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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Transforming Campus Climate for Diversity:
Accreditation Liaison Officer Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding the Impact of Regional
Accreditation on Institutional Change

by

David H. Sundby

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

In partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2021

Transforming Campus Climate for Diversity:
Accreditation Liaison Officer Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding the Impact of Regional
Accreditation on Institutional Change

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By

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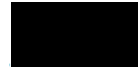
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ABSTRACT

Transforming Campus Climate for Diversity:
Accreditation Liaison Officer Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding the Impact of Regional
Accreditation on Institutional Change

By

David H. Sundby

Despite attention given to the increasing diversity in higher education, greater barriers to college access and degree attainment exist for many minoritized groups in comparison to dominant groups. Research illustrates that campus climate for diversity, a systemic concept, plays a critical role in the success of minoritized groups. Additionally, institutional accreditation is a critical process, and it may be a catalyst for systemic change. However, there is little research on the relationship between the regional accreditation process and institutional change, with even less research on the impact of accreditation on campus climate for diversity.

To address this gap in literature, this study utilized a descriptive qualitative methodology with three main sources of data for analysis—eight semi-structured interviews with accreditation liaison officers (ALOs), the Institutional Report, and the WSCUC site team visit report for each study participant campus. Data were analyzed using the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments, a multidimensional model for campus climate for diversity. Significant themes related to accreditation and institutional change in general included a focus on other

mechanisms of change, a clear relationship between WSCUC accreditation and institutional change, and the need to consider mediating factors during the WSCUC process. Inconsistency related to the WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy, ALO skepticism about this possible relationship, and a lack of multicontextual emphasis emerged as themes related to campus climate for diversity. This study provides many practical recommendations to better leverage the accreditation process for positive institutional change—especially changes related to campus climate for diversity.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Preface and Research Positionality

A critical part of reflexivity for a researcher is a clear understanding of what perspectives, explicit or implicit, I bring to a research project (Kvale, 2007; Mann, 2016). I am a White, straight, cisgender man raised with the support of middle-class economic resources and some generational wealth. It is no stretch to argue that I embody White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2003). My secondary education was in majority-minority public schools, and my friend group was relatively racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. I believed the best racial attitude was to strive towards colorblindness—I was raised in an era saturated with an appropriated understanding of multiculturalism (Leonardo, 2013). I did not have to confront what it meant to live with so many dominant identities until college, and even then, it was another several years before I started to conceptualize a robust understanding of social justice in relation to my dominant identities.

Many educational approaches focus on teaching individuals about their dominant identities and assisting them with recognizing the negative consequences of the inequity from which they benefit (Jackson, 2014). During my first summer at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in the doctoral program, I was focused on how to educate students who, like me, have many dominant identities. Unfortunately, recent research on such efforts has not been particularly fruitful. One study followed a semester-long effort to shift student attitudes towards justice-oriented citizenship at an elite private high school and showed little to no attitudinal shift (Swalwell, 2013). In a larger meta-analysis of a decade of research, the impact of higher

education on development outcomes related to social justice behaviors and attitudes was insignificant and possibly even slightly negative (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Reflecting on my social justice journey, I had moments in my undergraduate education where I was (appropriately) challenged to think differently about my assumptions, attitudes, words, and actions. However, it was not until I was out of my master's program and in my first year as a student affairs professional that I heard the term "privilege." I know from personal and professional experience that we need to learn this and related concepts much earlier.

When I was first introduced to the concept of privilege in 2006, I pushed back. I was at a local conference for housing professionals in Chicago, and the presenter discussed White privilege using various examples from everyday life, sports, and pop culture. He shared my White and cisgender male identities, we were similarly aged, and he was, based on his presentation and my later experience with him, presumably straight. After the lecture, I approached him and thanked him for his work. Then, I let him know that I took issue with a few of his examples. I had *literally* no knowledge of the concept of privilege, and specifically White privilege, while he was working on his Ph.D. in education on this topic at the time.

Still, I had enough privilege to walk up and share my opinions. I had no right, reason, or knowledge to do so. When I think about that moment, I see the absurdity of my action. I also must remind myself that I did not hear this concept once and then immediately change my attitudes and behaviors. It took years of working in higher education, across conversations and interactions with friends, colleagues, and students, both like me and different than me, who were willing to challenge my assumptions and behaviors. I needed to be regularly pushed by people who I trusted to say to me, "You can't do that." Or, "You can't say those things, and it's a

problem when you do.” These types of conversations are vitally important to changing attitudes, and they also take time. Undoing and unlearning years of deeply rooted and embedded power dynamics and the associated behaviors and assumptions is no small task.

I still believe efforts at individual education are important, but the current landscape of structurally reified oppression demands approaches with wider scope. I am interested in understanding how to change systems and structures in higher education to move IHEs towards improved campus climates for diversity and that support, value, and include all students. Currently, while it is important that we have pathways for students who are minoritized to “get through,” the problem is that, in many instances, they are *just* getting through. And the goal should not be merely degree completion for minoritized students *because* we have many different resources for them; the goal should be that *anyone* who walks through the door has all the same support to complete their degree and obtain their educational goals.

After reading Young (2011) early in my second year at LMU in 2018, I wondered if there was a way to get farther upstream in creating systemic change at IHEs or even in the larger culture of higher education in the United States. Through my professional experience, accreditation appeared to be a high-stakes, external force that could leverage change at an IHE. I wanted to know if it could be a catalyst to improve campus climate for diversity. I collected data for this study in fall 2019, and I completed my data analysis over the winter of 2020. I was confident that I would complete and defend my dissertation later in the spring.

When the coronavirus pandemic struck southern California in mid-March of 2020, my professional and personal responsibilities forced me to step away from writing. It was not until early fall 2020 that I could devote significant time to drafting my dissertation again. During that

time away, much had rightfully shifted in the national conversation about racial justice. Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others, protests exploded around the country. Throughout the summer and fall, college students demanded that their IHEs respond with substantive statements and plans to improve campus access, climate, and outcomes, especially for Black students.

At the same time, the inequitable impact of the pandemic has become more and more apparent. It was no secret that health outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and other minoritized communities have always lagged behind comparable White communities due to a myriad of environmental and socioeconomic factors tied to ongoing racial residential segregation (e.g., Morello-Frosch & Lopez, 2006). Around the country, infection and death rates for communities of color exceeded White counterparts wherever racial data was collected (Wood, 2020).

These dual forces of police brutality and the pandemic have reinforced my belief that campus climate for diversity is more critical than ever for higher education to address in robust and authentic ways. As illustrated by the theoretical framework for this study—the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments—colleges and universities do not exist outside of society. Instead, IHEs have been impacted by external contexts like the sociohistorical reality of the United States and the local community where an IHE is situated. IHEs must also reconcile with their own history of exclusion to positively shift campus climate for diversity. Accreditation, as a de facto requirement to function in higher education in this country, has been even more uniquely situated to serve as a catalyst for systemic change. IHEs can and should reciprocally impact the external contexts locally and sociohistorically to move towards a more just and inclusive society. While the results of this study cannot be significantly generalized, I

was even more convinced that, as a higher education leader, we need to continue to analyze the systemic barriers to student success and thriving to find ways to tear these obstacles down. Only then can we create campuses well-equipped to serve every student equitably and successfully.

Background of the Study

The landscape of higher education in the United States has shifted significantly since the mid-1940s, and particularly in the last 40 years. Institutions of higher education (IHEs) face significant external pressures from federal government oversight and shifts in public perception of and confidence in higher education. At the same time, increased federal funding has had the intended outcome of increasing access to higher education (Brown, 2016), which predictably resulted in increased student demographic diversity. This, in turn, has led to the need for innovative solutions for student success that simultaneously create opportunities to improve educational outcomes for all students (Denson & Chang, 2009).

The end of World War II saw a historical shift to an increase in federal funding directed at higher education, which resulted in the greater federal oversight and accountability that IHEs experience today. At that time, Congress viewed higher education benefits as part of a larger set of post-war, anti-depression measures (Olson, 1973). The *Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944* (1944), better known as the *GI Bill*, provided the first direct federal funding to college students (Brittingham, 2009). In 1952, amid concerns over new or unscrupulous IHEs targeting recruitment of veterans to capitalize on the influx of federal funds following a higher than expected utilization of *GI Bill* (1944) benefits, Congress passed the *Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952* (1952; Kelchen, 2018). This act limited federal funding only to students at IHEs who were accredited through a federally-approved accrediting body (Eaton, 2012). The

Higher Education Act of 1965 ([*HEA*], 1965) greatly expanded federal financial aid to students (Hegji, 2017b). Subsequent *HEA* reauthorizations increased access to grant and loan-based financial support while adding greater stipulations to said funding (Brown, 2016). For example, the addition of Title IX in 1972 (*Education Amendments of 1972*, 1972) prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex at any institution receiving federal funding. Title IX and similar federal guidelines continue to shape how IHEs recruit, hire, and operate (Reynolds, 2019; Rose, 2015).

More recently, public support for higher education has lessened while public perception has become more polarized. In a national Gallup poll, confidence in higher education dropped nine points overall between 2015 and 2018; the gap between Republicans and Democrats grew to 23 points, up from 12 points in 2015 (Jones, 2018). Higher education has transformed into a battleground for political views (Belkin, 2017; Mitchell, 2017). In the last decade, the federal government added major reporting requirements for IHEs via the College Scorecard with the stated goals of greater public accountability for student outcomes and post-graduation success, while helping families identify colleges and universities that add the most value for the institutional cost (Obama, 2013). The sum of increased federal funds and corresponding scrutiny, and the analysis of the value of higher education have accelerated the change in governmental expectations.

Institutional accreditation has been theoretically optional but given IHEs' fundamental reliance on federal funding, it has been essentially impossible for an IHE of any significant size or prestige to be fiscally sound without accreditation and the associated access to federal monies (Phillips & Kinser, 2018). Institutional accreditation has been a critical and prominent process

for IHEs, and it appeared to exert significant influence on institutional decisions and change (Studley, 2018).

Higher education enrollment exploded concurrently with the shifts in federal accountability and the related rise in importance of institutional accreditation. According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018c), full-time annual student enrollment has nearly tripled since the *HEA* (1965) passed in 1965—from roughly 4.1 million students to 12.1 million students. Shifting national demographics and increased access and enrollment in higher education has led to steadily increasing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity (NCES, 2018a). Many—if not most—campuses intentionally attempted to recruit more diverse student populations and hire diverse faculty and staff (e.g., Chun & Evans, 2015; Denson & Chang, 2009). Some of these efforts have been questioned and legally contested, but colleges and universities continue to seek best practices for increasing campus diversity (e.g., Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2002; *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2016; Hodge-Clark & Jones, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Despite immense attention given to the increasing diversity on college campuses, there has continued to be greater barriers to accessing college for many minoritized groups (NCES, 2019) and degree attainment has remained stagnant or declined slightly in comparison to dominant groups (Bok, 2017). A common element in both the access and success of minoritized groups has been campus climate for diversity, a multidimensional concept that has had significantly disparate impact across groups at an IHE (Hurtado et al., 2012). Recent research confirmed that campus climate for diversity played a critical role in the success of minoritized

groups of students (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014; Stebleton et al., 2014; Wells & Horn, 2015). Campus climate has been influenced by internal, external, and historical factors (Hurtado et al., 1999, 2012). It also has reflected an embedded campus culture consisting of norms, beliefs, and assumptions, which is more difficult to measure and change than campus climate (Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Renn & Patton, 2016). In other words, issues related to campus climate have been systemic, at least at the institution-level.

Other recent research pointed to systemic inequity issues across higher education. For example, student and faculty discussions around race and racism often perpetuated inequality through basic assumptions embedded in language both in and out of the classroom (Nishi et al., 2016; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Vass, 2017). Systemic issues ran so deeply that even the language of scholarship related to critical Whiteness studies and race-related educational conclusions have been seriously critiqued for reproducing the inequity these fields are intended to undo (Harper, 2012; Leonardo, 2016). Systemic inequity has required systems-level response to create lasting change (Young, 2011).

Purpose

Institutional accreditation has been a more critical process than ever before, and it may prove to be an effective lever for systemic change at IHEs. However, there was little research on the efficacy of the regional institutional accreditation process in causing institutional change, and even less research on the impact of institutional accreditation on campus climate for diversity. This study was intended to help fill this gap in the literature. The study explored the relationship between institutional accreditation, change, and campus climate for diversity by examining key campus leader perceptions and beliefs regarding institutional accreditation's relationship with

institutional change and campus climate for diversity in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) region after a recently completed WSCUC accreditation process at the institution where they work.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the perceptions and beliefs of accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on institutional change?
2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on campus climate for diversity?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) created by Hurtado et al. (2012) as an update to an earlier model by Hurtado et al. (1999). The MMDLE centers student identity between the curricular and co-curricular processes in which the student engages. These processes are located within the larger structure of campus climate for diversity, which is made up of five dimensions. There are three institution-level dimensions (historical, compositional, and organizational) and two individual-level dimensions (psychological and behavioral). Campus climate for diversity is only one part of the institutional context, and there are other external elements which influence, and are influenced by, the institutional context and thus campus climate for diversity as well. All of these aspects of the MMDLE are described in detail in the next chapter.

The MMDLE was appropriate as a theoretical framework for this study for three primary reasons:

- It directly connects campus climate for diversity with greater student success and desired educational outcomes across all student identities.
- The framework conceptualizes campus climate for diversity as a part of many different systems that it can influence or be influenced by.
- It explicitly acknowledges the policy context, an external context that accurately describes where the institutional accreditation process is situated in relation to campus climate for diversity.

Thus, the MMDLE served as both a theoretical framework for organizing the need for this research as well as an interpretive lens through which to understand the research data.

Method

This research study utilized a descriptive qualitative methodology to answer the two research questions. There were three sources of data for the research analysis. The primary source of data collection was eight semi-structured interviews with ALOs in the WSCUC region. The participant group was selected through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling. The other two data sources were the Institutional Report (if available) and the WSCUC campus team visit report for each study participant campus—two key documents related to the WSCUC institutional accreditation process. Document analysis was used to triangulate the data from the interviews to help mitigate any researcher bias and provide important context (Gay et al., 2012).

Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because of the complicated nature of organizational change, accreditation review, and policy implementation. The richness and

depth of data provided through a qualitative approach was intended to better elucidate this complexity (Creswell, 2014). It was also best to use qualitative methods because there was little literature on the impact of institutional accreditation on organizational change, especially as it related to campus climate for diversity. Diving deeply into the topic to illuminate possible themes for future research was appropriate when there was little existing research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

A major assumption of this study was that there is a high likelihood that the institutional accreditation process has an impact on IHE behavior and change. There was some research which demonstrated this assumption, but the scope of both studies was quite narrow and likely not generalizable even within the region of study (Boozang, 2016; Jones, 2013). Despite limited research to support this assumption, it has been relatively common in many discussions and evaluations of accreditation (e.g., Kelchen, 2018; Studley, 2018). Additionally, this assumption was consistent with the accreditation processes in which I have participated through my professional work.

As noted above, this study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology with eight ALO interviews recruited through convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling (Gay et al., 2012). All of these qualifiers acted as delimitations for the study. However, the goals of the research did not purport to be highly generalizable and were narrowly applicable within the WSCUC region. So, while the scope was not significantly generalizable, these delimitations were appropriate for the goals of the study.

A similar limitation of this study related to the participant group, in that many of the ALOs who responded expressed a personal interest in and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Additionally, most of the participating IHEs were very compositionally diverse. Thus, the research participants may not have been representative of the wider array of ALOs in the WSCUC region.

Two other limitations are tied to WSCUC as an organization. First, the WSCUC has continued to refine and revise its accreditation standards. For example, as of 2021, the WSCUC was offering a Thematic Pathway for Reaffirmation for IHEs that were at low risk for falling out of compliance (WSCUC, 2020). If an IHE opted for this reaffirmation method, it was unlikely that the IHE's Equity and Inclusion Policy (EIP) will carry as much influence. The second limitation is that data for certain elements of the MMDLE, the theoretical framework for this study, may have been more significantly prevalent in campus efforts than these aspects appeared to be using the regional accreditation process as the sole data source. In Chapter 4, I detail how certain portions of the MMDLE more or less frequently appear in the interviews and reports. The frequency of these elements was limited by both the participant pool and the WSCUC framework itself.

Another limitation was the risk of researcher bias. I have been passionate about the topic addressed in this study and could have been prone to more positive or negative interpretation of the information derived from interviews and document analysis. To mitigate this risk, I practiced ongoing reflexivity to explicitly acknowledge my positionality as a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Watt, 2007).

Significance

Given the persistent gaps in higher education attainment and evidence of systemic inequity endemic to higher education, this research was significant because it explored the gap in literature about institutional accreditation and its relationship to institutional change, especially as a process that could serve as a tool for systemic change related to equity and inclusion. There are implications for both policy, practice, and future research.

Policy

At the regional and possibly national level, this study started to clarify how accreditation policy design may impact campus climate for diversity at member institutions. Policies like the EIP in the WSCUC were still relatively new. This study illustrated the need for further research into the efficacy of similar accrediting body policies to identify areas for improved clarity. If the intent and impact of such policies are not aligned, this study could inform future revisions to WSCUC and other regional accrediting agency policies regarding equity and inclusion. At the institutional level, ALOs and IHEs can better understand how the institutional accreditation process influences organizational change and improvement, especially regarding equity and inclusion efforts and goals.

Practice

There has been a robust body of research on campus climate for diversity and creating change positively at the institutional level (e.g., Hurtado et al., 2012; Renn & Patton, 2016). In practice, this work has often isolated to a few specialists who may not have the influence, position, or power to effect change within an IHE (Griffin, 2016; Saffold, 2018). This research illustrates the tangible impact that accreditation can have on institutional change, and it lends

greater credibility to this process. Additionally, by directly connecting various dimensions of campus climate for diversity with the goals of the WSCUC accreditation process, this study can help IHEs align practice with current research.

Future Research

There was almost no systematic research into the impact of accreditation on higher education change and improvement. As a descriptive, qualitative study of a single region, this study opens up possibilities for many new avenues of research including broader research into the WSCUC process, the experience of ALOs in and outside of the WSCUC, comparative studies across regional accrediting bodies, and analyses of equity and inclusion policies for other regions.

Definition of Terms

To avoid ambiguity throughout the rest of this study, refer to the following list of key repeated terms. These terms are grouped by general topic, then alphabetized to facilitate easy reference.

General Terms and Abbreviations

- IHE: institution of higher education; refers broadly to any degree-granting postsecondary educational institution including both two-year and four-year colleges and universities
- *HEA: Higher Education Act*; Originally passed in 1965 (*HEA, 1965*), this set of guiding federal legislation that has been, to date, regularly reviewed and updated by Congress. The most current version is referred to as the “Higher Education Opportunity Act” (*Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008*).

Accreditation

- ALO: accreditation liaison officer; ALOs are high-profile, respected, and influential campus leaders with the requisite campus access and knowledge to oversee all accreditation efforts at an IHE, and often report directly to the campus Chief Executive Officer (WSCUC, 2018b).
- CfR: criteria for review; In the WSCUC guidelines for regional accreditation, each of the four standards has related CfRs that more fully describe the expectations of the accreditation process. Currently, WSCUC has 40 CfRs (2018a).
- EIP: WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy; This policy, its history, and its role in this research study are described in detail in Chapter 2.
- Institutional accreditation: a broad, umbrella term which includes program, regional, and specialized institution processes.
- Regional accreditation: a subset of institutional accreditation run by the six regional accrediting bodies.
- WASC: Western Association of Schools and Colleges; see WSCUC below for more information
- WSCUC: the WASC Senior College and University Commission; While the organization was officially known as WASC for much of the period discussed in this study, it was reincorporated into three separate entities in 2012-2013, maintaining the “WASC” acronym in each distinct entity. To avoid inconsistent terms, I have used WSCUC regardless of the name at the time referenced.

