BE KEPT PRIVATE?

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be

stored securely and only Dr. Vicente M. Lechuga, Faculty Chairperson and Jesse M. Lewis, Principal Investigator, will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in a locked file cabinet and computer files will be protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

WHOM CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

You can call the Principal Investigator to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research study. The Principal Investigator, Jesse M. Lewis, MPA degree can be called at (979) 268-2304, cell number (337) 351-6887 or emailed at jlewi27@neo.tamu.edu. You may also contact the Principal Investigator's advisor, Vicente M. Lechuga, Ph.D. degree at (979) 845-2716 or vlechuga@tamu.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research and cannot reach the Principal Investigator or want to talk to someone other than the Investigator, you may call the Texas A&M Human Subjects Protection Program office.

- Phone number: (979) 458-4067
- Email: irb@tamu.edu

MAY I CHANGE MY MIND ABOUT PARTICIPATING?

You have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide not to participate or stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study, there will be no effect on your employment or evaluation. You can stop being in this study at any time with no effect on your employment or evaluation. Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more

questions if I want, and I can still receive services if I stop participating in this study. A copy of this entire, signed consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

Signature of Presenter

Date

Printed Name

Date

APPENDIX E

YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

It is important to understand your rights as a research participant:

- To know why the research study is being done.
- To know what will happen during the research study.
- To know whether any study procedure, drugs, or devices are different from standard medical care.
- If the study involves treatment or therapy:
 - To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
 - To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related injury treatment.
 - To be told the risks, side effects, and discomforts from taking part in the study.
 - To be told the possible benefits from taking part in the study.
- To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
- To be told who will have access to information collected about you, and how your confidentiality will be protected.
- To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.
- To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study.
- To be able to decide not to take part in the study, or decide to drop out, at any time. Your decision will not affect your right to the usual care not related to the study.
 - If you are enrolled in a course or student participant pool, be aware that course credit is available by alternative method(s).
- To ask questions at any time.
- To receive a copy of the consent form.

APPENDIX F

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

It is important to understand your responsibilities as a research participant:

- Completely read the consent form and ask the Principal Investigator (PI) any questions you may have. You should understand what will happen to you during the study before you agree to participate.
- Know the dates when your study participation starts and ends.
- Carefully weigh the possible benefits (if any) and risks of being in the study.
- Talk to the Principal Investigator (PI; the person in charge of the study) if you want to stop being part of the research study.
- Contact the PI and/or the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) with complaints or concerns about your participation in the study.
- Report to the PI immediately any and all problems you may be having with the study drug/procedure/device.
- Fulfill the responsibilities of participation as described on the consent forms unless you are stopping your participation in the study.
- Keep a copy of the consent form for your records.

APPENDIX G

DEMOGRAPHICS OF 4 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

A-1

Demographics of 4 Interview Participants

JOHN AARON COLLEGE

First Name	Last Name	Age Range	Gender
Ms. Lillian	Gray	40-50	Female
Pres. Edward	Hillcrest	40-50	Male
Dr. Margaret	Janssen	39-45	Female
Dr. Phillip	Onkean	50-60	Male

APPENDIX H

DEMOGRAPHICS OF 13 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

A-2

Demographics of 13 Interview Participants

THOMAS HENSON UNIVERSITY

First Name	Last Name	Age Range	Gender
Dr. Joel	Abbott	50-60	Male
Dr. Carolyn	Drew-Nelson	50-60	Female
Dr. Paul	Eganu	40-50	Male
Dr. Sarah	Ellis	40-50	Female
Dr. Christine	Farley	60-70	Female
Dr. Karen	Goldstein	55-65	Female
Dr. Jessica	Holland	55-65	Female
Dr. Reva	Jones-Cabot	50-60	Female
Dr. Benedict	Lopez	45-55	Male
Dr. Leonard	Owens	45-55	Male
Dr. Ellen	Sanders	40-50	Female
Dr. Trevor	Wesley	50-60	Male
Dr. George	Wilke	60-70	Male

APPENDIX I

DEMOGRAPHICS OF 11 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

A-3

Demographics of 11 Interview Participants

SIMON WILTZ COLLEGE

First Name	Last Name	Age Range	Gender
Dr. Marva	Ashford	50-60	Female
Dr. William	Begley	65-75	Male
Dr. Sandra	Brown-Healey	40-50	Female
Dr. Martin	Healey	40-50	Male
Dr. Robert	Hoffman	50-60	Male
Mrs. Darlene	Langston-Mohr	35-45	Female
Dr. David	Parnika	50-60	Male
Dr. Harry	Relic	40-50	Male
Mrs. Joanne	Rice	30-40	Female
Mr. Norbert	Rutledge	40-50	Male
Dr. Radimir	Stuart	40-50	Male