Equity and Inclusion

- **Campus climate for diversity:** A multidimensional concept comprised of various internal and external factors that influence student experience and learning (Hurtado et al., 2012). This term is more fully operationalized in the portion of Chapter 2 describing the theoretical framework for this study.
- **Class:** While socioeconomic status (SES) is also commonly used as an identity marker in conversations on diversity, equity, and inclusion, I chose instead to use the term “class” to indicate more than just financial resources. Recent scholarship on class indicates that similar economic circumstances intersect with other cultural and social capital based on power differentials within society, and class should be considered an aspect of identity because of these complicated intersections (hooks, 2000; Martin et al., 2018; Smith, 2015; Soria, 2015; Yosso, 2005).
- **Diversity:** Refers broadly to the range of student, staff, and faculty identities.
- **Dominant:** Describes identity characteristics which are given preferential treatment historically and in systemically problematic ways; the term “privileged” is often used to refer to these identities, but “dominant” better and more explicitly captures the inherent power dynamic in these systemic advantages.
- **Minoritized:** Describes identity characteristics that are subordinate and oppressed in relation to dominant identities; this term is used rather than other common terminology (e.g., “minority” or “underrepresented”) consistent with Harper (2012) to capture both the contextual nature of being rendered less than and to reinforce the power dynamic inherent in this process.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of the regional institutional accreditation process as an effective lever for institutional transformation to improve campus climate for diversity at institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) region. This chapter overviews and discusses the literature related to the topics central to the study. The first section is a detailed introduction to some of the external pressures exerted on higher education by a rapidly shifting context over the last few decades. These pressures have both shaped and elevated the institutional accreditation process to its current critical role. The next section focuses on the history, current structure, and changing role of institutional accreditation in the United States in the current era of increased accountability. It also describes the evolution of WSCUC expectations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion within the standards of the WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy (EIP). After outlining the context for accreditation nationally and in the WSCUC region, the third section explores the literature on campus climate in higher education to define and clarify the scope of campus climate for diversity and its importance to student success. The final section describes the theoretical framework for the study—the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) and related supporting literature (Hurtado et al., 2012)—and connects the current WSCUC accreditation expectations to key aspects of the MMDLE.

Shifting Landscape of Higher Education

External pressures on higher education have increased because of added federal funding and accountability, recent changes in public perception, and increasing student diversity. These influences have significantly shifted the national context for higher education, have been entrenched in the larger sociohistorical context of higher education, and could not be ignored. It was therefore critical to understand how these factors impacted and elevated the institutional accreditation process to its current position in higher education.

Federal Oversight

Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt were concerned about an economic depression following World War II, and as part of the larger efforts to protect the economy and mitigate these concerns, Congress enacted the *Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944* (1944)—better known as the *GI Bill*—to provide the first direct federal funding to veterans interested in pursuing higher education (Olson, 1973). In 1952, amid concerns over IHEs abusing this influx of federal funds, Congress passed the Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (1952; Kelchen, 2018). This law limited federal funding from the *GI Bill* (1944) only to students who attended IHEs that met specific federal criteria, including accreditation through a federally-approved accrediting body. The conditions on these funds set the foundation for much greater federal accountability and influence on higher education (Eaton, 2012).

The *Higher Education Act of 1965* (*HEA*, 1965) further expanded federal financial aid beyond veterans and increased access to higher education to a broader population of students (Brown, 2016). The 1972 reauthorization of the *HEA* (*Education Amendments Act of 1972*, 1972) significantly shifted how federal funding was allocated. Whereas the original *HEA* created

programs wherein federal funds were given to IHEs to disburse to students, the 1972 reauthorization of the *HEA (Education Amendments of 1972, 1972)* saw Congress pivot and focus on aid programs for individual students to attend any qualified IHE under Title IV (Gladieux, 1996). Subsequent reauthorizations increased access to grant and loan-based financial support while imposing more conditions on institutions with students receiving this funding (Hegji, 2017b; *Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008*). For instance, likely the most famous of these changes was the codification of Title IX in 1972. This law prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex at any institution receiving federal funding, and has continued to impact how IHEs recruit, hire, and operate (*Education Amendments Act of 1972, 1972*; Reynolds, 2019; Rose, 2015).

Many other federal accountability expectations have been tied to Title IV funding, but generally have represented less of an immediate sea change in IHE policy or action than that of Title IX (*Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008*). By the 1992 *HEA* authorization, the current structure of need-based grants, subsidized and unsubsidized loans, and direct parent loans was largely in place. In 1992, federal loan amounts and student debt started to rapidly increase (Congressional Budget Office, 2018). Due to this increase, higher education has been under greater political scrutiny related to student outcomes, especially those related to employment and debt repayment, for both graduates and non-graduates (Gaston, 2014). High profile federal committees such as the Spellings Commission have called for changes to the structure of higher education that embeds greater accountability measures to produce more positive outcomes for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). President Obama (2013) called on IHEs to focus

on keeping costs down for students and created the College Scorecard to provide transparent public information about the costs and outcomes at all IHEs receiving federal funding.

In 2017, postsecondary students received nearly \$125 billion in aid through Title IV funding (*Higher Education Opportunity Act*, 2008) in the form of loans and grants, down from a peak of about \$150 billion in 2010-2011 when postsecondary enrollment also peaked (Congressional Budget Office, 2018). Many if not most of the recent regulations were focused on consumer information or protection; this was unsurprising considering the immense amount of money spent annually by the federal government on higher education. These regulations have become a complicated morass of reporting and program structure expectations described over 228 pages (Office of Federal Student Aid, 2018).

Kelchen (2018) categorized current federal accountability policies into two groups. The first category was low-stakes consumer information related to attributes of IHEs and student outcomes, such as retention and six-year graduation rates. These data have been reported through a dozen surveys to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which were then compiled and made publicly available through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The data were also compiled into three different consumer websites, ostensibly to help prospective students and families make informed decisions about where to attend college. The second category of higher-stakes policies laid out minimum performance standards tied to student economic outcomes, such as loan default rates and employment. This category has also included institutional demonstration of fiscal stability standards to protect students and the federal government from IHEs on the brink of financial collapse.

Even as the federal government increased its oversight of IHEs, it still utilized accreditation as the determining factor for receiving Title IV funds (*Higher Education Opportunity Act*, 2008). Accreditation has evolved in conjunction with federal oversight changes (Eaton, 2012). Thus, IHEs must value it as a critical process or risk losing a huge source of student financial support.

Public Image Management

Closely linked to shifts in legislative and policy oversight, public discussion and perception of higher education has changed dramatically over the last 35 years.

College Rankings

Many organizations have created college rankings systems since *U.S. News & World Report (USNWR)* published its first annual college ranking list in 1983, some employing rigorous empirical criteria while others have used more informal data inputs or arbitrary criteria (Kelchen, 2018). Few college presidents have been willing to say that college rankings are a very important measure of successful leadership (Gallup, Inc., 2016). However, in a prominent national survey of college admission counselors, more than 70% of colleges reported promoting their *USNWR* ranking in at least a limited fashion through recruitment and marketing (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2011). Additionally, data from the last 20 years showed a steady increase in incoming first-year students relying on college rankings to make their final college choice (Eagan et al., 2016).

More recently, many ranking systems have begun to use rigorous empirical assessments to consider institutional characteristics—such as incoming student quality in relation to student outcomes (e.g., persistence, graduation rates, and initial earnings)—to measure the return on

investment from an education at individual institutions (Kelchen, 2018). Researchers in higher education have similarly assessed the value added by particular IHEs when controlling for institutional characteristics (e.g., Cunha & Miller, 2014; Kelchen & Harris, 2012; Rothwell & Kulkarni, 2015). When President Obama (2013) introduced the College Scorecard tool in his State of the Union address, much of the rationale for this new tool was to help families figure out how to “get the most bang for [their] educational buck” (para. 48). He also indicated that the College Scorecard would hold IHEs more publicly accountable for student outcomes and post-graduation career success. Thus, the federal government’s increasing role in accountability reflected changing public opinion about approaching college enrollment decisions while it was simultaneously influenced by political discussions about the need for greater accountability and return on educational investment.

While college rankings have purported to be a democratization of information to better inform families and students in the college admissions process, the pervasiveness of these rankings has faced significant criticism as well. First, it has been extremely difficult for an IHE to shift their ranking in certain rankings (like *USNWR*) due to solidified reputational rankings and costs (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011; Kim, 2015). Second, rankings have tended to be very static longitudinally with many small shifts in ranking attributable to minor data variations year-to-year (Ortagus, 2016). Third, even attempts to measure more rigorously and quantitatively the value added by individual institutions likely failed to show a causal relationship between the college educational experience and learning outcomes (Pike, 2016). Finally, reframing the college search process through a student-as-consumer lens reflected a more widespread increase of market-based ideology in higher education (St. John, 2017). While there is no lack of

arguments in favor of this shift (e.g., Schneider & Peek, 2018), other research showed that this move has not created greater access or equity. For example, in a study of the last cohort of United Kingdom students to receive a free university education, Pugsley (2004) argued that shifts in higher education to reflect market-based ideology have not created greater equity across class because of differentials in social capital when navigating the university admissions and decision process. Also, St. John (2017) noted that the marketization of higher education has regularly increased the number of citizens with degrees, but this has also happened simultaneously with a radical rise in social inequality.

Despite criticisms directed at college ranking systems, they have exerted considerable influence on student and family decision-making (Eagan et al., 2016). The increase in value-added rankings also reflected a change in wider public perception about the role and worth of higher education.

Public Perception

Less academic research exists on changing public perception, but well-respected poll data from the last four years indicated increasing skepticism regarding the value of higher education for individuals and society at large—especially after President Trump took office in 2016. In a national Gallup poll, confidence in higher education dropped nine points overall between 2015 and 2018; the gap between Republicans and Democrats grew to 23 points, up from 12 points in 2015 (Jones, 2018). This trend was consistent with a separate Gallup poll from 2017 (Newport & Busted, 2017). In two separate recent polls, Pew Research has also indicated an increasingly partisan split on whether higher education has had a positive impact on the United States, and it shows that most Americans believed higher education is headed in the wrong direction (Brown,

2018; Fingerhut, 2017). Popular news outlets have speculated that a perceived liberal bias at colleges and universities has made higher education a popular political battleground for partisan views (Belkin, 2017; Mitchell, 2017). Other issues related to higher education bridged the partisan divide. For example, while there was a 19-point gap between Republicans' and Democrats' opinions on college affordability, the majority of both groups saw increased costs of college as a major national issue (Hartig & Doherty, 2018).

The shift in public perception has not gone unnoticed in higher education. Major regional and national organizations have grappled with the gap between public perception, public narrative, and an ongoing belief in the value of higher education as a public good (Harney, 2018; Sullivan, 2017). Despite broad public concerns and attempts to reconcile or shift these views, more nuanced polling in late 2017 and mid-2018 indicated that the public still views higher education as an important indicator for future success and that it benefits both individuals and society at large (Drezner et al., 2018; Lederman, 2017). However, both polls also showed significant partisan gaps. The polarized political climate has demanded that institutions have some mechanism for public quality assurance to demonstrate the value they provide at both individual and societal levels (Eaton, 2012).

Demographics

Major demographic shifts across various identities occurred concurrently with the aforementioned changes in federal accountability and public perception. These shifts have been in large part due to the passage of the original *HEA* (1965) and its various reauthorizations (e.g. *Education Amendments of 1972, 1972; Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008*), which have expanded federal funding of higher education significantly over the last few decades (Brown,

2016). The examples below were only a sample of the various identities much more widely represented at IHEs.

Race and Ethnicity

The United States has become more racially and ethnically diverse every year (Cohn & Caumont, 2016). The average demographics of students attending public elementary schools in some states have been more than 50% students of color; by 2024, the entire country will reflect this shift (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016). Colleges and universities have been experiencing similar shifts in demographics, and students of color make up a much higher percentage of students than they did four decades ago (NCES, 2018a). Despite these changing racial demographics, six-year graduation rates for most students of color showed little to no progress and continued to lag behind their White peers (NCES, 2018b).

Sex

Enrollment of female students has continued its upward trend since 1972 when Title IX (*Education Amendments of 1972*, 1972) was passed, only recently plateauing around 56.5% between 2009 to 2016 (NCES, 2018c). While female students made up the majority at many IHEs, the general campus climate for both students and faculty has still often been perceived as less welcoming and warm for women—especially in academic disciplines that continue to be male-dominated (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015). The disparate impact of campus climate on all minoritized groups will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Ability

The passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504, 1973) and legislation in 1975 that would later become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1990) ushered in a new era where students with disabilities (SWDs) arrived in higher education settings with different expectations based on their having received a more supportive K-12 experience, and rightfully seeking the support they needed from IHEs to complete a postsecondary education. There was limited historical NCES data on the growth of the percentage of SWDs in four-year IHEs, but the number of SWDs has nearly doubled from around one in ten to one in five college students since these statistics were first tracked in the late 1990s (NCES, 2018d). These students' K-12 experience was shaped by the IDEA (1990) and the broadened definition of a "qualifying disability" under the Americans with Disability Act Amendments Act (Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2019). However, postsecondary support for disability accommodations has functioned very differently than K-12 support and SWDs have often faced many barriers to successfully transitioning into a college setting (Chan, 2016; Hong, 2015; Summers et al., 2014).

Class

The number of students representing more categories of class has, for the most part, also grown over the last four decades. Increased federal support based on financial need has been a major reason for this increase in access (Umbricht, 2016). Class as a category of postsecondary diversity did not have a clear measure because it was a relatively new concept (Martin et al., 2018). The most commonly used measures were first-generation student status (i.e., educational attainment of both parents does not include a postsecondary degree) or Pell Grant recipient status

despite issues with these descriptors (Ardoin, 2018). However, increased access across classes has varied greatly by institution.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Systematic collection of demographic data regarding members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities was still too new to indicate any trends in higher education enrollment. For example, the federal government only started exploring effective ways of collecting sexual orientation and gender identity information in a working paper from 2016, and it was suggested in a commissioned report in 2017 to add LGBTQ information to postsecondary surveys (Campbell et al., 2017; Federal Interagency Working Group on Improving Measurement of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys, 2016). There is no evidence that the Trump administration continued this exploration or intended to implement the recommended changes. The widely used Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey managed by Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) included sexual orientation for the first time in 2016 and found that seven percent of incoming first-year students identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (Eagan et al., 2017).

In part because there was no federal requirement and the CIRP Freshman Survey had only published two years' worth of data, it was difficult to know if the percentage of LGBTQ-identified students had increased. However, various changes in legislation at state and national levels in combination with the landmark marriage equality decision issued by the Supreme Court of the United States in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) were clear indicators of the rapidly changing sociocultural acceptance of members of the LGBTQ community. Renn (2010) also effectively summarized the state of research in higher education and made the case that even without good

data on the percentage of LGBTQ-identified students, it has still been imperative that IHEs adapt to increased visibility and expectation of support from this community.

Critical Role of Accreditation

The combination of federal oversight, public image management, and an increasingly diverse study body meant that the institutional accreditation process offered a critical opportunity to meet government and public demands while improving student access, experience, and success for everyone. The next section describes the history and development of regional accreditation, a prominent type of institutional accreditation, and its current structure. It also describes how the WSCUC region has evolved around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Regional Accreditation

History and Development

Early Development

In the final three decades of the 1800s, the quality and focus of institutions self-described as colleges and universities ranged broadly. High school graduation standards varied significantly, making it difficult for IHEs to accurately assess the preparedness of prospective students. To assess applicants and signal their own institutional quality, prestigious and well-established IHEs formed geographically regional bodies for accrediting member colleges and universities through a peer-review process applying criteria agreed-upon by the member institutions (Harclerod, 1980). The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) was established in 1885; by 1924, the entire country was overlaid with regional accrediting agencies for IHEs (Kelchen, 2018; New England Association of Schools and Colleges [NEASC], n.d.). In their infancy, each regional body established independent criteria in

conjunction with their member institutions for accrediting IHEs in their region, and there was very little state or federal government involvement in setting standards or influencing accrediting agencies (Harclerod, 1980). Thus, each organization developed relatively independently through an evolutionary rather than intentional process of change (Brittingham, 2009).

Despite this disjointed development, regional accrediting bodies shared two main purposes from early in accreditation's history. Perhaps the simplest commonality was the bodies' goal to ensure effective credit transfer if a student changed institutions (Gaston, 2014; Phillips & Kinser, 2018). Second, these bodies attempted to define what it meant to be a "college," often through subjective quantitative thresholds for characteristics like number of library books regardless of student body size (Brittingham, 2009). Despite these somewhat arbitrary standards, their goal aimed at ensuring quality among their member institutions, i.e., setting minimum standards for qualification as a college (Bok, 2017).

Two important milestones during this time occurred in the North Central Association (now the Higher Learning Commission), which covered 19 states in the Midwest and Southwest. First, in 1912 it became the first accrediting agency to publish a list of standards for accreditation (Kelchen, 2018). Next, in response to critiques of such specific standards in light of the heterogeneous nature of IHEs, it transitioned to a more general set of principles focused on institutional mission and achievement of said mission in 1934 (Gaston, 2014). This shift laid the groundwork for other regional accrediting bodies to similarly adopt standards that have been adaptable to the range of institutional purposes and missions in higher education (Brittingham, 2009). It also marked one of the earliest shifts in accreditation's focus on inputs, e.g.,

institutional characteristics, to outcomes such as alignment of mission and student achievement (Gaston, 2014).

Modern Accreditation

Two major shifts in the mid-20th century propelled regional accreditation into its modern form. First, in 1948 the Association of American Universities stopped publishing its annual list of recognized institutions. This list had been the most prestigious and respected form of institutional recognition since its inception in 1914 (Harclerod, 1980). The second change, as noted previously, was the exponential growth of federal funding and related oversight of higher education after World War II when Congress passed the *GI Bill* (1944; Olson, 1973). Originally, Congress chose to work from lists submitted by each state to determine qualified IHEs. Fears developed regarding disreputable or unreliable new IHEs heavily recruiting veterans in an attempt to take advantage of the influx of federal dollars through the *GI Bill* (1944; Kelchen, 2018). The federal government responded when it delegated the responsibility of vetting the quality of IHEs to existing regional accrediting bodies (Brown, 2016). Thus, students could not receive veterans' educational benefits to support their education at a non-accredited IHE. Access to federal aid and total federal aid dollars grew exponentially after the first *HEA* (1965) passed (Congressional Budget Office, 2018). This positioned accreditation as an important gatekeeper for a significant amount of money, but it also placed accreditation under greater federal, state, and public scrutiny.

By the mid-1970s, though the federal government had revised criteria for recognizing accrediting agencies, the rise of the educational consumer protection movement put accreditation in the national spotlight with many public criticisms of accreditation (Proffitt, 1979). The current

basic structure of published federal criteria for accreditation agency recognition succeeded this tumultuous period. However, there were very few federally codified criteria until the *HEA* reauthorization of 1992, which added Section 496 to enforce greater oversight of IHEs by accrediting agencies (Hegji, 2017a). Subsequent *HEA* reauthorizations in 1998 and in 2008 added significantly more criteria to the Department of Education (DOE) requirements for accrediting agency recognition (Brittingham, 2009; *Higher Education Opportunity Act*, 2008). That recognition process has been largely concerned with assuring that each recognized accrediting organization supports institutional and programmatic reliability to protect federal investment in higher education (Eaton, 2015).

Purpose

As accreditation evolved, so has its purpose (Brittingham, 2009). Current literature has indicated five main roles of the institutional accreditation process. First, ensuring the ease of transfer and credit articulation was one of the earliest goals of regional accrediting bodies, and it has continued to be an important role (Eaton, 2015; Gaston, 2014). Second, much like early organizations' attempts to define a "college," accreditation has still established baseline criteria for quality of program or institution to make certain that any accredited institution meets minimum standards (Bok, 2017; Brittingham, 2009; Eaton, 2015; Harclerod, 1980; Kelchen, 2018). Third, the accreditation review process has evolved into an important institutional mechanism for continuous improvement—especially of student outcomes (Bok, 2017). Much of this shift was in response to critiques of the current process by institutional members or third parties (Alstete, 2004; Gaston, 2014) or to ensure that the accreditation process adds value to stable, established institutions (Brittingham, 2009).

The other two roles of accreditation have developed more recently in response to increased federal funds and oversight. Since the *GI Bill* (1944), accreditation has served as a gatekeeper to all direct federal funding and Title IV funding eligibility for students (Brown, 2016; Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008; Proffitt, 1979). The specific guidelines to the periodic review process for every accrediting agency articulated in the 1992 *HEA* reauthorization solidified those agencies' gatekeeping role by requiring their review of institutional sustainability to protect consumer and federal investment (Bok, 2017; Eaton, 2015; Gaston, 2014; Hegji, 2017a). These guidelines impacted the ways accreditation served as a gatekeeper to federal funds while also reflecting the current role of the process—public accountability, which includes evidence of effective student outcomes in learning and economic success (Alstete, 2004; Bok, 2017; Eaton, 2012; Gaston, 2014; Kelchen, 2018).

WSCUC

The WSCUC was the newest of the six regional accrediting agencies, established in 1924 as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC; Brittingham, 2009). It covered California, Hawaii, and some international IHEs. Its organizational history and development has largely paralleled the trends of regional accreditation development described above. Due to the focus of this research project, it was necessary to take a deeper look at the WSCUC institutional review process as well as the specific development of the WSCUC criteria related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This information was the foundation for understanding how participating in the WSCUC may impact institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity.

Process

The WSCUC accreditation process has reflected the five common attributes of other accreditation agencies in the United States: institutional self-study; external peer review; a site visit by peers and accrediting agency officials; a decision from the accrediting agency; and periodic review for follow up and renewal (Brittingham, 2009; Eaton, 2015). The WSCUC Handbook of Accreditation (2018a) described the full process and provided the specific guidelines and standards. Whether an institution was seeking first-time accredited status or going through the reaffirmation review process, each IHE must start with a self-study called the Institutional Review Process. This process has included a robust self-study firmly rooted in institutional mission, history, and progress with significant data collection to reflect current operations in relation to the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation. The self-study lays the foundation for the Institutional Report, an approximately 50-75-page document detailing compliance with WSCUC Standards, description and quality of programs, measures of student learning and success, demonstration of institutional sustainability and ongoing improvement, and next institutional steps for improvement and change. The Institutional Report typically has also included links to evidence and other supporting documentation.

Once the Institutional Report is complete, a review team made of qualified peers and outside experts (as needed) evaluates each institution based on the WSCUC Standards of Accreditation (WSCUC, 2018a). The review team then conducts an Offsite Review via video conference to describe any subjects that require more follow-up, provide overall impressions, and note any issues such as additional documentation needed during the onsite review process.

The review team also provides a private summary report to help individual institutions prepare for the site visit.

Six months or more after the Offsite Review, the review team visits each campus for three days to address issues of compliance or improvement that arose during the Offsite Review process. Additionally, institutions have the opportunity to show progress or fill gaps in the initial review. The review team creates a post-visit team report to send to the WSCUC Commission for decisions on action. The Commission, through an action letter, may reaffirm accreditation for up to ten years or sanction an institution through warning, probation, or withdrawal of WSCUC accreditation status. Both the Commission's action letter and the review team's report are made publicly available through the WSCUC website (WSCUC, 2018a). The WSCUC was the first regional accrediting agency to make this information available to the public, paving the way for other regional bodies to follow suit (Gaston, 2014).

Diversity Standards

At the time of the study, five of six regional accrediting agencies had specific criteria and expectations for growth and support of diverse student populations on campus which varied in scope and focus (Ferreira et al., 2014). The Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) was the only exception (Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC], 2017). WSCUC first set standards related to diversity in the 1988 handbook and approved the more robust "Statement on Diversity" in 1994 (WASC, 2001). High-profile IHEs such as the University of Southern California, Stanford, and the California Institute of Technology vociferously opposed this statement as an overreach of institutional accreditation's role, as well as an impingement on academic autonomy for higher

education institutions (Sample, 1994). Language in newspaper articles reporting on the new statement indicated a contentious sociopolitical environment when there was significant public backlash against “political correctness” and efforts to create more multicultural educational systems and curricula (Frammolino, 1994).

The WASC Statement on Diversity remained untouched for nearly twenty years in spite of this opposition. Major revisions were made in 2013, when the Statement on Diversity was renamed the “Diversity Policy” and its length was cut nearly in half (WSCUC, 2017a). The policy was edited again in November 2017 for “brevity and clarity, using updated language” (WSCUC, 2017b, para. 1) and renamed the “Equity and Inclusion Policy” (EIP).

Notable Revisions. The original 1994 document was titled, “Statement on Diversity” (WASC, 2001). It was then renamed the “Diversity Policy” in 2013 (WSCUC, 2017b). While the word “policy” implies more enforceability than a “statement,” the document’s functional purpose has largely remained the same throughout each version of the WASC and WSCUC handbooks—it was referenced as the guideline for the criteria for review (CfR) regarding campus climate and diversity efforts. The second important change was the revisors’ replacement of the word “diversity” with “equity and inclusion.” The terms “equity” and “inclusion” reflect the larger shift in regional accreditation from a focus on just inputs to student outcomes, especially in the last two decades (Bok, 2017; Gaston, 2014).

Deletions. The 1994 statement was notably longer and contained multiple focused examples when compared with the current EIP. Nearly two and a half pages of the policy were cut just by removing the section titled “A Definition of Diversity.” This change seemed to reflect how much less controversial a diversity-focused policy or document was during this study than it

was in 1994. For example, the 1994 statement devoted three paragraphs toward distinguishing between “diversity” and “affirmative action” in recognition of a relevant and contested topic at that time. In contrast, the EIP did not use the phrase “affirmative action” at all. Another outdated example from the 1994 policy was the attention paid therein to the autonomy of religious institutions to select students “on the basis of adherence to religious beliefs” (WASC, 2001, p. 2) with explicit reference to sexual orientation.

Another two pages in the 1994 statement addressed “Educational Quality and Diversity” by making a robust argument for the value of diversity in the entire constituency (students, faculty, and staff) of an institution. This section appeared to be distilled into a single sentence in the current EIP which states, “That experience has confirmed that issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are systemic, related to student success and institutional effectiveness in a number of ways” (WSCUC, 2017a, p. 1). Finally, the 1994 statement included many specific examples from member schools to help explain or justify the suggestions of WASC, whereas all specific examples with school references were cut from the EIP.

Additions. The EIP included two new sections when compared to the 1994 statement. The first was the “Introduction and General Principles” (WSCUC, 2017a, p. 1), which summarized some of the core ideas in the “Educational Quality and Diversity” (WASC, 2001, p. 3) section of the 1994 statement. This section in the EIP was much more pointed in making substantive value claims. For example, it stated, “Students benefit most from [member school program] assets where there is a climate of respect for diversity of backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives, and where the institution’s various constituencies deal honestly and constructively with issues of equity and inclusion” (WSCUC, 2017a, p. 1). There was no comparable claim in

the 1994 statement, especially not with such certitude about student learning and development connected to a diverse campus enhancing core programs like the curriculum. This change reflected the two intervening decades of research on the educational benefits of diversity and the contingency of these benefits on campus climate (Chun & Evans, 2015; Denson & Chang, 2009; Hurtado et al., 2012; Milem et al., 2005).

Both the EIP and the 1994 statement contained sections titled, “Expectations for Institutional Review and Presentation,” but the EIP version contained entirely new language. The 1994 section aligned closely with the last section of the EIP. At the time of this study, the EIP also had five main topics related to equity and inclusion with one or two sets of questions, each of which institutions should have considered during the self-review process. These questions were more directive guidance for the institutional self-review process than in the 1994 statement.

Consistencies. Though the 1994 statement, like the EIP, provided five points about diversity, it was unclear if these are requirements for institutions in the accreditation process or merely suggestions. The content of these five points was kept nearly verbatim in the EIP, though under a different section title, “Good Practices for Valuing Diversity and Fostering Inclusion” (WSCUC, 2017a, p. 3).

Current Criteria. In the WSCUC Handbook of Accreditation (2018a), the four Standards of Accreditation had 40 related CfRs. The only explicit reference to the EIP was in CfR 1.4, which required that each institution demonstrated consistency with the principles in the EIP. CfR 1.4 also mentioned two other criteria (CfR 2.2a and CfR 3.1) as relevant. CfR 2.2a refers to undergraduate curriculum offerings and requirements with explicit reference to “an

appreciation for diversity.” CfR 3.1 covered faculty and staff qualifications and mentioned the EIP as a related document, but with no explicit mention of diversity, equity, or inclusion.

At the time of this study, the current EIP included five main headings with a total of nine questions institutions were expected to consider during the Institutional Review Process (WSCUC, 2017a). These categories were institutional commitment, access/inclusion, support/success, campus climate, and educational objectives. The related questions framed everything in terms of institutional mission, goals, and current campus demographics. In other words, as with the rest of the accreditation process, there was a relatively high amount of leeway for interpretation to accommodate the wide range of IHEs that are affiliated with WSCUC. These categories and questions will be revisited below in the context of the theoretical framework. However, an interlude to review the literature related to the term “campus climate” is necessary both because of its presence in this group and its relevance to the second research question of this study.

Campus Climate

Though often used by administrators and leadership on campuses around the United States, the term “campus climate” has been ill-defined in its practical usage (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). It has often referred vaguely to diversity and equity issues facing different minoritized groups, including identities rooted in race, ethnicity, sex, class, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

In academic literature, the range of definitions for the term has been more clearly refined, but a conclusive definition has not yet emerged. Research on and assumptions about campus climate have been rooted in research on organizational climate in many settings outside of

education starting in the 1960s (Owens & Valesky, 2015; Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

Researchers have not operationalized the term consistently despite this robust research base, instead using it interchangeably with other phrases such as “campus environment” (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014; Stebleton et al., 2014; Wells & Horn, 2015).

Peterson and Spencer (1990) have been often cited as the first academic attempt to clearly define the terms “campus climate” and “campus culture” in higher education while also distinguishing the two concepts. They described culture as more deeply embedded than climate in an organization’s function because it is the hidden and often implicitly accepted values, beliefs, and meanings that have historical roots in the existence and development of an organization or campus. On the other hand, they asserted that climate refers to the resultant behaviors in, perceptions of, and attitudes towards the IHE. The authors broke climate into three corresponding categories for possible research: objective climate, the behavioral patterns that are directly observable; perceived climate, the way that members see the organizational function and belief about how it should function; and psychological climate, the way that members are motivated within an organization by how they feel about their work or role within it.

Campus Climate for Diversity

While Peterson and Spencer (1990) provided a valuable foundation upon which to build a better understanding of campus climate, their conceptual framework was lacking for a few important reasons. Though they alluded to the importance of the relationship between campus culture and climate, they largely saw culture as highly static while characterizing climate as malleable and a good target for intervention by administrators. They did not acknowledge that embedded values and beliefs have influenced perceptions within an organization in profound

ways (Renn & Patton, 2016). Next, because of their organizational focus, Peterson and Spencer (1990) did not adequately acknowledge the larger social cultures and climates or additional contexts that have impacted campus settings in significant ways (e.g., George Mwangi et al., 2018). These contexts must be considered to accurately interpret and respond to issues on campus related to the social reproduction of inequity and its significance for campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999).

Finally, practical and professional use of the term “campus climate” in higher education has most often referred to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion for minoritized groups (e.g., Hodge-Clark & Jones, 2017). Academic research terminology has similarly evolved, and most literature and research related to campus climate has addressed these issues as well—often under a larger umbrella concept of campus climate for diversity.

Research on campus climate for diversity has repeatedly shown that minoritized student groups have been more likely to perceive and experience climate more negatively than dominant groups. In some of the earliest research, Hurtado (1992) illustrated distinct perceptions of campus racial climate between White, Black, and Chicana/o students across institutions. Black and Chicana/o students were more likely to perceive the campus racial climate as negative or hostile. Following this early work, Harper and Hurtado’s (2007) 15-year meta-analysis of campus racial climate research and multi-institutional qualitative study showed common themes emergent in research including significantly different perceptions of climate by racial groups and regular reports of racist and other prejudiced acts against minoritized students at IHEs.

The last decade of research has shown that differential perception and experience of campus climate has not been limited to racial minorities. Differences have existed based on other

identities such as sex (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015; Hart & Fellabaum, 2008), sexual orientation (Rankin, 2003; Yost & Gilmore, 2011), national origin (Stebbleton et al., 2014), and class (Soria, 2015). Disparate perceptions have also had a tangible impact on student outcomes and satisfaction. In an early study, Hurtado and Carter (1997) showed that first-year experiences of Latina/o students have a lasting effect on their sense of belonging in their third year, which impacted their persistence and success. Sense of belonging has had a rich research connection to student persistence, satisfaction, and success (Astin, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993), and more recent research has shown that campus climate for diversity has been predictive of sense of belonging for various minoritized groups (Johnson et al., 2014; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Stebleton et al., 2014; Thompson, 2017; Wells & Horn, 2015).

Campus climate for diversity has long suffered from inconsistent definitions; even literature that relied on common descriptions has demonstrated that it is a complicated, multilayered concept that requires a deep understanding to attempt to effect positive change. Students have perceived and experienced campus climate for diversity differently depending on their own identities. In nearly every example, these perceptions and experiences were more negative for those from minoritized backgrounds and it has resulted in a gap between experience and outcomes for these individuals. The theoretical framework for this study provided this complex, nuanced description while also functioning as an analytic lens for this research study (see Chapter 3 for more detail on the methodology).

Theoretical Framework

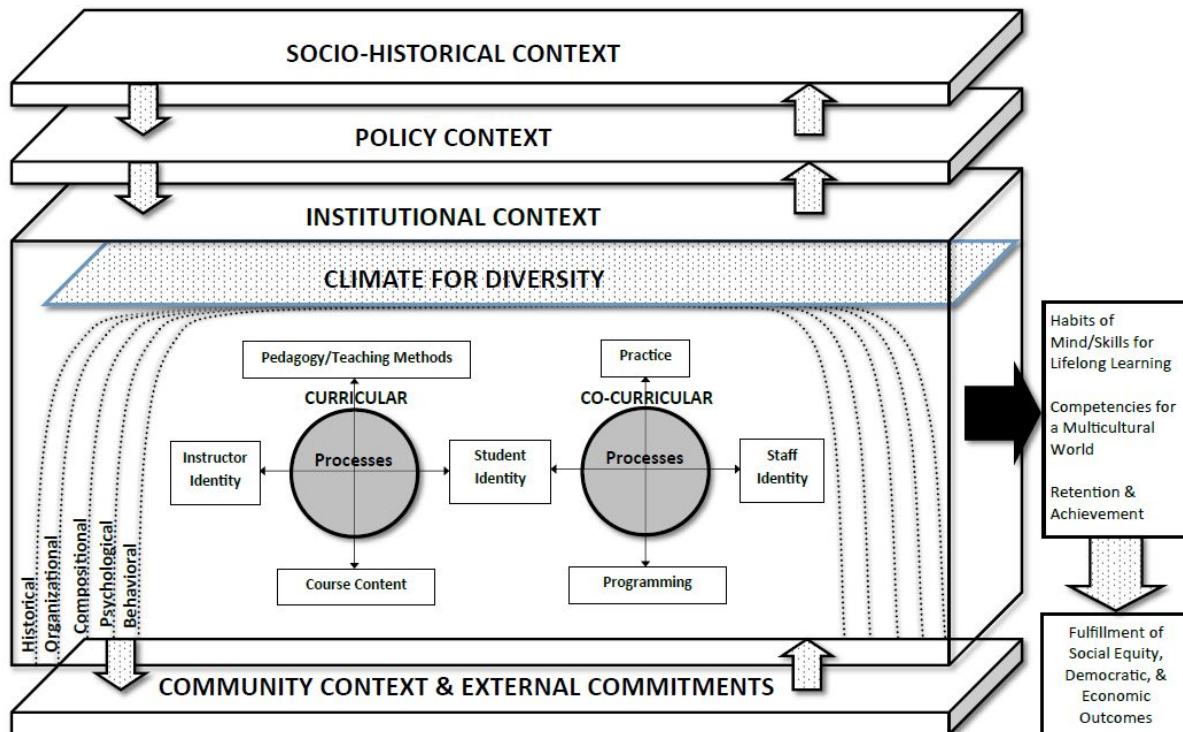
Hurtado et al. (1998, 1999) expanded on Peterson and Spencer (1990) by utilizing prior research about the experiences of racial and ethnic minority students throughout the previous two

decades, and thereby developed a more robust model for understanding campus climate as it relates to racial and ethnic identity in diverse learning environments. These pieces by Hurtado et al. (1998, 1999) became two of the most frequently cited pieces of academic literature on campus climate in higher education, and they inspired another decade of research, response, and revision to the original model. Hurtado et al. (2012) synthesized the intervening research and conceptual responses to revise the original model for diverse learning environments (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999) to introduce the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE).

As seen in Figure 1 below, the MMDLE more explicitly articulated the external contexts which impact (and can be impacted by) institutional context. It also posited five dimensions of campus climate for diversity—historical, organizational, compositional, psychological, and behavioral—that shape the institutional context and all actors (students, staff, and faculty) within it. These dimensions have been concurrently shaped by the external contexts and individuals within the institution. All five of these dimensions have been crucial to understanding how climate has been experienced at both the institutional and individual levels within each IHE (Hurtado et al., 2012; Milem et al., 2004; Milem, et al., 2005; Peterson & Spencer, 1990).

Figure 1

Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments



Note. Adapted by permission from Springer Nature: Springer “A Model for Diverse Learning Environments: The Scholarship on Creating and Assessing Conditions for Student Success” by S. Hurtado, C. L. Alvarez, C. Guillermo-Wann, M. Cuellar, L. & Arellano, (2012) in J. C. Smart & M. B. Paulsen (Eds.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 27, pp. 41-122). https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-2950-6_2. See Appendix A for copyright permission.

Institution-Level Dimensions

Three of the five dimensions in the MMDLE focused on critical areas that influence campus climate for diversity on a systemic level.

Compositional

The compositional dimension, originally deemed the structural dimension, referred to the number of students, faculty, and staff who hold diverse identities (Hurtado et al., 1999; Milem et

al., 2004). It has been an important early step in creating a positive campus climate for diversity (Hurtado et al., 2008). Early research in higher education indicated that a critical mass of a minoritized group (measured absolutely rather than proportionally to campus demographics) was necessary to sustain campus protests to instigate institutional change (Astin & Bayer, 1971). Significant research over the last two decades suggested that increases in underrepresented group populations have positive effects on the campus learning environment and various learning outcomes (Bowman, 2010, 2011; Denson, 2009; Engberg, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2001). Additionally, student satisfaction and ethnic identity development have been positively correlated with greater compositional diversity (Hinrichs, 2011; Park, 2009). It may also be the case that lower compositional diversity resulted in more instances of discrimination or stereotyping for underrepresented students (Hurtado et al., 2015). Thompson and Sekaquaptewa (2002) synthesized previous research to extend the subtle negative impacts of underrepresentation for Black faculty and staff who identify as African American or as women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). More recent research confirmed this perspective for Black staff and administrators by describing the ways that counterspaces can mitigate some of these effects (West, 2017).

Despite the significant positive effects of compositional diversity, researchers have shown that increased numerical representation is not sufficient by itself to ensure equitable experiences and outcomes (Denson & Chang, 2009; Milem et al., 2005). Institutions must examine disaggregated measures of success through an equity scorecard or other campus assessment to determine how other dimensions of campus climate for diversity impact student

outcomes (Bensimon, 2004; Harris III, & Bensimon, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2008; Museus et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2005).

Historical

The historical dimension of the MMDLE referred to the institutional legacy of previous exclusion of certain groups from admission or full participation in campus life (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999). To best understand the vestiges of historical influence, researchers have had to deeply examine current policies, practices, norms, and traditions as well as the historical shifts in each of these areas (Hurtado et al., 2008). Qualitative methodologies have been often most appropriate to assess this dimension because it requires an in-depth look at context, documents, and institutional artifacts (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). For example, a study that examined the experiences of Black graduate student alumni from integration in 1962 through 2003 demonstrated that while certain aspects of climate may improve, historical legacies of exclusion and marginalization continue to manifest in higher education (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). The historical dimension has been rarely assessed or addressed through intentional institutional change even while many campuses attempt to increase their compositional diversity through recruitment efforts (Hurtado et al., 2012). In a critical race meta-analysis of seven prominent higher education journals and published articles on student outcomes for students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), Harper (2012) concluded that historical exclusion at institutions is important but should always be considered in the context of the larger sociopolitical context of the United States.

Organizational

The original MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 1999) identified only four dimensions of campus climate for diversity. Milem et al. (2005) added the fifth dimension, organizational, to comprehensively describe “the organizational and structure aspects of colleges and the ways in which benefits for some groups become embedded into these organizational and structural process” (p. 18). These campus structures and processes may be linked to the historical dimension, but the organizational dimension specifically has referred to the contemporary daily functions of IHEs through elements such as curriculum, resource allocation, admissions, hiring and promotion/tenure decisions, and general decision-making policies and habits. Hurtado et al. (2012) synthesized existing research and theory on the organizational dimension into the following three categories.