APPENDIX J

DEMOGRAPHICS OF 11 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

A-4

Demographics of 11 Interview Participants

DAVID KEMMER UNIVERSITY

First Name	Last Name	Age Range	Gender
Dr. Carmen	Beltran	45-55	Female
Ms. Roslyn	Brody	30-40	Female
Dr. Verna	Lawson	60-70	Female
Dr. Audrey	McVey	60-70	Female
Dr. Dana	Morrow	50-60	Female
Dr. Sharon	Norwood	45-55	Female
Dr. Arnold	Perreau	40-50	Male
Pres. Jacob	Spencer	60-70	Male
Ms. Agnes	Stoner	40-50	Female
Ms. Barbara	Tucker	45-55	Female
Ms. Emily	Weston	40-50	Female

APPENDIX K

LETTER OF APPRECIATION FOR PERMISSION TO DO STUDY

Jesse M. Lewis
P.O. Box 1201
College Station, TX 77841-1201
Date

Name
Job Title
Institution
Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear _____:

I would like to thank you for your interest in my dissertation research. I really appreciate your offer to participate in my study on “The Impact of Accreditation on Institutional Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes: A Case Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.”

I will not reveal any identifiers linking you or your respective institution to this study. Your confidentiality will be protected in any future published reports, and each interviewee will be given a pseudonym. Therefore, this will provide an additional level of protection for the institution and interviewees in this study. In the final analysis, the dissertation chairperson and myself are the only two people that will be aware of my actual research.

I am sincerely grateful that you have decided to participate in my study. The contributions from your institution will enable me to complete my doctoral degree. Please send me a schedule of the date(s) and time(s) that you are available for interviews. Thank you again for your interest and support.

Respectfully yours,

Jesse M. Lewis
EDAD Doctoral Candidate
Texas A&M University

APPENDIX L

RUBRIC CONSTRUCTION AND USE IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Class: American History

Assignment Objectives	What students did on various aspects of the assignment	What can I do next time/changes in instruction and this assignment
Content		
Research		
History		
Writing Skills		

Note. Rubric used by instructor to summarize how students completed the assignment.

APPENDIX M

SAMPLE OF ASSIGNMENT GRADING RUBRIC

Name _____

The key question I am asking as I grade your assignment is this: “*what specifically does your writing demonstrate about your ability to reason, that is, to think critically?*” Along this line, the following are specific guidelines in my grading...use them in reviewing your assignments.

	A	B	C	D	F	NA
<i>General Competences</i>	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69	0-59	
Independent thinker, not hanging on others ideas						
Understands question and stays within it						
Responds to the question completely						
Identifies and defines used concepts effectively						
Recognizes and addresses points of view						
Makes references whenever uses sources						
Shows sociological analytical thinking skills						
<i>Mechanical</i>						
All sentences are grammatically correct with no spelling errors, and words used effectively						
Paragraphs divided throughout reflecting ideas						
Page numbers bottom-centered, question-written, author’s name, and no more than 3-pages						
<i>Average Totals</i>						

Comments:

GRADE

APPENDIX N

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name: *Jesse Marcus Shelton Lewis*

Address: P.O. Box 1201, College Station, TX 77841-1201

E-Mail: jlewi27@tamu.edu

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

Ph.D. Candidate Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA [2006 – present]

Anticipated graduation date: December, 2018

Major: Educational Administration

Area of concentration: Higher Education Administration

Dissertation in progress: The Impact of Accreditation on Institutional Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes: A Case Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

MPA. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana [2005]

Major: Public Administration

Area of concentration: State and Local Government

Thesis: Not required for this major field (Portfolio Required)

B.A. Grambling State University, Grambling, Louisiana [2002]

Major: Mass Communication

Area of concentration: Radio and Television Broadcasting

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Louisiana Department of Insurance

Office of Life and Annuities, Student Assistant, 2004-2005

Office of Public Information, Intern, 2003

KATC-TV 3, ABC affiliate in Lafayette, Louisiana: Intern, 2001

Student Mentorship Program, Grambling State University: Student Mentor, 2000-2002

American College Test (ACT) Proctor, Louisiana State University at Eunice, 1997

HONORS

Pi Lambda Theta Honor Society in Education, Texas A&M University

Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Society in Education, Texas A&M University

Graduate and Professional Student Council (GPSC) Outstanding Service Award,

Texas A&M University