Context for Policy and Practice. The organizational dimension of climate has been heavily influenced by the external contexts of each institution (Rankin & Reason, 2008). For example, in a recent qualitative study interviewing 25 Black students at PWIs from across the country, participants consistently noted that the larger national context regarding race directly influenced their experience on campus and appeared to influence the organizational dimension through actions like increased campus security presence at Black-sponsored events (George Mwangi et al., 2018). In another recent study of Black male students at a PWI in a county with a very small Black population, study participants noted that the lack of a local community context exacerbated perceptions of issues with the campus climate (Allen, 2018).

Important Policies and Practices. Another aspect of the organizational dimension was institutional policy, which has demonstrated the degree to which an IHE is committed to support

for diverse populations (Hurtado et al., 2012). High levels of institutional commitment have been characterized by articulation of commitment in mission (Clayton-Pedersen et al., 2007), response or lack thereof to climate issues (Yosso et al., 2009), and other explicit programs and services (Rankin & Reason, 2008).

Research also indicated that diversity embedded in the curriculum is a critical aspect of the organizational dimension (Milem et al., 2005). One attribute of highly effective educational experiences, or “high-impact practices” as they are commonly known, has been experience with diversity, though minoritized students are less likely to have the opportunity to participate in such activities (Kuh et al., 2017). Diversity education in the curriculum has been linked to positive outcomes such as reduced prejudice (Engberg et al., 2007), increased empathy (Chang, 2002), and improved moral development (Parker III et al., 2016). Broadening the curriculum also has legitimized different types of knowledge such as those within communities of color (Solorzano et al., 2000).

In a multi-campus qualitative study of racial climate, Harper and Hurtado (2007) interviewed a broad range of students of color in focus groups and identified nine themes across the campus experiences. One theme was the pervasiveness of dominant norms and cultures and the negative impact this had on perception of climate. Similarly, Gusa (2010) described the concept of White institutional presence (WIP) and how dominant White norms have been recreated, embedded, and obscured through various organizational and social processes. Hurtado et al. (2012) noted that considering the “pervasiveness of any privileged [dominant] cultural norm” (p. 62) has been absolutely necessary when studying the organizational dimension of

campus climate for diversity to understand if the goals of equity and inclusion have been achieved.

Organizational Processes to Improve Climate for Diversity. Finally, the organizational dimension included any efforts to improve the campus climate for diversity. These processes have been seated within the organizational dimension because they largely influenced individuals within an IHE closely involved with change efforts and related planning or assessment (Hurtado et al., 2012). To effectively improve campus climate, these processes have only succeeded if diversity work on campus is undertaken broadly from design to implementation (Clayton-Pedersen et al., 2007) and has included as many constituents as possible for both buy-in and understanding (Williams et al., 2005).

Individual-Level Dimensions

The remaining two dimensions of campus climate for diversity in the MMDLE—behavioral and psychological—functioned at the individual level.

Behavioral

The behavioral dimension of campus climate referred to all aspects of interactions between individuals across different identity groups including “the context, frequency, and quality of interactions on campus” (Hurtado et al, 2012, p. 66). This dimension is closely related to what Peterson and Spencer (1990) originally termed “objective climate” (p. 12). It has also been helpful to distinguish between formal and informal interactions between identity group members. Informal interactions are those that occur outside of intentional, educationally purposeful curricular and co-curricular activities in the course of everyday activities (Hurtado et al., 2012). In a synthesis of literature related to climate assessment tools used on and across

various campuses, Hurtado et al. (2008) noted that many campus-level assessments attempt to improve intergroup relations by focusing on the frequency and quality (i.e., positive or negative) of informal interactions between identity group members. Formal interactions, on the other hand, occur in the context of curricular or co-curricular settings and are facilitated in some way by the campus (e.g., Parker III et al., 2016). Formal interactions often have been assessed to gauge the educational benefits of diversity (Hurtado et al., 2008), such as increased empathy (Chang, 2002) and improved moral development (Parker III et al., 2016).

Research has shown that while formal interactions can have a positive impact, informal interactions may have a greater impact on student development. Bowman (2010, 2011) conducted two distinct meta-analyses and concluded that informal interactions often had greater impact on cognitive development and civic engagement for students. Denson and Chang (2009) examined aggregate longitudinal data from nearly 20,000 student responses to the CIRP Freshman and College Senior surveys to demonstrate that merely being on a campus with higher levels of informal interactions, even if the student did not personally engage in such interactions as frequently as others, still resulted in developmental gains. They also noted, however, that it has been important to acknowledge the disparate gains and experiences of students across demographic groups, especially differences between dominant and minoritized groups. Johnson et al. (2014) demonstrated this disparity in interactional experiences between students of color and White students, and its impact on perception of campus climate and intent to return to the IHE. Hurtado et al. (2012) noted that it is common for studies to measure both intergroup interactions and perceptions of these interactions because it has often been difficult to separate

perception and reality in self-reported studies. Perception, however, has been related to the other individual dimensions of the MMDLE—the psychological dimension.

Psychological

The psychological dimension of campus climate encompassed individuals' perceptions of discrimination or conflict, group interactions across difference, and the general campus environment at an IHE (Hurtado et al., 1999). Peterson and Spencer (1990) referred to this dimension as the “perceived climate” (p. 12). Much of the campus climate for diversity research has focused on the psychological dimension (Hurtado et al., 2008). As illustrated above in the discussion of campus climate for diversity, research has consistently shown that students from minoritized identities perceived their IHE environment in different, and often more negative, ways than their dominant peers (e.g., Allen, 2018; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Langhout et al., 2007; Stebleton et al., 2014).

External Contexts

This study was largely focused on the five institutional dimensions of the MMDLE; nevertheless, the external contexts have been critical in understanding the influence exerted by and on individuals and institutions by additional contexts. Hurtado et al. (2012) relied on adaptations of Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological structure of educational environments, especially Renn's (2003) adaptation of this structure for college student identity development, to explain the dynamic relationship between both institutions and individuals with the external contexts at the exosystem and macrosystem levels.

Community Context and External Commitments

Hurtado et al. (2012) categorized community context and external commitments as a part of Bronfenbrenner's (1976) exosystem, the non-primary settings that do not include the individual or institution but nonetheless exert influence on them (Perron, 2017). For example, local communities where students were connected outside of an IHE (e.g., religious or cultural communities) may have indirectly affected the campus and been shaped by it even if there was not a direct relationship between them (Hurtado et al., 2012). The local context where an IHE was situated and its relationship with that institution may have similarly influenced student experience. Allen's (2018) study of Black male student experience at a PWI with a less than two percent Black population noted that the surrounding city and county demographics exacerbated feelings of isolation or targeting. In other words, the relationship between the surrounding community and the campus exerted negative influence on student experience even though this was not a relationship in which study participants were directly engaged. Hurtado et al. (2012) pointed out that this has been an area of the model that is underdeveloped in literature despite commonsense connections and influences between these local contexts and campus climate for diversity.

Sociohistorical Context

The sociohistorical context was situated at the macrolevel system (Bronfenbrenner, 1976), which included the interactions of all lower-level systems, often manifested in laws, values, and norms of a culture in a particular place and time (Museus, 2016; Perron, 2017). Hurtado et al. (2012) stated that few studies have directly linked sociohistorical forces with institutional change, but that there have been longitudinal studies that demonstrate change over

time that can be linked to particular windows of time (e.g., Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Two recent studies of Black student experience also pointed to particular sociohistorical forces influencing the perceptions and behaviors of Black students at PWIs (Allen, 2018; George Mwangi et al., 2018). In short, even with limited direct research on this external context, it has been apparent that the current sociohistorical context must be considered when creating strategies for improving campus climate for diversity at a particular IHE.

Policy Context

The policy context, part of the macrolevel system (Bronfenbrenner, 1976), was the last of the external contexts; it was located below the sociohistorical context and above the institutional context. The policy context of the MMDLE included federal, state, and local educational policies that have shaped IHEs and thus student access, experience, and outcomes. Hurtado et al. (2012) noted that research on the impact of policy development on postsecondary outcomes was relatively new and underdeveloped. From the history and development of accreditation and the impact of increased federal oversight and accountability described previously in this chapter, it was clear that the accreditation process has been situated in this aspect of the MMDLE. Examining how accreditation has impacted the institutional context and specifically the five dimensions of campus climate for diversity provided a rich opportunity for understanding methods to systemically influence positive change related to campus climate for diversity.

Accreditation and Campus Climate for Diversity

There was essentially no research on institutional accreditation's impact on campus climate for diversity. Ezeamii (1997) explored attitudes of 160 chief academic officers regarding whether regional accreditation should consider academic interests of minority students and the

variables that may contribute to differences in responses. Disparate impacts of campus climate for diversity and persistent gaps in postsecondary access, experience, and success over the last 20 years described in this chapter seemed to make this point moot, but Gaston (2014) still questioned whether minoritized student experience was even an appropriate thing for accreditation to consider in its process. Healey (2016) explored the question of whether regional accrediting agencies have done enough to advance diversity, but there was no research to support these assertions.

The research on regional accreditation's impact on institutional change more broadly has also been quite limited. Two relatively recent doctoral dissertations explored research questions related to this topic, but both had limited generalizability because their research was conducted in a single region and the dissertations were not peer-reviewed (Boozang, 2016; Jones, 2013). Even if these research results were significant, the results were mixed. Boozang (2016) concluded that regional accreditation absolutely impacted campus leadership decisions, while Jones (2013) found that the impact was mitigated by the manner an institution chose to approach the accreditation process. A recent study of Argentinian higher education showed that university-wide response to accreditation expectations resulted in *over-compliance* with expectations rather than anticipated resistance (Salto, 2018). The author argued that the Argentinian model was quite similar to U.S. higher education, but the location of the study was an obvious limitation to generalization to IHEs in the WSCUC region or other U.S. regional accreditation areas.

It has been more common that the success of the regional accreditation process, or more generally institutional accreditation, was based on larger changes in institutional assessment (Bok, 2017; Studley, 2018) or on the lack of apparent accountability as measured by schools

with dismally low graduation rates (Gaston, 2014; Kelchen, 2018). These proxy measures have not illustrated anything in particular regarding accreditation’s impact on institutional decision-making or change.

MMDLE and WSCUC

It was necessary to use the MMDLE as an analytical lens to map WSCUC expectations onto a model of campus climate for diversity due to the literature gap on regional accreditation’s impact on institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity. The nine guiding questions under five headings in the WSCUC EIP address specific elements of the five dimensions of campus climate for diversity. Table 1 illustrates the relationship between these headings and the five dimensions of the MMDLE.

Table 1

Intersection of MMDLE and WSCUC EIP Themes

MMDLE	WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy Themes				
Institutional	Institutional Commitment	Access/ Inclusion	Support/ Success	Campus Climate	Educational Objectives
Historical		X			
Organizational	X	X		X	X
Compositional	X	X			X
Individual					
Psychological			X	X	X
Behavioral			X	X	

Conclusion

Nearly three decades of research on campus climate for diversity have described its characteristics (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999, 2012; Milem et al., 2005) and have illustrated its

profound effect on student success for minoritized groups (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Museus, 2014). Prior to and during this time period, the landscape for higher education changed and the institutional accreditation process has become more important than ever (Bok, 2017; Eaton, 2012). However, there has been a glaring dearth of research on regional accreditation's impact on institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity. It was therefore useful to better understand how key campus leaders perceived and understood the relationship between accreditation and campus climate for diversity. The most effective way to start exploring these ideas was through rich description of the current state of affairs via a qualitative study given the MMDLE's complicated framework. The next chapter further explains the relationship between the research questions and the methodology for this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The landscape of higher education has shifted dramatically over the last 50 years. Many institutions of higher education (IHEs) have actively recruited minoritized students with diverse identity markers, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability. Shifts in federal oversight, accountability, and growing public skepticism of the value of higher education has applied increased pressure on IHEs to demonstrate institutional ability to support rapidly diversifying student bodies (Kelchen, 2018). These demographic shifts have provided educational benefits to all students (Denson & Chang, 2009). Two decades of growing research has illustrated the educational benefits of diversity in higher education, both during and after postsecondary education (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Problem and Purpose

Despite progress made thus far, student access, experience, and graduation rates for many minoritized populations still have lagged behind their dominant peer groups (Bok, 2017; Hurtado et al., 2012; NCES, 2019). Direct intervention and support programs have shown some efficacy in improving student outcomes (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2013), but such programmatic efforts have not addressed the full scope of inequity in higher education. Some researchers have argued that approaching these issues through subpopulations has perpetuated a student deficiency mindset and has failed to address systemic issues at individual institutions and across higher education more generally (e.g., Harper, 2012). IHEs have an obligation to examine what systemic issues impact minoritized populations. Many researchers have pointed to different aspects of campus

climate for diversity as being critical for maximizing success for *all* students (Hurtado et al., 2008; Milem et al., 2005). Researchers also have illustrated that campus climate for diversity must be understood through both internal elements and external contexts which mutually influence the overall climate for students, staff, and faculty (Hurtado et al., 2012). Positively changing campus climate for diversity has required significant institutional commitment, which has been difficult to secure due to the relatively static organizational nature of IHEs both within and across different campuses (Bok, 2017).

Accreditation processes (regional, national, professional, etc.) have been uniquely positioned to serve as a catalyst for change as the only external influence concerned with improving student learning (Bok, 2017). One of the regional accrediting bodies, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), recently revised the guidance it provided IHEs regarding equity and inclusion efforts (WSCUC, 2017a). High-level administrators who oversee each campus accreditation cycle of preparation and self-reports have unique access and insight into the impact of the regional accreditation review process on organizational change. Therefore, understanding these administrators' perceptions of the accreditation process and its impact on institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity, provided valuable insight into institutional accreditation as a possible lever for systemic change in higher education.

Research Questions

To understand the possible relationship between institutional accreditation, change, and campus climate for diversity, the research questions for this study were:

1. What are the perceptions and beliefs of accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on institutional change?
2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on campus climate for diversity?

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were eight ALOs from the WSCUC region from a variety of institutional types and levels of experience as described in Table 2 below. The chief executive officer (CEO) at each IHE appoints an ALO to work with WSCUC. Often, ALOs are high-ranking administrators; while not required, the WSCUC has encouraged campuses to select an individual who reports directly to the CEO (WSCUC, 2018b). Each ALO must have the requisite skills, knowledge, institutional access, and influence to effectively lead all accreditation activities. In short, ALOs should have a deep understanding of their campus and the role that accreditation plays in institutional change.

Table 2*List of Study Participants*

Name	IHE Type	Gender	Years of Accreditation Experience	Years as ALO at current IHE
Russell	Public	Male	9	8
Grace	Public	Female	9	9
Jaina	Private	Female	14	5
Phil	Public	Male	12	3
Andre	Private	Male	22	5
Ciara	Private	Female	6	1
Beth	Public	Female	11	7
Rachel	Public	Female	6	6

The names above in Table 2 are pseudonyms. All study participants were offered and accepted confidentiality. Overall, the group of participants was quite familiar with the WSCUC accreditation process. In total, they had more than 100 years of accreditation experience, and at least six of the participants had served as a site team reviewer for WSCUC during another IHE’s accreditation process. The group represented a wide range of academic disciplines and past professional experience. One participant was cited for their research in this study, though they were not informed of this connection during the interview to avoid any bias.

Procedures

Data sources for the study were semi-structured interviews of ALOs and a concurrent review of one or two key accreditation documents. The first document was the WSCUC campus visit site team report, which IHEs must post to the institutional website in a prominent location as a condition of the WSCUC accreditation process. WSCUC also has posted the report and

accreditation decision letter on their own website (WSCUC, 2018a). The second document was the Institutional Report, which is a summary of an IHEs self-study, and public report posting has not been required (WSCUC, 2018a).

Recruitment

At the time of this research, there were 209 IHEs that were either accredited or candidates for accreditation in the WSCUC region (WSCUC, n.d.). However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Equity and Inclusion Policy (EIP) for WSCUC underwent major revisions in 2013 and a title change in 2017 (WSCUC, 2017a, 2017b). To gauge the impact of the current policy, I focused exclusively on schools that have been through the accreditation process since the changes were announced in 2013. Additionally, I omitted schools outside of the United States because the cultural and sociohistorical differences related to diversity and inclusion were likely to impact the way ALOs perceived and understood the EIP. Placing these limitations on possible participants provided more recent accurate interview and document data to best answer the research questions for this study through purposive sampling, a common characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

I have not regularly interacted with the formal accreditation process in my role as a student affairs administrator, but I have had strong professional relationships with colleagues at WSCUC institutions who either work directly with accreditation or could facilitate introductions with regional ALOs. After limiting the sample by the parameters listed above, I accessed my professional network to recruit ALOs who were willing to participate in the interview process. This recruitment method yielded three initial contacts. To help expedite the study, I also selected an additional eight eligible IHEs that were a mix of public, private, and geographically distinct

institutions around the WSCUC region. I contacted this initial list of 11 ALOs individually via an introductory e-mail with context on the study (Appendix B) and explained that participation would be voluntary and data would be kept confidential in reporting findings. For those ALOs that did not respond within two weeks of my initial request, I sent two additional follow-up e-mails as needed. After an ALO agreed to participate, I sent a confirmation e-mail (Appendix C) with a copy of the WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy (EIP; Appendix D), the Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent form (Appendix E), and the LMU Experimental Subjects' Bill of Rights (Appendix F).

Five of the original 11 ALOs that I contacted agreed to participate, including two of the three identified from my professional network. Four other ALOs declined to participate, and two ALOs did not respond to my initial request or follow-up e-mails. After interviewing the first four study participants, I asked for suggestions or introductions to other ALOs who they believed might be willing to participate in the study in an attempt to reach an adequate number of interview participants through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2014). While I received four additional suggestions, only one of the recommendations was eligible based on the timing of their IHE's last WSCUC accreditation visit. This ALO, Beth, agreed to participate in the study. To bring the total number of interviews up to eight, I also contacted an additional three eligible IHEs, two of whom agreed to participate in the study.

Interviews

Interviews lasted for 35 to 80 minutes with each participant and were conducted via GoToMeeting (www.gotomeeting.com) video chat, audio chat, or via phone. Interview audio for seven of the eight interviews was recorded and transcribed via the automatic transcription tools in

GoToMeeting or Otter (www.otter.ai) for data analysis. During Beth's interview, I failed to start the recording mechanism in GoToMeeting, and I did not realize this mistake until about 35 minutes into the interview. Rather than disrupt the interview, I finished the interview while focusing on taking more comprehensive notes. Thus, in all, I utilized seven transcribed interviews, as well as more detailed notes from the eighth interview.

Document Review

To provide additional institutional context for the semi-structured interviews, I also reviewed important accreditation reports. The first report was the WSCUC visiting team report which must be posted on an institution's website and was also available on the WSCUC website for each institution (WSCUC, 2018a). The second report was the Institutional Report, a 65- to 100-page summary of an institution's self-study efforts leading up to and during the accreditation review process (WSCUC, 2018a). Sometimes, these reports were posted publicly, and each report was shared with the WSCUC campus visit team about six months prior to the scheduled site visit. For the five ALOs at public IHEs, I accessed a digital copy of their most recent Institutional Report on their IHE's website. For the three ALOs at private IHEs, I asked for a copy of their most recent Institutional Report, but all declined to share this information citing campus confidentiality and privacy concerns.

Participant Protections

All interview data was kept confidential. During each interview, I asked each participant for a preferred pseudonym, and if they did not provide one, I selected one for them. Participants were reminded at the beginning and the end of the interview that they have the right to remove consent for participation at any point during the study, including after the interview is concluded.

Participants were offered and accepted confidentiality via e-mail, the signed IRB informed consent form (Appendix E), and verbally at the start of the interview. During the interviews, multiple ALOs sought reassurance of the confidentiality of the interview material. Some participants expressed hesitation about speaking too candidly about their experiences both with their IHE and with WSCUC. Due to these concerns, I have provided limited details about each individual participant to ensure their protection.

To protect the raw data, original interview recordings, scanned copies of handwritten notes from each interview, immediate impression notes from after each interview, interview transcription text, Institutional Report documents, and campus team visit reports were stored in different secure locations for data backup purposes and redundancy. All audio recordings were downloaded from GoToMeeting or Otter and then saved to a private, cloud-based folder and a personal home computer, both of which were password-protected. Next, interview transcriptions and related accreditation documents were uploaded to Dedoose (Dedoose Version 8.0.35, 2020) for data analysis; this web-based program is managed securely through a password-protected account and built-in layers of data protection which the software provider asserted offers the highest standards of security. All electronic copies of this data were stored locally on a personal home computer, and one digital backup was stored in a private folder on a cloud-based storage software. To maintain data security, all data from the study will be kept for three years after the publication of this dissertation, and then data will be discarded appropriately. All hard copy data has been scanned, stored as noted, and then shredded through a professional shredding company. All electronic data will be permanently deleted from both the personal computer and cloud-based storage.

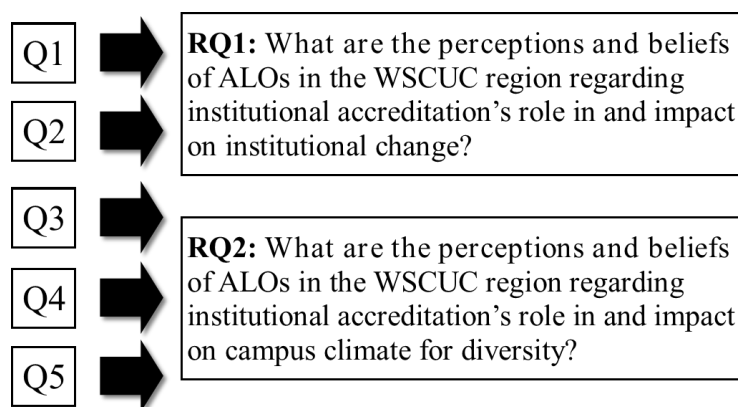
Measures/Instruments

Interviews

Each interview was semi-structured to provide flexibility in adapting to study participant knowledge and interest (Kvale, 2007). The interview protocol consisted of a few demographic questions followed by five broad content questions with guiding topic areas to extend conversations and encourage participant sharing (see Appendix G). The first two interview questions were intended to answer the first research question for this study. Thus, these two questions focused on preparing for accreditation review, the campus site team visit feedback, and how these two processes impacted institutional change generally. The remaining three questions were designed to answer the second research question for this study. Question three addressed the ALO's familiarity with the specific criteria for review (CfR) related to the WSCUC EIP. Questions four and five more directly addressed how the institutional accreditation process was related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. See Figure 2 below for a visual representation of the interview protocol (see Appendix G) mapping onto the research questions.

Figure 2

Interview Protocol Connection to Research Questions



Document Review

Prior to each interview, I briefly read the available historical accreditation documents on the WSCUC and applicable IHE websites to familiarize myself with campus trends and possible follow-up topics within the interview. This preparation proved invaluable as I was able to illustrate my interest in each ALO's professional context and probe further in topics if my original question failed to elicit a rich response. It also engendered confidence in my ability as a researcher as multiple interview participants commented on my level of preparedness.

After analyzing the interview transcription data, I reviewed both the WSCUC visiting team report, a summary report of major findings by the site team upon their multi-day visit, and the Institutional Report, a self-study of the years leading up to the current accreditation process, when it was available. Examining both of these reports was critical to triangulate the interview data (Gay et al., 2012). Each report provided important contextual data to the interviews through either supporting or contrasting data points. Gaps in each report were also relevant to note because of the inconsistency of focus between the ALO's perspective and what was reported to and reviewed by WSCUC representatives. Among interview transcriptions, Institutional Reports, and WSCUC site team reports, I reviewed and coded approximately 1,300 double-spaced pages of data.

Trustworthiness

While qualitative research has been largely accepted as an important and useful form of inquiry, research must have adequate checks in place to ensure trustworthiness (Gay et al., 2012). Trustworthiness demands that researchers consider the credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability of a study (Shenton, 2004). Credibility refers to a researcher's ability to

describe and process the complexity inherent in a qualitative study (Gay et al., 2012). To better establish credibility, the document review provided at least one additional data source to triangulate the interview content with a previously published document. Additionally, even in cases where the Institutional Report was not provided, it was apparent through the WSCUC visiting team reports that site team participants drew heavily, and sometimes nearly verbatim, from the Institutional Report.

Triangulation is also important to confirmability—the efforts to safeguard against researcher bias, especially in qualitative research because the researcher serves as the interpretative instrument (Gay et al., 2012). My description of researcher positionality in Chapter 1 also contributed to the confirmability of the research project because reflexivity is critical for quality control in qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Kvale, 2007; Mann, 2016).

Qualitative research, and naturalistic inquiry more generally, seeks understanding of phenomena in context; thus, its generalizability to other contexts will always be limited. As an aspect of trustworthiness, transferability refers to the contextual richness in the research description which allows other researchers to consider how similar their own research context may be (Shenton, 2004). To bolster transferability, I noted the institutional contexts for each participant and non-identifying IHE characteristics when relevant to the context of the analysis. I also described the particular region, the WSCUC, in which this research takes place.

Dependability in qualitative research requires careful description of all study processes to allow future researchers to repeat the work even though research results are usually context-dependent (Shenton, 2004). To contribute to the dependability of the study, I piloted the first version of the interview protocol with the ALO at the IHE where I currently work to test if the

questions elicited content relevant to the research questions and content rich enough to analyze (Gay et al., 2012). While this eliminated my current professional location as a potential participant site, some have argued that it can be challenging or even problematic to do “backyard” research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The pilot interview confirmed that the interview protocol elicited rich information regarding ALO perceptions of the WSCUC accreditation process.

From the pilot interview, I also received feedback that certain terminology related to diversity, equity, and inclusion might be unfamiliar to some ALOs because of their relative distance from work related to campus climate for diversity. I added more follow-up question notes on the first two interview questions to better unpack campus mechanisms for institutional change during my research interviews. This change helped to compare and contrast the perceived role of accreditation in relation to other common practices like multi-year strategic planning. Finally, the pilot interview enhanced my professional relationship with a regional ALO who facilitated an introduction to one of the research participants.

Analytical Plan

As with all qualitative research, the researcher served as the interpretative instrument for evaluating the interview and document data (Creswell, 2014). However, data analysis was grounded in this study’s theoretical framework, the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE), to improve credibility and confirmability of the analytical process. Described in Chapter 2, the MMDLE integrates two decades of ongoing research to model how campus climate for diversity works within a campus and reciprocally with external contexts to produce key learning outcomes applicable to all IHEs (Hurtado et al., 2012).

In addition to taking handwritten notes during each interview, I also spent 10-15 minutes writing my initial impressions within one hour of completing each interview. These informal immediate reflections were valuable for identifying early trends in interview data and gave me the opportunity to consider additional follow-up question topics for future interviews (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were completed over the course of ten weeks during the fall of 2019. At the conclusion, I reviewed and corrected the interview transcriptions manually relying on recordings of the interviews. While both GoToMeeting and Otter offered auto-transcription services, they were imperfect and required, at times, significant revision to accurately reflect each interview. Revising, reformatting, and reviewing interviews served as a pre-analytical process where I started to notice emergent patterns within and across interviews (Mann, 2016). After completing these transcriptions, I developed an initial list of codes using both deductive and inductive themes with a focus on analysis for meaning rather than linguistic analysis (Kvale, 2007). Deductive themes included the main topics listed in the EIP (see Table 1 in Chapter 2) and key aspects of the MMDLE, especially the five dimensions of campus climate for diversity and external contexts. Other inductive themes emerged through the interview transcription pre-analysis and during the first phase of coding (Gay et al., 2012). Table 3 summarizes the codes used for analysis.

Table 3*Summary of Codes for Analysis*

General Codes	Research Question 1 Codes
ALO influence	Causes of change
Commendation	Continuous improvement
Recommendation	Perception
Site team	Preparing
	Quality assurance
	Responding
Research Question 2 Codes	Theoretical Framework Codes
CfR 1.4	MMDLE
CfR 2.2a	Behavioral
CfR 3.1	Compositional
EIP	External contexts
Access/inclusion	Community context
Campus climate	Institutional context
Educational objectives	Policy context
Institutional commitment	Sociohistorical context
Support/success	Historical
Familiarity with EIP	Organizational
	Psychological

All coding was done using Dedoose, a web-based research analysis program that has been well-vetted in academic research and writing for data security and coding. Each interview transcript, site team report, and available institutional reports were uploaded to Dedoose. Passages in any document can be tagged with a code by highlighting the relevant text, right-

clicking, and selecting the code from the options input by the researcher. Multiple codes were sometimes applied to the same statement or section.

To focus on effectively answering each research question, I initially coded only the first two interview questions up to the point where I pivoted in each conversation to talk more explicitly about the EIP in the latest accreditation process for the IHE where the ALO currently worked. I applied the general codes and first research question codes from Table 3 in this first phase of analysis.

Next, to answer research question two, I coded each interview transcript in full, paying particular attention to themes related to campus climate for diversity using the codes for research question two and the theoretical framework. The general and research question one codes were also applied during this analytical phase. After coding the interview transcripts, I coded the site team reports and available institutional reports for each IHE for all themes.

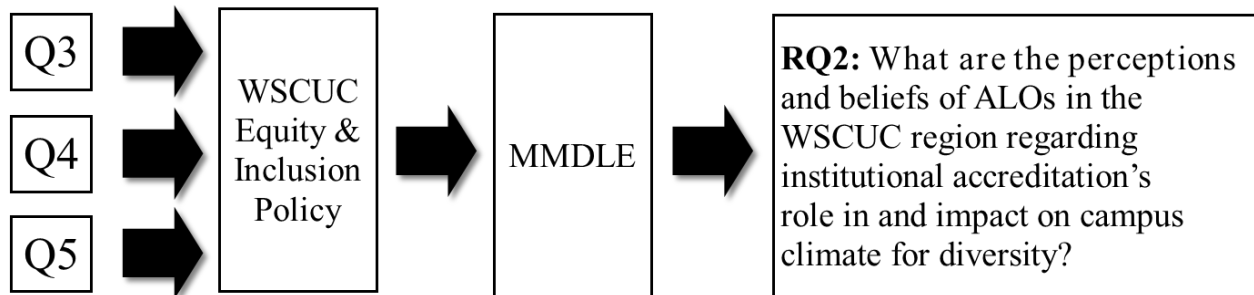
Lastly, using a coding frequency report available from Dedoose, I cross-checked coding frequency and points of emphasis between the interview transcript and the campus document(s) that were accessible. Documents were analyzed for consistency as well discrepancies or omissions. Finally, summative themes were noted and compared for any conflicting data. These findings are presented in detail in Chapter 4.

While Dedoose has many different tools to help qualitative researchers analyze coding frequency or thematic overlap, I opted to do most of this cross-analysis manually. Dedoose was largely used only to house the research data sources with organized coding that was easily accessible through the online tagging process.

Each ALO interview and the campus documents reflected the five topics in the EIP more frequently than the MMDLE, in part because I used the language in the EIP to probe during the interview process. It was necessary to directly map EIP elements onto the theoretical framework to answer the second research question for this study even though elements of the MMDLE were included as deductive themes. Therefore, the last three questions of the interview protocol and related content in the campus documents were analyzed relying on Table 1 (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed explanation) to map interview and document data onto the EIP and then onto the five dimensions of the MMDLE. This is illustrated in Figure 3, a modification of part of Figure 2 to illustrate this analytical mapping process.

Figure 3

Analytical Mapping Process for Second Research Question



Mapping the data onto the MMDLE allowed this study to accurately describe the intended, possible, or actual relationship with campus climate for diversity in Chapter 4, a core goal of this research project.

Limitations

As with any study, there were some limitations. First, this study was limited in its generalizability. It was necessary to winnow the possible participant pool through purposive

selection related to only IHEs where WSCUC accreditation was complete after the 2013 revisions to the EIP because the policy was significantly revised at that point. Additionally, recruitment through convenience and snowball methods may have led to interviews with only like-minded ALOs who felt comfortable engaging in conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Examining only WSCUC schools in the context of regional accreditation criteria regarding equity and inclusion may also have limited applicability of the results of this study to other regional accreditation processes—other regional policies differed in their directive or explicit standards for campus efforts in this area. All of these recruitment parameters limited the generalizability of the results.

The generalizability and ongoing applicability of this study were also limited by the WSCUC accreditation process. In 2020, the WSCUC began to offer an alternative track for IHEs at low-risk for failing to meet reaffirmation standards, the Thematic Pathway for Reaffirmation, which may not apply the expectations in the EIP in the way as described in the *2013 Handbook for Reaffirmation* (WSCUC, 2018a, 2020). Next, even within the standard process at the time of this study, the WSCUC framework may have over or underemphasized certain elements of campus climate for diversity even if regional IHEs were addressing other areas of campus climate effectively or exceptionally.

Researcher bias was another possible limitation. I recognized that my different identities (especially dominant identities) may have influenced my analysis of collected data and research. My professional experience likely influenced my interpretation of various statements and claims made by interviewees and in the accreditation documents. I practiced ongoing reflexivity to mitigate these impacts through activities such as data triangulation and the informal analytic

memos to capture my fresh and immediate perceptions after each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Watt, 2007).

Conclusion

With increased student diversity in higher education and lagging success for minoritized students, it has been critical that IHEs engage in understanding campus climate for diversity. There was almost no research on the impact of the institutional accreditation process on organizational change, especially as it related to this critical aspect of student success. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of beliefs of key college leaders to help fill an important gap in understanding how the institutional accreditation process may be a powerful tool for positive systemic change at IHEs in and beyond the WSCUC region. The next chapter describes the findings in the collected data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

Background

Higher education has faced growing external pressure from changes in public perception, federal funding, and greater accountability to meet the needs of increasingly diverse students. These external forces have created an environment where the institutional accreditation process is more influential and important than ever. There has been little research on the relationship, if any, between accreditation and institutional change despite the accreditation process being positioned to serve as a significant catalyst for both quality assurance and continuous improvement in higher education.

The purpose of this study was to better understand whether regional institutional accreditation in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) region may cause institutional change, especially related to campus climate for diversity. The previous chapter described the research design and methodology of this study in detail; briefly, the study employed a qualitative research design with three primary data sources: semi-structured interviews with ALOs, publicly-available WSCUC site team visit letters, and self-study Institutional Reports (where available). The study was designed to answer two research questions:

1. What are the perceptions and beliefs of accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on institutional change?

2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of accreditation liaison officers (ALOs) in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on campus climate for diversity?

This chapter is organized into three main sections. The first summarizes the major themes for each research question that emerged through analysis of interviews, institutional reports, and WSCUC site team letters. The second section details overall trends and patterns that emerged from data collection and analysis related to the first research question on ALO perceptions of accreditation's relationship with institutional change. The third section describes trends and patterns that emerged from data collection and analysis related to the second research question on ALO perceptions of accreditation's relationship with campus climate for diversity. It also illustrates how these trends relate to campus climate for diversity as described in the study's theoretical framework—the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) created by Hurtado et al. (2012).

Overview of Findings

The data for this research project yielded three prevalent themes for each research question. This section is a brief overview of the remainder of Chapter 4; the major themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4*Overview of Themes and Subthemes by Research Question*

Research Question 1: Institutional Change and Accreditation	Research Question 2: Accreditation and Campus Climate for Diversity
Theme 1: Other mechanisms of change	Theme 1: Inconsistency surrounding the WSCUC EIP
<i>Internal causes of institutional change</i>	<i>Familiarity with EIP</i>
<i>External causes of institutional change</i>	<i>Prominence in the accreditation process</i>
	<i>Campus climate vagueness</i>
Theme 2: WSCUC accreditation and institutional change	Theme 2: Pervading ALO skepticism
<i>Preparing for accreditation</i>	
<i>Responding to WSCUC feedback</i>	
Theme 3: Mediating factors	Theme 3: Lack of multicontextual emphasis
<i>Campus perception of accreditation</i>	<i>Frequently addressed internal dimensions and external contexts</i>
<i>Sustaining change</i>	<i>Infrequently addressed internal dimensions and external contexts</i>
<i>ALO influence</i>	
<i>Site team focus</i>	

For the first research question, the first emergent theme was that other mechanisms of change were perceived as more impactful on institutional change than the WSCUC accreditation process. Participants described internal causes such as institutional leadership behaviors and turnover, faculty influence, and strategic planning. ALOs also indicated that there were other

more influential external causes, including government policy and peer comparison. However, during the interviews and through document review, there was clear evidence of real, and sometimes significant, impacts on institutional change from the WSCUC accreditation process—the second prevalent theme. Preparing for the current accreditation review and responding to feedback from both the past and current reaffirmation feedback influenced institutional decisions. The last emergent theme for the first research question was that accreditation's role in and impact on institutional change were mediated by multiple institution- and process-specific factors. These factors included campus perceptions of the value (or lack thereof) that accreditation adds to institutional growth, difficulty in sustaining change, the influence of ALO's personal outlook and professional experience, and dynamics related to WSCUC site team visitors.

For the second research question, the first major theme was significant inconsistency in the knowledge and application of the WSCUC EIP and related terminology. The second theme was that ALOs were skeptical of the WSCUC impact on campus climate for diversity. This attitude was relatively consistent for all participants despite significant differences in ALO familiarity with the EIP or the level of prominence diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues had during the recent reaffirmation cycle. The final theme for the second research question was that only two dimensions and two external contexts of campus climate for diversity, as described in the theoretical framework in this study—the MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 2012)—were emphasized in the interview and document data. These were the compositional and organizational dimensions. The external community context and the sociohistorical contexts

were the only prominent external contexts. The other dimensions and external contexts were not significantly referenced through the interview or document data.

The rest of this chapter elaborates on the prevalent themes summarized in this section. The next section describes the three major themes and supporting evidence related to the first research question.

Research Question 1: Accreditation and Institutional Change

As described in Chapter 3, the first two substantive questions in the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix G) sought to understand ALO's perceptions of the impact of WSCUC accreditation on institutional change. Three significant themes surfaced through the interview process and document analysis. First, ALOs indicated that there were other common influential causes of institutional change that they perceived as more impactful than regional accreditation. The first set of causes were internal to IHEs while the second were external. Next, there were many tangible impacts of the WSCUC accreditation process, both preparing for and responding to it, despite ALOs consistently downplaying its influence during the interview process. Third, regional accreditation's impact on institutional change was mediated by campus perceptions of accreditation, sustaining change between reaffirmation cycles, individual ALO influence, and site team member attitudes. This section details each of these major themes as well as the supporting subthemes.

Theme 1: Other Mechanisms of Change

When asked about the relationship between WSCUC accreditation and institutional change, ALOs were quick to mention other mechanisms of change, both internal and external, that they perceived as more impactful. Russell summarized this common sentiment, saying:

The campus will do some things just in order to check the box for WASC but those are going to be short term. Anything that we expect to be a longer-term change has to have more than just WASC as the reasoning.

ALOs described institutional leadership and strategic planning as influential internal factors. In addition to accreditation, ALOs noted that government policy and peer comparison were critical external forces for institutional change. The remainder of this section summarizes the data for these subthemes.

Internal Causes of Institutional Change

After asking interviewees about the impact of preparing for the WSCUC reaffirmation process, I asked about other mechanisms of institutional change. Themes of institutional leadership and strategic planning emerged from the interviews with limited corroborating evidence from document analysis.

Institutional Leadership. When describing important catalysts for change, nearly every research participant indicated the outsized role that senior-level leadership behavior and turnover has on institutional change. Though less common, multiple ALOs commented on the role of faculty in driving change.

Behavior. Of all the interviewees, Jaina most consistently revisited the idea that change needed a singular person to carry it through at an IHE. She acknowledged the need for shared values and vision, but she repeatedly came back to the idea that effective change required a “champion” to be effective. During our conversation, she said:

Some institutional value that institutional members value is a great rousing point for inspiring action, but it has to be anchored to some kind of inspiring vision for change. So,

inspiring vision in any matter will, no matter what it addresses whether it be about values or external sources of change or grassroots, bottom-up kinds of change, a compelling vision and really organized people. And you always need a champion.

Jaina subsequently indicated that a champion did not necessarily need to be a senior-level leader, but that it was more effective if that individual was a president, provost, or other high-ranking leader on campus. She indirectly confirmed this attitude when she described a recent search for a new president, “And that makes a huge difference in the presidential commitment to diversity . . . it makes an enormous difference in the progress of the way an organization thinks around diversity work.” The president’s attitude and behavior are directly linked to the organization’s behavior, indicating a belief that a campus president’s priorities will have a significant impact on the direction a campus takes.

Late in our interview, as Phil and I discussed how I ended up interested in researching the relationship between accreditation and institutional change, he speculated about how both IHEs and the federal government feel about the current design of the regional accreditation process:

I wonder if the dearth of literature is because neither of the sides lobbying for this particularly want change. Like the government just wants to know, should we continue to pay them? And the institutions just want them to go away. And so, as levers of positive change, there might just not be a lot of appetite for using it that way, unless you get, like we had here, a savvy president and provost to say, “We’re going to use this to our advantage.”

While Phil addressed the role that the WSCUC reaffirmation process may play in institutional change, he ascribed a primary role to leadership behavior. Earlier in our interview, he stated his

belief that the president and provost “were eager to have such a public high-profile opportunity to rebrand that for internal audiences. And that’s why they took it extremely seriously.”

Ciara similarly reflected on the impact of institutional leadership behavior on the accreditation process and campus change more generally. She said, “Assessment is really examining what we’re doing, and how we’re doing it, and how well we’re doing it. And I would say that requires so much humility.” She continued by describing her experience as a WSCUC site team reviewer and how the tone of a team’s visit may look very different based on how campus leadership welcomes the team for the site visit:

I think it comes from the president, because some institutions, the president is like, “I’m so glad you’re here. I recognize these are our issues. I hope you find whatever, you know, we need to work on.” But really, the leadership makes a huge difference. And then, you know, I’ve also had experiences where presidents aren’t as open.

Ciara used this example from her site team visit and noted that the tone a president and other leadership set through their behavior and priorities significantly influenced overall organizational behaviors. Just as leadership might exert a negative influence, she said that senior-level administrators had the power to positively shift organizational behaviors:

I think it’s senior leadership and their leadership, the leadership they embody. In terms of, you know, are they themselves reflective practitioners? Do they embody continuous improvement? Because I think that the discourse, and their narrative around that, makes a big difference.

Many of the ALOs who were interviewed saw senior-level leadership behaviors and attitudes as critical for creating change, including as a major influence on how effective or ineffective the accreditation can be.

Turnover. Other ALOs noted that the departure and replacement of senior-level leadership had a significant impact on institutional change. When asked about possible mechanisms for institutional change, Rachel did not hesitate to answer:

New president, that'll do it. Our previous president was here for 15 and a half years and we certainly weren't stagnant in those years. But when you have consistent leadership, it is very different when there is a shift then to someone from outside the [system], outside the state, first presidency. So, it's all a lot different right now. So that certainly is an impetus for change.

Following the last reaffirmation cycle at Rachel's IHE, the long-time president retired. Rachel described the ways that many relatively static programs and ideas were shaken up with the infusion of new leadership at the top that was hired from outside the IHE. She said that these changes included "an opportunity to revisit things that came out during the WASC visit in ways that we may not have done before." The recommendations of the previous reaffirmation process were the same, but Rachel noted that the new president's arrival infused new energy towards change in response to not only WSCUC, but in a host of other ways.

At Andre's IHE, a new president arrived a couple of years before the most recent WSCUC reaffirmation. Nearly all of the senior-level leadership roles turned over in the same time period. As Andre reflected on the numerous changes before and during the reaffirmation preparation process, he said that "an important catalyst in all of this was leadership transitions.

And so, new leadership comes in, they have different views or ideas about what we're doing, how we should be doing it as an institution." Leadership turnover at Andre's IHE led to major institutional change amidst the campus-wide conversations about self-reflection and preparation of the Institutional Report. The timing was convenient, but he believed that leadership changes would have probably resulted in the same rate of institutional change even without the simultaneous WSCUC process.

In Jaina's case, turnover created a leadership void on certain projects. She noted that, "There's also been enormous other kinds of transitions in different positions . . . that intersected with the work on diversity, of people who were representing different areas of it, [and] have transitioned into different roles or left the institution." All of these changes stalled institutional change because projects were so deeply tied to particular people in specific roles; leadership turnover impacted institutional change by refocusing, shifting, or stalling institutional priorities.

Faculty. A few ALOs also noted that faculty were crucial players in institutional change. Beth described faculty as central in determining nearly every aspect of institutional change. As a relatively new IHE, Beth's campus was heavily dictated by the academic program direction the faculty chose as they developed multi-year hiring plans and priorities. Academic programs also influenced institutional priorities for physical facilities to keep up with the research needs of new faculty and programs.

At another public IHE, Russell described the bulk of work at his IHE as driven by tenured and tenure-track faculty—all of whom are members of the faculty senate:

The work happens in [faculty senate] committees. There are 20 something committees.

There's a couple that are more important than most of the others but most of the work

happens in committee . . . and so when we want to get things done, we work closely with the senate and with the campus academic leadership.

He went on to say that any efforts toward change would likely fail without the support of the faculty senate. In other words, institutional power largely resided in this faculty body rather than senior-level leadership.

The role of faculty in institutional change was not unique to public IHEs. After discussing the tone that senior-level leadership may set through their behaviors and actions, Ciara acknowledged that there are other important leadership factors that serve as mechanisms of change:

When you talk about senior leadership and commitment to organizational change in whatever area, I think they're, some of it is culture, right? Like, institutional culture, structure, governance. Because this institution has a very different governance structure than where I'm coming from. And historically, an interesting relationship between faculty and administration from what I've learned.

Ciara is a relatively new ALO at her institution and often compared her current experience to the IHE where she previously worked. She saw senior-level administration as relatively powerful, but she noted that at her current IHE, certain issues were significantly influenced by faculty attitudes and opinions, especially those relating to core academic policies.

Strategic Planning. Another supporting theme that emerged during the interviews and document analysis was the internal influence that strategic planning has on institutional change. Under the new leadership team at Andre's IHE, institutional strategic planning started just prior to the start of the larger preparation process for the WSCUC Institutional Report. The overall

strategic planning process was nearly concurrent with the reaffirmation process itself. Andre said, “Basically, the long and short is that the planning process ran during the same year that we were in the reaffirmation process.” As such, the strategic plan was reviewed by the WSCUC site team, but it was approved by the governing board before the final site team report from WSCUC. Andre ultimately believed that “the result of the strategic plan, really, the final product was really, I think, there was no real big digression or divergence between the strategic plan and what we saw in the WASC team report.” Andre’s IHE strategic planning process dictated the future direction for institutional change while the WSCUC reaffirmation only served as confirmation of the validity of the internal process.

Rachel also discussed a narrower strategic plan that led to general education requirement changes:

There was a diversity and inclusion strategic plan that was developed that had priorities for all of the divisions really. And actually, now that I’m thinking about it, that was the impetus for the diversity and equity course requirement change.

Again, the internal campus process of focusing priorities through a strategic planning process drove campus change rather than an external influence.

In a slightly different way, the WSCUC site team report on Phil’s IHE noted the strategic plan that existed before the most recent reaffirmation process. “The conclusion drawn from the final chapter and the report is that the WASC review has served as a catalyst to achieve campus goals under their Strategic Plan.” In this case, the direction and framework for institutional change, i.e., “campus goals,” were dictated by the strategic plan, though the external process of WSCUC re-accreditation ultimately provided the spark to achieve the strategic plan goals.

External Causes of Institutional Change

The previous section described the supporting themes in the data related to internal causes of institutional change. This section describes supporting themes for external causes of institutional change that emerged during interviews and document analysis—government policy and peer comparison.

Government Policy. For the five public IHEs in the participant pool, government policy and expectations were identified as major external influences for institutional change. This theme did not emerge for the three private IHEs.

As described in Chapter 2, federal funding plays an important role in determining an IHE's compliance with government expectations. The same is true at the state level for public IHEs. Russell put it candidly when he described mechanisms for institutional change, stating that his IHE tends to make changes related less to accreditation and more “because of other reasons, you know, a combination of intrinsic as well as the legislature pushes us on a number of these issues. Yeah, they fund us. We have to listen to them.” In Grace's Institutional Report, the authors echoed this sentiment when describing recent changes to fiscal policies and priorities. The report described “several ramifications for this movement into fiscal alignment with larger system initiatives,” some of which were directly tied to certain administrative and student support programs.

Related to funding, some Institutional Reports and site team reports highlighted campus efforts that were only possible through external government grant funding. For example, Russell's IHE, based on grant funding and collaborative research,

has begun developing and implementing enhanced community-based learning experiences within academic programs, with the goal of increasing academic engagement and sense of belonging among underserved students.

While a campus effort has often been required to secure grant funding, this point underscores the influence that many external funding—federal, state, or private—has on institutional work.

Participation in a larger public system of IHEs was the other part of government policy that came up regularly from research participants. Grace believed that system policies and mandates were heavily influenced by the state legislature, and she said “So, if anything the things that really do affect us are the things that come through our legislature.” Russell identified other factors related to institutional change, but when first asked about the factors that create change, he immediately replied, “Because we’re part of a system, you just get driven at the system level.” Rachel echoed this sentiment. She responded to an inquiry regarding mechanisms for institutional change by stating, “Another impetus for change on our campus is executive orders that come from the [system leadership] office.” She went on to describe some recent executive orders that had radically shifted the way her IHE provided core academic support services.

Peer Comparison. In addition to government policy through legislature or system initiatives, most of the research participants indicated that peer benchmarking and comparison were important for prompting change. ALOs at public institutions noted the importance of comparison across the public system in which the IHE is situated. In discussing some recent system-wide initiatives that changed certain academic programmatic expectations, Rachel said, “We’re actually second-to-last and last in the system on both of the measures this year. And so

that's a big impetus for change because obviously nobody likes it when we're last." At other times throughout her interview and in the Institutional Report for Rachel's IHE, it was apparent that benchmarking student success measures against other system schools was important in campus decision-making. Russell emphasized the role of peer comparison within the public system even more:

So there's a lot of friendly competition and collaboration between the campuses in the system and that drives a lot of what we do is that we tend to reference ourselves to other campuses in the system. And because it's a strong system, there's a lot of good competition and that spurs us all forward. So, a lot of it is really internal to our system rather than external for us.

It was the first catalyst for change at his IHE that he identified, and he frequently revisited the ways in which being part of a public system influenced decisions.

While system-wide peer comparison is a recurring theme for public institutions, comparison extends beyond just system peers in Beth's Institutional Report. In considering peer institutions, "All three institutions were chosen because they have somewhat comparable student populations. . . . Our sister [system] campuses provide another set of reference points." Every Institutional Report available for document analysis referred to demographic peer comparison to contextualize successful efforts or possible areas for focused improvement.

Whereas government policy did not come up as an important external cause for institutional change at any private institution, even without a formal system of peers, the influence of peer comparison emerged with private institutions as well. For example, when discussing a recent initiative at his IHE, Andre said that:

[T]he public visibility by way of rankings and other external entities, how they were viewing us as an institution as far as, you know, how we compare to other similar institutions of mission, size, you know, kind of focus, you know, those kinds of so, so I think that all of those things converging really did kind of create an opportunity for us. As described in Chapter 2, institutional rankings have become an important external influence for many IHEs. Andre pointed out the role they played for his IHE in organizational decision-making; later in our interview, he returned to the idea of peer comparison and its relationship to institutional change. He said, “In terms of engaging in the conversation about the changing landscape of higher education, you know, there’s a lot of value to hearing from peers prompting our own internal thinking.” Though he was referring to a broader network of peer schools and colleagues, the structure of the institutional accreditation process is similarly intended to provide IHEs with peer evaluation to prompt continuous and effective improvement.

While ALOs brought up a variety of internal and external factors as more important mechanisms of change than regional accreditation, there was clear evidence through the interviews and document analysis that the WSCUC process has a tangible impact on institutional change. The next section describes this impact as the second major theme related to the first research question regarding ALO perceptions of WSCUC accreditation and its relationship with institutional change.

Theme 2: WSCUC Accreditation and Institutional Change

Most participants downplayed accreditation’s significance related to institutional change. However, as a focus of this study, the WSCUC accreditation process was discussed prominently as a source of external change in each interview. Interview and document review data

demonstrated that the accreditation process was a more significant source of change than initially indicated by ALOs. Ultimately, research evidence led to the second major theme in the findings for the first research question which is, despite expressed skepticism, regional accreditation impacted institutional change as an external influence. For example, Ciara initially downplayed accreditation's impact but quickly reversed and expressed a strong view of the importance of accreditation. "I think they [mechanisms of organizational change] exist because of accreditation." She went on to say:

The relationship between accreditation and institutional or organizational change - it's an external factor that pushes institutions to have to examine their practices. Where, if an institution doesn't have that process or places, or people in place to regularly examine quality assurance, student learning, inclusive practices, fiduciary responsibility. I don't know if institutions would normally choose to do that. And so, you know, it's the, in my opinion, it's kind of a, I think, in some ways, it's the necessary evil, right? You're not going to behave, and do what you're supposed to do and be accountable to the public until there are, there's someone knocking at your door. And I think that's unfortunate.

Ciara's view of accreditation's impact on change were based on skepticism that IHEs are motivated to act unless there are external influences, so the accreditation process and related expectations are vital to quality assurance.

Jaina was not as skeptical of IHE's motivation to change through internal means, but she still viewed accreditation as important to ensure a minimum level of quality across a region:

In general it functions as quite an inspiration for change because it's a threshold that people need to get to in order to get reaffirmed. So, it ends up functioning as a stick. As a

compliance stick, that ends up being kind of a bottom line for change and a motivator for a lot of people. I think you know, not the greatest way to go about doing it, but it is that is effectively how it functions.

She returned to the idea of a “compliance stick” multiple times in her interview. Similar to Ciara, she focused more on quality assurance than on continuous improvement as an intended or actual outcome from the WSCUC accreditation process. Phil also ascribed significant importance to WSCUC accreditation in effecting change:

The presidents, boards, stakeholders really at every level of the organization, take accreditation so seriously. It has an outsized impact on institutional reputation among peers which in turn affects your rankings nationally and also how committed your employees, your students, the supporters of your students, they all need to believe that what they’re doing is worthwhile and accreditation is our single best marker for whether or not it is. And so the effect of accreditation on institutional change is enormous. If you can hitch a ride on all that attention and energy, you can make some pretty good things happen.

Phil diverged from Ciara and Jaina; he more frequently discussed the impact that accreditation may have on continuous improvement for an institution. He also believed that campus stakeholders held a more authentically committed attitude towards accreditation as important to institutional change. Other research participants held views that covered the spectrum of opinion between Ciara, Jaina, and Phil. Eventually all the interviewees acknowledged that the WSCUC accreditation process has been an impactful external influence on institutional change.

There was also significant evidence that supported two subthemes, namely that both preparing for and responding to WSCUC accreditation served as distinct sources of institutional change. The following sections describe the supporting themes and relevant evidence of supporting themes for both of these subthemes.

Preparing for Accreditation

Across interviews and document analysis, every participant noted that preparing for a reaffirmation review was itself a catalyst for change. The two supporting themes that emerged related to preparing for accreditation were broad institutional buy-in and changes made during preparation.

Broad Institutional Buy-In. Both Institutional Reports and WSCUC site team reports noted and commended the breadth of participation in preparation of the self-study. For example, the Institutional Report for Beth's IHE noted that, "In preparing for this review, the general strategy was to have work of the review run through a representative steering committee, small enough to work efficiently but broad enough to reach all campus constituencies at key points." The visiting team at Ciara's IHE commented on the breadth of participation in the preparation for the Institutional Report in their site team report. "Institutional involvement in the review and report preparation included multiple sectors of the campus community. . . . The president constituted a WSCUC Self-Study Steering Committee composed of individuals from across campus units and divisions, including faculty and administrators." It was not merely the broad participation that impacted change—multiple ALOs commented on the impact that this type of participation had on institutional change.

For Grace, broad participation in preparation pulled together offices and individuals that were not regularly discussing issues:

It also, I think, shed light on the larger picture that it's not just any one program, but it's all of us collectively contributing to this. And that's something that was really kind of nice because the different parts of the institution to learn about each other's function and how, you know, all of us are contributing to the larger picture.

Broad buy-in across campus created a better sense of shared goals and responsibility for student success. Phil observed this at his IHE as well:

There's a more subtle benefit to accreditation though than either of those concrete projects, which is that it forces multi-, cross-functional teams to talk to each other about where the university is working and where it isn't. And so the impact on institutional cohesion is probably the strongest one, but the hardest to point to or measure.

He felt that the broad participation across his IHE helped to clarify institutional goals and build more effective collaborations across campus. For Rachel, the process of preparing generated important questions for her IHE.

We had a good 60 or so people that were directly involved in creating the report. And so in the process of doing that, that always raises lots of questions about are we doing this right? What do we need to change? And so, just by virtue of the process of introspection, got brought up some things that we need to do.

Merely preparing the self-study inspired change before the off-site review or campus visit.

Rachel attributed this to the conversations that came out of broad participation in the report preparation process.

Change During Preparation. Rachel’s experience with change driven by the process of preparation was not unique. In both interviews and document analysis, there were examples of changes started or completed before the on-site review that were inspired by the Institutional Report preparation process.

The Institutional Report for Beth’s IHE noted that the academic program review process underwent changes during preparation for WSCUC accreditation. “The goal has been to increase the efficacy of the process as a planning tool for programs and the campus.” Similarly, Russell discussed using preparation for reaffirmation strategically to inspire important changes to academic program assessment:

So, we thought what’s the thing that has the most value for us as a campus? And we thought that would be the program learning outcomes assessment. And so we focused on that, and it really, it’s something good for us to do as a campus regardless of WASC, but it was something that we weren’t really doing and so the WASC process spurred us to do it.

In this instance, Russell’s IHE identified a way to make the accreditation process support an already-identified need. Preparation for self-study then provided more pointed feedback for certain academic programs that were not yet meeting campus expectations around program review and assessment.

Andre also discussed using the preparation process to support existing campus change efforts. “In dovetailing [WSCUC] reaffirmation with strategic planning, it really did lend itself nicely to taking a step back, thinking about strategic-level considerations, not getting too caught

up in just the day-to-day operations.” Andre’s IHE used the self-study preparation process insights to inform important changes they were making in light of campus leadership changes:

Rather than reinventing the wheel, what we found to be helpful was, you know, taking some of the things that had already come out of the institutional reflection process according to the WASC Standards, and then infusing some of those findings.

For Andre, the WSCUC Standards framed important campus perspectives that were a foundation to inform changes.

Site teams also commented on the important insights from the preparation process. In site team letter for Jaina’s IHE, the visiting team wrote:

The accreditation steering committee, for instance, explained that their work preparing for the review resulted in a near revelation regarding the alignment of the mission and values between all [campus locations]. Similar experiences were expressed by others involved in developing the report, and on the whole, students, faculty, and staff appears to have an enlightened understanding of the institution based on their participation.

Other WSCUC visiting teams identified changes that were in progress as a result of preparing the Institutional Report. For example, the site team who visited Rachel’s IHE described conversations where campus constituents “cited numerous assessment goals that were to be completed” in the fall semester when the on-site review took place. These goals were the result of the self-study. Though they were not fully completed at the time of the site team report, it was apparent that Rachel’s IHE was committed to completing the goals.

Some of this change during the preparation process was merely a result of regular change processes that happen gradually, separate from the accreditation process. As Phil discussed during his interview, the Institutional Report is:

always a snapshot of a work in progress. And so even in the time between when we submitted our written report and when we hosted the team, so much had changed so quickly that we had to keep providing the team with updates.

This is not to say that change was a given. When discussing areas identified for improvement in the self-study process, Phil also said, “And all of that, I would say got accelerated by accreditation . . . things that we were able to change as a result were already in play, but they got accelerated.” IHEs that are focused on continuous improvement will engage in change efforts, but preparing for accreditation may serve as a catalyst to increase the rate of change.

Responding to WSCUC Feedback

ALOs also discussed the various ways that feedback from WSCUC during reaffirmation inspires change at their IHEs, the second supporting theme related to regional accreditation’s impact on institutional change. Data showed that the most recent accreditation cycle and previous accreditation cycles continued to impact IHEs.

Previous Cycles. In all interviews and both document types there was evidence that the feedback from the WSCUC led to change, even if only narrowly tailored to this feedback. For example, Jaina said that any significant change depends “on whatever their issues were from the prior commission action letters. It inspires people to do whatever is in that.” She went on to emphasize that formal recommendations in the WSCUC process must be addressed to continue accreditation, so the recommendations serve as a minimum bar for IHEs to address.

In the Institutional Report for Grace's IHE, she noted that "a number of measures [the IHE] initiated in specific response to the [recent WSCUC] Action Letter." The report went on to detail the ways that the campus addressed recent feedback from WSCUC along with ways that resources have been allocated to maintain changes. The site team report from Beth's IHE emphasized that the institution had "satisfactorily addressed all of the recommendations in the [previous] team report." Campuses were clearly motivated to act on such specific recommendations.

One ALO claimed that the impact from previous cycles may carry over through multiple reaffirmation cycles. Phil said that prior to his arrival, his IHE "did not get a great report, two cycles ago, roughly the year 2000. . . . The files that I inherited have kind of desperate, very emotionally pitched memos about what the institution could do about all this." Though his institution had successfully responded to WSCUC recommendations and completed another reaffirmation cycle, Phil saw the effects that strongly critical feedback had roughly 15 years later. He indicated that his IHE responded to this historical scar by starting its preparation for their most recent reaffirmation in earnest by his arrival, largely in an attempt to avoid a negative site team report.

Reaffirmation Process. IHEs have received feedback at two key points in a typical reaffirmation process. First, after the off-site review of the institutional report, site team members have drafted "lines of inquiry," a set of follow-up questions and topics they want to pursue during the on-site visit. Next, the site team has provided a set of formal recommendations in their report and IHEs have been expected to address these recommendations before the next reaffirmation cycle and often much earlier through a special visit or mid-cycle review.

For Andre, the feedback in the off-site review was particularly salient in the last accreditation cycle:

I find that to be very much, you know kind of a stimulating conversation, you know, not just with our peer reviewers, but also internally we're able to take some of those lines of inquiry and engage in some reflection around that. We amass, you know, quite a few exhibits for the accreditation visit itself on campus.

This off-site review feedback started the change and response process at Andre's IHE, and during the intervening months they pulled together many of the missing data or additional information to help peer reviewers make sense of Andre's IHE and its particular quirks.

Jaina spoke from her experience as a WSCUC site team member when she spoke about changes in response to WSCUC feedback:

I can say, for those institutions that have a problem and they're not addressing it, accreditation makes a huge difference because it becomes an action item, and they've got to do something about it . . . follow-up action items play a very big role in a reaffirmation process.

She emphasized these points about the importance of a follow-up action item on multiple occasions throughout the interview, indicating her belief that these formal recommendations from the site team are critical toward causing change.

For IHEs that felt they had a more successful site visit, ALOs did not make as direct of a connection between WSCUC feedback and institutional change. Phil said, "Because our visit went too successfully, and we got the 10-year gold ring really all it did was validate and affirm

things that we had argued we wanted to do.” Though WSCUC provided recommendations, Phil believed that these recommendations mirrored his IHE’s proposals for additional attention.

Russell believed that WSCUC feedback from the site team visit functioned similarly for his IHE:

It sort of strengthened what we were doing, but it didn’t really drive what we were doing. It was consistent with what we were going to be doing anyway. That helped with some institutional buy-in for a few of the items where it did require a broader buy-in. It was one more thing to add to the reasons that we’re doing it and help generate buy-in. That there was some help there in just, it was yet another reason that we needed to do these things, but it didn’t necessarily change what we were doing.

Jaina also mentioned the way that an IHE can use feedback from WSCUC as a further catalyst for change. “It gives the organization, again, a lever to say, ‘Hey, this has been adopted now. Let’s make it functional.’ So, it just gives you direction. So, you have to do it because they’re coming back to check.” Jaina and Russell emphasized that responding to WSCUC recommendations is a necessity, and both alluded to another major theme that emerged in the data—mediating factors in the overall usefulness of accreditation as a lever for change.

Theme 3: Mediating Factors

There was evidence that other factors influenced the efficacy and direction of the institutional accreditation process beyond the process itself. These mediating factors were the last theme in the findings related to the first research question. Campus perceptions of the process, the ability to sustain change after reaffirmation, ALO experience and perspective, and

the site team perspective were also important in determining the influence of the WSCUC process. Each of these subthemes is discussed in the sections that follow.

Campus Perception of Accreditation

As both Russell's and Jaina's perspectives highlight, there were a range of attitudes at each IHE that impacted the effectiveness of the reaffirmation process on institutional change. Most ALOs discussed the impact that campus perceptions have on the WSCUC process and possible resulting changes. Andre believed that some of the challenges in perception are to be expected. "I think the very nature of the reaffirmation process, the peer-review process, since the team is comprised of peer evaluators, you know, I think it's hard to hear the recommendations." Campus constituents may have mixed perceptions of the qualifications of their peer evaluators. Phil also thought that accreditation, as a result of its current structure, made it difficult to sell as a positive and worthwhile endeavor. He said, "The regional accreditors are in kind of an awkward spot these days. No one likes them very much. The institutions look at it as burdensome and the other stakeholders . . . [only] rely on regional accreditation for accountability and enforcement." In other words, campus perceptions may have had a substantial impact on the resistance or support of key stakeholders.

Some ALOs focused on how to create buy-in by trying to reframe campus perceptions. Grace took a pragmatic approach. "Can you find a way to make it applicable to people? And until that happens, I think, you really are going to get a lot of resistance." However, the Institutional Report from Grace's IHE noted that, "[F]aculty do understand the importance of assessment; however, most assessment plans seem to have been done to simply satisfy accreditation and the adoption of best practices has not always been consistent." The Institutional

Report later indicated that “assessment is still seen by some as an unnecessary imposition upon faculty time as opposed to a valuable exercise leading to pedagogical improvement.” During our interview, Grace regularly revisited the idea that much of her job as an ALO was working against and changing campus perceptions. She acknowledged that there was still much work to be done despite clear expectations in the site team letter that her IHE needed to improve the use of evidence in decision-making and program improvement:

You know, for a long time, program review kept getting stalled out. In fact, we’re kind of stalled out right now. A lot of programs don’t want to do it. Because neither faculty nor administration are communicating or seem to understand what program review is all about.

Negative perceptions or misperceptions among stakeholders at her IHE prevented Grace from effectively meeting WSCUC expectations—faculty and administration continued to resist changing their practices to match expectations.

Andre encountered resistance due to campus perception that WSCUC would not fully understand the unique attributes of his IHE. He said, “There were many folks that were resistant, that were mistrustful of the accreditation process because they felt that it was an outsider imposing their will or their views on what we were doing here.” Andre approached this negativity with a different, yet still pragmatic approach by focusing on the most basic effects on an IHE if it were to lose accreditation:

For those that push back on accreditation and say that it’s external imposition, I’m very quick to remind them that an institution particularly like [my IHE]. It is, by virtue of being regionally accredited, that we can participate in federal student aid programs. In the

absence of that regional accreditation, we would not be able to participate in those programs. That means all of the federal loans, Pell grants, FSCOG, go right down the list. All of those programs are no longer available to students. Who's most disproportionately affected by that?

Andre's focus on the necessity of accreditation leverages both the need for federal funding and the direct impact on minoritized students to push back against negative campus perceptions.

Ciara expressed personal skepticism of institutional motivation to focus on continuous improvement if accreditation or another external process did not exist:

I'm dubious that most institutions and organizations are reflective. I'm dubious that most organizations have effective systems in place to ensure that they're working effectively and that everything that they're doing is intended to serve students well. So, when we're talking about inclusive organizations, we're talking about student-centered learning, student-centered campuses, it sounds good on paper. It sounds good in a speech by leadership, but I think where it really hits the road is, well, you say that, and it's actually very well-aligned to, you know, WASC criteria or standards for review, but it falls apart when you don't see how that's operationalized. And how that's resourced.

She viewed the accreditation process as critical to hold IHEs accountable to what each one claims to do and be and understood the WSCUC standards as important for requiring IHEs to follow through on the promises made through leadership and larger campus initiatives.

Not all ALOs indicated a lack of buy-in or resistance from certain campus factions. At Rachel's IHE, she said, "people here seem to respect and to some extent, fear is a strong word, but respect WASC and what they do." She only spoke positively of the campus perceptions of

accreditation and the reaffirmation process. When pressed on this during the interview, Rachel said that there had been a real shift since the last accreditation. “At the end of the day, this is to inform your program. If it’s not informing your program, don’t do it. So, the whole box-checking mentality was thrown out the window.” At the time of study, she said, faculty and staff saw the value in assessment as its own end rather than just to satisfy WSCUC expectations. The site team report for Ciara’s IHE also reflected that over time, campus perception had changed. “Many commented on major shifts in attitudes toward assessment since arriving eight, ten or more years ago: from initial resistance to the extra work to eventually understanding the value it adds to their teaching.” While there was initial resistance from the campus community to adhere to accreditation expectations, the value of the process won over those who continued to work and teach there.

Most ALOs who participated in the study indicated a mixed campus perception of WSCUC accreditation. Jaina saw campus perception as mixed, but likely progressing towards a more positive and supportive environment:

I think it’s mixed. And I think that I clearly see, given all the progress that has been made in the past six years, I clearly see, for instance and I’ve seen this at a lot of institutions, that people have gotten over the hump of just doing it. And now they start to see some of its value for their own teaching. . . . There’s a whole spectrum of degrees of change, of embracing that in an institution.

While not quite yet as developed as at Ciara or Rachel’s IHEs as described above, Jaina’s IHE was moving toward an overall positive campus perception even though the current campus perception is still mixed.

Andre described some distrust from his IHE regarding the process, but his extensive experience with accreditation gave him a broader picture overall of the progression of perception possible over time in the WSCUC region. He said that at one point, it sometimes felt as if accreditation was about trying to hide your areas of improvement from your peers, but at the time of the study, “if there are things that you recognize that you could do better, you’re calling those out. I believe that WASC is beginning to reward that.” He went on to argue that accreditation can provide value to an IHE, if the campus begins

to really think about how we might go a little bit further by going a little bit deeper as opposed to just trying to do a bunch of things to check boxes, and you know, ensure that WASC was comfortable that one, we knew what the purpose of accreditation was, two, we were committed to the process, and three, that we were taking it seriously.

Andre had only recently completed the most recent reaffirmation process, and he said that he believed a large part of the reason that his IHE received a full ten-year affirmation was due to the honest self-assessment undertaken by new campus leadership during the self-study process.

Russell was direct about the mixed perception at his IHE when describing recent revisions to the program review process that resulted from preparing for the WSCUC accreditation process. “There’s some parts of campus that understood why we went that direction, and there are other parts that treated it as box-checking. And when you’ve got a big campus, you get a diversity of things that happen.” He saw the range of perceptions as a natural result of the size of his campus community and less a function of the degree to which assessment was or was not embedded in the campus culture.

The data from site team reports in this study indicated that mixed or negative campus perceptions impact the feedback that WSCUC provided in the reaffirmation process. Rachel spoke positively about what she believes was a healthy respect for WSCUC, but the site team had “reservations about how deeply the institution has developed a ‘culture of assessment’ and how thoroughly engaged faculty in all programs are in using the results of assessment and program review to modify programs or adapt pedagogies.” These concerns led to a formal recommendation for Rachel’s IHE that required more significant use of evidence in organizational decision-making and improvement. Andre was more realistic in his perspective about negative campus perceptions of the WSCUC reaffirmation process, and the visiting site team noted the lack of commitment to the use of assessment on campus. Authors of the site team report wrote, “There is little evidence of a full culture of assessment and that the findings are being used in decision-making. Faculty buy-in is an issue.” It was apparent to the site team that faculty did not perceive WSCUC expectations positively. Like at Rachel’s IHE, one of the recommendations from the site team was to create a more data-informed culture including wider assessment of foundational learning outcomes and evidence-based decision-making.

Ultimately, faculty and administrator perceptions of the WSCUC accreditation process most impacted whether ALOs believed they could effectively implement changes. Jaina stated that even with mixed campus perceptions, the WSCUC accreditation process could still overcome a lack of buy-in. When talking about one particular recommendation, she said:

I think it was really helpful that it’s still in our action items. And it’s just as, “Keep doing it, you know, we want you to finish your plans.” And so that keeps it alive for any leadership or anybody in the organization who would rather go on and prioritize

something else. Everyone has to make priorities, and instantly, when it's an action item, it instantly makes it an institutional priority whether or not you want to do it.

She believed that specific recommendations from WSCUC carried significant weight in institutional priorities and decision-making after a reaffirmation process. In the next section, I will describe another related subtheme that emerged in the data related to WSCUC accreditation and institutional change, the ability to sustain change related to accreditation.

Sustaining Change

One of the subthemes under the larger theme of mediating factors that emerged in the data was the extent to which changes related to preparing for or responding to WSCUC accreditation could be sustained. Jaina's stated, "I think it's mixed. . . . There's a whole spectrum of degrees of change, of embracing that in an institution." As with campus perceptions of accreditation, ALOs had mixed perceptions of the sustainability of institutional change.

There was evidence that the accreditation process could inspire long-term change. In the Institutional Report at Rachel's IHE, it stated, "The multi-year budgeting process under which the University currently operates is a direct outgrowth of what was learned from the [prior] WASC re-accreditation." This type of reference to changes directly related to the previous accreditation cycle were common in other available Institutional Reports. When discussing her experience as a member of various site teams for WSCUC, Ciara also shared that she had "seen how accreditation has shifted an entire institution. But I will also say, and this is where I'm going to have my disclaimer, it was a young institution that was seeking accreditation." Ciara observed real and sustained change at an IHE in the region, but still gave the caveat that the institutional history likely played an important role in how effective and long-lasting these changes were.

Some ALOs noted that the preparation process for the WSCUC accreditation often created momentum on certain initiatives or projects, but there was a possibility that certain efforts might lag after receiving a reaffirmation. Phil stated, “There’s the risk there that people then relax. We’ve seen that. . . . I was worried about what you’re describing. Like I didn’t want people to just breathe a sigh of relief and not think about [assessment] for five years.” During her interview, Beth described a “refractory period” after the accreditation cycle where it is important for the campus to celebrate their accomplishment and relax a bit. However, she did not make it clear how the IHE would regain momentum or refocus institutional efforts around changes that were scaled back immediately following a successful re-accreditation.

This point was illustrated in Rachel’s discussion of the most recent accreditation at her IHE. “I can’t remember for the life of me now, I can’t remember what the other three [recommendations] are. There are five total. I think it’s because the other two were like, yeah, okay, we’re doing that. We’re doing that.” For the three recommendations that Rachel could not recall, it was clear that little to no change had been broadly implemented because she could not even remember what WSCUC recommended. Ciara also discussed the challenge of sustaining or pushing forward with changes when discussing a recent reaffirmation process at her previous IHE:

I will say, our team was surprised we got a ten-year reaffirmation and ten is the max, right? I was surprised and disappointed, like, as an ALO. I was like, “Oh, God.” Because you kind of lose, like, in this position, you lose the momentum of the work that has been put into place leading up to accreditation, right? So, I mean, honestly, you kind of wish, like, just give us eight with a couple of, like, required reports in between. . . . Because ten

years is great for presidents and provosts and the board, but for someone of the ALO role, it's great, but it's also, it can be challenging to continue to move the institution forward in the ways that you know it needs to continue progressing.

Ciara appeared to believe that the WSCUC accreditation process may have a real and lasting impact on an IHE, but that result requires consistent pressure to sustain significant change. She felt it was easy to lose any momentum gains from the accreditation process without a pending interim report or mid-cycle review. Ciara also addressed some practical considerations in sustaining change. She said:

Leadership might say, "These are our priorities." But to garner the trust of your organization, you have to resource it, it has to be this continuous message, the way that you communicate it, what is your cascading communication practice? And that's the, and I'm finding that that's very challenging at some institutions.

Even with changes tied directly to a critical process like accreditation, Ciara identified barriers to sustaining or committing fully to said changes.

Other ALOs described factors that impacted whether change inspired by the WSCUC accreditation would last. Jaina said, "When it's built into the standard it becomes something you don't have a choice about. Because if that standard goes away, you can bet almost all assessment activity would go away." Consistent with other parts of her interview, Jaina perceived WSCUC as a baseline quality assurance tool. Without it, she felt that IHEs would not sustain most changes caused by it. Phil was more ambivalent in his assessment of the impact of accreditation on institutional changes stating, "The recognition that we were on the right track was useful, but I didn't see a steeper upward slope as a result." He believed that his IHE created so many

mechanisms for sustaining change during the self-study process that the recommendations from WSCUC simply reinforced the work that he and others were already committed to completing.

Grace and Russell were both more skeptical of the accreditation process inspiring lasting change without an internal influence. Grace said, “And I think, you know, for us, saying, ‘Oh, WASC needs it.’ Or WASC is saying you need to do it. That only goes so far, you know, because on a day-to-day basis most faculty, most students don’t really care.” Russell was more optimistic that the accreditation process could be a part of sustained change, but he did not believe that this type of change would come from accreditation alone. “Yeah, we’re not getting permanent institutional change if it’s just for WASC. You have to have intrinsic motivation for doing it, for it to be a lasting institutional change.” As described above, research data in this study described other external and internal causes of institutional change. Russell believed that WSCUC could be a part of lasting change with another external source such as a system mandate or an internal source such as faculty buy-in and push.

Andre reflected a perspective similar to Grace and Russell, but spent time discussing the way that his IHE engaged in looking at possible changes related to WSCUC preparation and feedback conversations. He said that his IHE was looking at opportunities for change:

in ways that weren’t just going to be reactive, but were going to be more transformative as far as kind of evolving the institutional culture, codifying some of the conversations that needed to be grounded in the shared governance structure, so that those could be sustained over time as opposed to, you know, having these one-off conversations and addressing, you know, something that flared up. You know, which is what I’m characterizing as being reactive.

Andre did not explicitly identify the WSCUC accreditation process as a cause of sustained change, though his perspective indicates that he believes his IHE was attempting to use the broad and high-profile nature of the accreditation process to seek opportunities for lasting change.

When asked if they thought changes inspired directly by the most recent accreditation process were sustained, ALOs described some lasting changes but with limited or mixed results over time. Phil felt that there was little letdown on the projects and changes post-accreditation at his IHE:

The momentum seems pretty much alive. Yeah, on all of the things that we were singled out for in the report as positives, I haven't seen flagging in any of it. The bigger risk we have than will or motivation is distraction because we're growing very fast.

He believes that changes implemented during the preparation process have continued with similar fervor while acknowledging possible threats to this continued progress.

Jaina spoke from both her prior and current ALO experience, as well as her experience as a site team member for WSCUC. She believed that change is sustained because of accreditation accountability with a few caveats:

Now, it might be episodic. But it still is like when you see institutions go through, I mean, I can't tell you how many times it happens where institutions, they do everything they need to do to get all the programs and faculty on board for assessment in time for accreditation. And then it stops for six years until they're preparing for the next accreditation cycle. So, it might be episodic which means it's not very deep. But it's sustained.

The Institutional Report for Grace’s IHE spoke to a similar experience where academic assessment efforts were mixed and appeared to match Jaina’s description of episodic change:

Some departments and colleges are actively engaged in assessment, as documented by the departmental surveys and the samples of programmatic assessment we have collected and posted on our accreditation website. But some programs scramble once every seven years with large-scale assessment.

In all, ALOs generally agreed that changes caused by the WSCUC accreditation process were difficult to sustain in deep and meaningful ways if WSCUC was the *sole* cause of the changes. If changes were supported institutionally through leadership or other externally through other means, there was evidence that change initially caused by WSCUC could be sustained and become a part of the campus culture.

ALO Influence

Another emergent subtheme in the collected data was the variance in influence that ALO’s may have at their institution and on the WSCUC accreditation process itself. ALO influence was further sorted into three supporting themes of institutional positionality, personal approach, and WSCUC site team interaction.

Institutional Positionality. Ciara, who had only been the ALO at her IHE for a little under a year at the time of her interview, spoke frequently about the challenges she faced when compared to her last IHE, especially given the different power dynamics based on the reporting structure. She said, “Culture and organizational models and structures I think make a huge difference, and it could either make an ALO’s job much easier, or much more complicated.” She

elaborated why she believed the manner that an ALO is organizationally positioned is so important to their efficacy in creating change:

I think it relates to driving organizational change particularly as the ALO. And frankly, one, it's how your position is framed. And I think that makes a huge difference in what you are able to do. So, I know I talked about the institutional culture, organizational structures, but I think particularly with this position it's, you have knowledge of the history of the institution, all the areas that it needs to work on. Most people don't have that knowledge. I'm happy to share it all the time. Like, these are the areas we need to work on it. This is what we got commended on, but this is the stuff that we need to work on, you know. But I think it's, how effective this position can be and being part of that organizationally, is how the position is structured.

Ciara described feeling limited in her ability to provide effective feedback to the campus and leadership regarding change because she was too far removed within the institutional hierarchy from important campus leadership positions. Russell reinforced the importance of ALO institutional positionality when he discussed his stature on campus as an important factor in accomplishing goals. He said, "I interface between our Provost and our Academic Deans and as well as the Senate and so trying to get everybody on board, get everybody moving in the same direction." Russell had positional power because of the way the ALO was positioned at his IHE. Andre also discussed the importance of an ALO's access to senior leadership in their role:

I think that the relational aspect of the role of WASC ALO at our institutions with the senior leadership of the institution and then connecting that now to WASC as the

accreditor, I think that all of those pieces now have really made the process, have enhanced the value of the process.

Rachel indirectly reflected this sentiment during her interview. When asked about a particular project that was noted as still in progress in her site team report, she mentioned that it was not yet complete. She reflected, “But you know, in all honesty, without me sitting there, pushing it to get through academic senate, it hasn’t happened.” Rachel went on to describe how certain changes related to WSCUC expectations need her backing as ALO to get the necessary faculty buy-in for academic change. Russell, Andre, and Rachel therefore reinforced Ciara’s perspective that how an ALO was positioned within the institutional hierarchy impacted their ability to create institutional change.

Personal Perspectives. Another aspect of ALO influence that emerged as part of this subtheme in the data was the impact of personal perspectives or identities. For Russell, he repeatedly came back to the idea that accreditation was not particularly influential towards change at his IHE. He said, “I think the whole principle of accreditation is that you’re trying to make sure that there is some minimum standard of quality for all the accredited institutions.” As a well-established public institution with strong system support, it naturally follows from Russell’s personal perspective that if WSCUC only serves to set a minimum bar, then there was little feedback that the accreditation process would have had at his IHE.

Andre spoke at length about how his previous professional experience influenced the way that he perceived the accreditation process. He spoke about how working as an ALO at another IHE brought value to his current role and to the region:

I think that there's benefits to the peer-review process that pay dividends for institutions in ways that may not be apparent in the short-term. But in the long-term, I think that the experiences of each of us contributing at our current institutions and then taking that experience and moving somewhere else [are valuable].

Andre contrasted this more common current practice with observations from early in his career where the ALO role moved annually or bi-annually among faculty members who only minimally bought into the idea of accreditation as useful for institutional improvement or change.

The other aspect of Andre's experience that he discussed was his work prior to moving into institutional research and accreditation:

I have a practitioner background. . . . Diversity, equity, and inclusion is something that has been synonymous with my career since its inception . . . so when I think about diversity, equity, and inclusion, you know, that's something that has, that I came into higher education because I did not believe enough people that look like me or that sounded like me, that came from schools like the ones that I attended, you know, really had a full understanding what was available.

Andre came back to these ideas multiple times throughout his interview, and he discussed how his previous work in student affairs and student support services lent credibility to conversations with colleagues who did not believe he understood their work. He also revisited the role that his minoritized identities had on his perspective on accreditation and institutional priorities.

Ciara talked explicitly about her personal identity and its impact on how she approached her work as an ALO. She shared her belief that her "strict Asian upbringing, or as an immigrant" made her comfortable with taking a critical look at campus efforts in all areas because she was

raised to believe that there were always opportunities for improvement. For her, this part of her identity influenced her candor when preparing an Institutional Report or working with a site team on an accreditation process. She said, “As an ALO, I’m like, let’s just be real. Let’s take an honest look at where we’re at and let’s work on what we need to work on.” She also said that her personal identities and her background in education led her to have a particular commitment to DEI in her role as an ALO. In discussing a project she spearheaded at her last IHE, she said, “I’m really proud of it, because that helped to shift some of the conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion.” She went on to describe how she was using her previous professional experience on this project as well as her personal identity to start a similar analysis of student success data at her current IHE.

WSCUC Site Team. The last part of ALO influence subtheme that emerged as a supporting theme in the data was the ways that different ALOs discussed the impact that they could have by thinking strategically about the WSCUC site team assigned to their IHE. Russell talked about how his IHE considered the dynamics of peer review in writing their Institutional Report. He said, “In the WASC process, part of how you write your institutional report, we try to think about how will this be perceived by the WASC reviewers?” He went on to say that his IHE used different comparison schools in the WSCUC process because these schools were considered peers, and his IHE compared more favorably to this data set rather than the system peers that his IHE normally used for benchmarking.

In the context of his professional experience, Andre talked about the evolution of both WSCUC and the ALO role during his time in the region. He said “the expectations of ALOs, and kind of what our roles are, as ambassadors that represent the best interests of our institutions and

advocate for institutions within the accreditation process,” were quite different than when he first started as an ALO. He felt that it was much more important to help share peer reviewer knowledge and perspective with the site team because institutional-specific programs were hard for others to grasp without significant additional context.

Grace also talked about the importance of working closely with the WSCUC site team in every step of the process. She said, “Actually, I think, to me, as ALO, I also get to push back against people when they come here and they visit, and they make these grand proclamations.” Grace’s willingness to push back on some of the expectations from WSCUC were apparent in her Institutional Report as well. For example, when reporting student demographic data in one section, she wrote, “These different residency types may be part of the problem why the WASC templates are not an accurate reflection of this population.” Rather than trying to fit campus data to forms that did not accommodate the unique attributes of her IHE, Grace pointed out the problem. The WSCUC site team wrote about their experience with Grace during the reaffirmation process, saying, “The campus accreditation liaison officer complied with each and every request for additional information, all the while communicating opportunities and challenges to sharing the materials needed.” This explicit reference to the influence the ALO had on the site team review process validated Grace’s perspective that her advocacy to some degree had influenced the direction and feedback of the accreditation process.

Andre also talked about his communication with the site team members during the process. In preparing campus constituents for the review process, he said “What I tried to do was work with my colleagues to really recognize that we had the opportunity to define the scope of what we wanted, what we needed from our peer colleagues.” He helped his campus craft a

message to garner the input and scrutiny from the WSCUC accreditation that would be useful after the accreditation process was complete. He also talked about working directly with the site team to manage difficult, emergent situations, “I had the ability to communicate with the team related to, or regarding very sensitive matters that I wanted the team to be aware of, but I didn’t want them to necessarily solely focus on.” Andre talked about how these conversations allowed him to acknowledge some important areas of growth with the site team while influencing the final feedback so that it softened some of the recommendations.

Site Team Focus

Similar to the influence that some ALOs felt they had in working with their site team, many ALOs discussed their experience through WSCUC as a site team member on other campuses or how the particular focus of the site team that visited their IHE impacted the final recommendations from WSCUC. The role of the site team focus on the accreditation process and outcomes was the last supporting theme in the data for the overall theme of mediating factors.

Rachel expressed frustration over the most recent site visit due to a particular site team member’s focus on an area that did not seem to be a priority:

With our previous president, we had, our strategic plan was good. It didn’t seem that there was a need to revisit it at all. And yet, that was one of our recommendations. And so, that was a little challenging because during the visit itself, I’ll be completely candid with you . . . the personality of the team is going to drive some of the directions that they go. One of the members had strategic plan like a dog with a bone, and would not let it go. And so, it came out in one of the recommendations.

The site team report reflects this focus. There were multiple references to the current strategic plan, but each one spoke about the need for it to be updated or how it no longer appeared to be current. Rachel believed that this focus from WSCUC hinged on a single site team participant latching on to the strategic plan.

Andre spoke about the need to help peer reviewers understand the particular context at his IHE to help minimize situations like the one described by Rachel:

I think that the fact that the team appreciated that we had a recognition of that already to some extent, I think that they were, they were comforted in a sense that, you know, this isn't trying to paint a rosier picture than it actually is. There were a couple of campus climate flare-ups during that time that they were here. And so, you know, we really did, as an institution, commit to transparency in a way that I thought was conducive to helping our team members, our peer reviewers, understand our current context. Engaging them in conversations about what they're seeing at their campuses, how this may manifest differently at different size institutions, or institutions in different parts of [the region].

From his experience, Andre understood that peer reviewers relied on their own professional context to compare and evaluate his IHE. He also knew that there were some unique characteristics of his campus that might be challenging for external reviewers to understand. He tried to manage any critique through effective and regular messaging that connected with each context where the site team reviewers currently worked.

Phil spoke about his one experience on a site team, and he was skeptical of how effective outside peer reviewers could be without honesty and transparency from the IHE being evaluated for accreditation:

It is a kind of a weak process. The crash course you get in an institution is really not enough to tell you what's going on. There's a lot of opportunities for distracting the team, or telling them the story you want to tell, instead of answering the question they posed.

While Phil did not feel as if his IHE attempted to manipulate or mislead the site team during his most recent reaffirmation process, he expressed concern about the process. He felt that it would be relatively easy to craft a more positive narrative than what truly existed at an IHE. However, he also noted that his own professional experience—an important part of the site team selection process—was an asset in honestly evaluating an IHE as an external reviewer:

When I was assigned there, it was easier for me than others to kind of see through some of the smoke and mirrors, but also there were many opportunities . . . where you can frame the report in ways that are useful. Like, okay, what are you guys trying to make happen here? Where would a commendation or recommendation do you the most good? And they could tell us that.

Like other ALOs spoke about in their experience working with the site team, Phil discussed the dialogue between the site team and campus constituents that helped shape the final commendations and recommendations in the report. This data regarding the role of the site team reinforced the significance that an ALO may have had in creating or sustaining change at their IHE.

Ciara had more experience as a site team reviewer than Phil, having served on at least six teams during her career. She spoke more positively about the effectiveness of the site team process:

And the good thing is, the way that teams are comprised, are comprised by specialty, right? So, every team has like a CFO, somebody that's in accreditation, assessment, you know, sometimes institutional research. It's always led by a chancellor or president of an institution. . . . The way that we evaluate institutions are based on what they give us. And so, everything that we write in the report, we have to support it through the evidence that they've given us or didn't give us. Or what we learned through the visit itself.

Ciara saw the various perspectives on a site team as an important asset to the process because each person brought subject matter expertise to the group. She also felt like there was little room to manipulate a process through a personal agenda because the evaluation of an IHE relied on the evidence provided to the site team through the Institutional Report and conversations with various campus community members. Ciara reiterated her belief that the peer review process was a strong, solid process:

I understand that while it might seem sometimes subjective, it's as objective as you can possibly get. . . . Teams know when you're hiding stuff. Teams know when, you know, everyone's been given the message, like, don't let any skeletons out of the closet. And, you know, when you're on an institutional visit and it's so shiny, you know something's not right. Because, we, as you know, as people that work at institutions, we know there is no perfect institution. So in terms of trying to sanitize reports, no, not so much. And again, you know the experience of reviewers vary, right? A lot of times, you know half the team is first-time reviewers on the team.

Even amidst arguing for the objective and consistent nature of the WSCUC site team process, Ciara acknowledged that there may be significant variance between site teams and reviewer

experience. As Phil described it, part of the reason he could provide more effective scrutiny at the IHE where he was assigned was because of his experience at a similar institution in the same public system.

Grace spoke about her experience with a site team and the fact that her IHE successfully glossed over an area—DEI—that may have needed more scrutiny:

One of the problems that can also sometimes happen with diversity is because people from the outside come in and they go, “Ooh, aah, everything is hunky-dory, right?” It’s very easy for us to just sell our diversity as something that we don’t have to work on.

Grace appeared to believe that the professional experience and context of the site team members created a gap in the review process. She believed that her IHE presented a rosier picture to elicit a positive review because the site reviewers were likely experiencing more challenges on a less diverse campus than where she works.

Research Question 1 Conclusion

Three major themes emerged from the data related to the first research question about the perceptions and beliefs of ALOs about the relationship between accreditation and institutional change. First, ALOs identified other change mechanisms, both internal and external, as more critical for change than the WSCUC accreditation process. Second, despite ALOs downplaying the role of accreditation, data from both the interviews and document review demonstrated tangible impacts on institutional change and decision-making in both the preparation and response to WSCUC. Third, there was evidence that multiple IHE and WSCUC site team factors mediated the focus and efficacy of change related to accreditation. These factors include internal

campus perceptions, levers for sustaining change, the influence of ALO-specific characteristics, and site team reviewer focus during the reaffirmation process.

Research Question 2: Accreditation and Campus Climate for Diversity

This section describes themes in the data related to the second research question in this study. Questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix G) related to the second research question focused on ALO familiarity with the WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy (EIP) and the relationship between different parts of the accreditation process and DEI issues.

The data that follows is organized by the three main themes for the second research question. The first theme was the inconsistent understanding and application of the WSCUC EIP and related terminology. The second theme was pervading ALO skepticism about the WSCUC accreditation's impact on campus climate for diversity regardless of ALO familiarity with the EIP or the prominence of related issues in the most recent reaffirmation process. The third theme utilizes the theoretical framework for this study, the MMDLE, as an interpretive tool to show that only a few dimensions of campus climate for diversity were emphasized by ALOs and in both the institutional and site team report while many dimensions were largely unaddressed through the most recent WSCUC accreditation process.

Theme 1: Inconsistency Surrounding the WSCUC EIP

The second half of the interview focused on ALO perceptions and beliefs regarding the WSCUC EIP because there is not any significant research on the relationship between regional accreditation and campus climate. This section describes three major subthemes in the data related to EIP inconsistency. First, there was a wide range of self-reported familiarity with the policy. Second, there were limited references in the data which indicated the degree to which the

EIP was prominent in the most recent accreditation process at each participating IHE. The last theme was limited references to campus climate and inconsistent definitions of this concept across all participants.

Familiarity with the EIP

The second half of the interview protocol started by gauging each ALO's familiarity with the EIP. In preparation for the interview, the confirmation e-mail for each ALO interview included the EIP as an attachment (Appendix C; see Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of the methodology) and participants had a chance to review the policy before the interview.

Familiarity with the EIP diverged among participants. When asked about their familiarity with the EIP, five of the eight ALOs quickly responded that they were "very" or "quite" familiar with the policy. The other three ALOs, Beth, Rachel, and Russell, reported very limited knowledge of the EIP. Beth discussed serving on multiple site teams at other IHEs, including teams that focused on issues related to diversity and inclusion. However, she reported that she had never read the EIP nor had she referenced it on a WSCUC site team. In her interview, Rachel said, "I knew it was there. I did reread it because you sent it, so I wouldn't have been able to quote chapter and verse for sure, but I knew that it existed and the general gist of it." She had some knowledge of the policy but did not reference it nor have significant familiarity with it even though her IHE received a recommendation related to diversity in the most recent accreditation cycle.

Russell was direct about his lack of familiarity with the EIP and why he believed it to be unlikely that he would have been familiar with it:

I actually was unaware of the new policy because I guess it's a 2017 revision. Diversity is something we put a lot of attention into that anyway on our campus. So, for the most part . . . we ignore WASC on diversity things because we have a lot of our own initiatives.

Russell read through the EIP after receiving it from the researcher:

The main thing that caught my eye was, we don't do a lot of direct assessment. I would say, it's you know, maybe not our priority for we want to put our assessment efforts right now. We're really much more focused on student learning outcome assessment.

Reading the policy provoked him to consider opportunities for improvement at his IHE. He may have recognized value in prioritizing the EIP in the future, but still had limited confidence in WSCUC's impact on diversity efforts at his campus.

Prominence in the Accreditation Process

Before understanding the possible impact of WSCUC accreditation on institutional change related to diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, it was necessary to understand what role, if any, the EIP and related criteria for review (CfR 1.4) played in the most recent cycle. Though ALOs indicated mixed familiarity with the EIP, they spoke to the role, or lack thereof, that these core WSCUC expectations played. In reviewing both the WSCUC site team letters and the available Institutional Reports, both CfR 1.4 and the EIP were infrequently mentioned explicitly.

The two IHEs that received the most praise from the WSCUC site team review process were at two of the three IHEs where ALOs indicated little or no familiarity with the EIP. In Rachel's site team report, the WSCUC reviewers commented on how well Rachel's IHE acted "in the spirit of the Commission's diversity policy" and that her IHE "has a deep-seated commitment to diversity in all its dimensions. It aims in various ways to reflect the diversity of

its local community.” This site team report mentioned the “Commission’s diversity policy,” which was the only explicit reference to the EIP in *any* site team report reviewed for this research. The Institutional Report at Russell’s IHE and site team report both mentioned that the previous accreditation cycle included expectations to address diversity related to retention and graduation across demographic groups. Russell’s IHE received a specific commendation about diversity, noting that they “continued good work on CfR 1.4, which focuses on the institutional commitment to diversity in society” in their most recent site team report.

For Phil, who indicated deep familiarity with CfR 1.4 and the EIP, there are numerous mentions of WSCUC expectations around diversity in the Institutional Report. For example, Phil’s Institutional Report connects an institutional learning outcome to the “WSCUC Standards of Diversity” and directly mentions the EIP. The report later states “the process of self-reflection has demonstrated that the University actively develops and implements programs that increase persistence and retention among student populations that have historically experienced lower graduation rates.” This claim was validated by both data presented in the report and other direct references to CfR 1.4. However, during a comprehensive outline of writing assignments given to various campus constituents to prepare for the Institutional Report, CfR 1.4 was one of the few criteria for review not referenced.

In contrast with the relatively positive picture described by Phil and his Institutional Report, the site team report for Phil’s IHE specifically identified diversity as an area that needs more attention “under CFR 1.4 and highlighted a need to focus more on diversity and its development on the campus.” The site team added:

Given the diversity of students at [the IHE] and the comments heard during the Accreditation Visit regarding lack of clarity about the meaning of diversity on campus, it will be important to consider how diversity plans impact priorities. In addition, it would be important to continue discussion of diversity, its definition/meaning, and significance for the campus.

With so much focus on diversity and its role at his IHE, it appeared that the site team also focused on this point in their evaluation under the WSCUC Standards. On the other hand, Ciara felt that when DEI were not prominent in the process or previous report, these issues could be minimized. At her current IHE, she said diversity “wasn’t highlighted as a recommendation or commendation actually. In my opinion, it’s kind of fallen to the background.” She commented on her past experience when the WSCUC noted DEI as a recommendation:

DEI was something that was highlighted in my previous institution. We had an interim report due on areas that they wanted us, I mean, it was a ten-year reaffirmation but they wanted an interim report. Um. And DEI was one of the areas.

The prominence of CfR 1.4 and the EIP was mixed, and it seemed to be correlated with the degree to which an IHE highlighted their DEI work and commitment during the accreditation process and in the self-report.

At Andre’s IHE, the off-site review of the Institutional Report led to specific lines of inquiry from the site team regarding certain minoritized student populations and student success. Andre reflected on the evolution of WSCUC expectations and saw the current standards as useful to generate questions that every WSCUC-accredited campus needs to have the capacity to answer:

When I think about the inclusivity piece, you know, I think that there's a lot of work still that we have to do, but as I'm looking at what WASC is trying to do around that, I think that that's where the field of institutional research and assessment really comes back into play here. It's becoming a standard expectation now that institutions will have the ability to disaggregate their enrollment data, their outcomes data, to basically illuminate whether or not there's disparities.

For Andre, WSCUC has required a minimum of baseline information. This information, in turn, has been used by campuses to address inequities or delve deeper into issues. Explicit references to CfR 1.4 and the EIP were limited in the data, but all document sources provided evidence that WSCUC expectations related to DEI could play a role in both preparing for and responding to accreditation.

Preparing for Accreditation. Prior to the significant revision of the EIP in 2013, there was some evidence that WSCUC held IHEs accountable to diversity standards under the old statement. In the Institutional Report for Grace's IHE, she described the current state of affairs at her IHE in the context of previous feedback. Related to diversity issues that needed ongoing attention, the report referenced a recent WSCUC "Special Visit [which] noted progress on 'addressing diversity-related concerns identified in the [previous] Commission action letter.'" Like other feedback from previous accreditation cycles, Grace's IHE paid particular attention to DEI issues because of critical feedback during the last campus visit.

As he did for the general WSCUC process, Russell minimized the role that the accreditation process played for his IHE. "Being a high-profile public institution, the legislature is on our case all the time about all manner of diversity issues already. So, to the extent that

WASC is involved, it's not breaking ground for us." The external force of a public system and government pressure was more influential. However, he did acknowledge that DEI issues were a part of the accreditation process, saying that a "part of a WASC review, is you want to convince the reviewers that things are going well. And diversity is an area where we think we can showcase a lot of things that are going well for us." Thus, for Russell, preparing for the accreditation process was a chance to highlight how they went above and beyond the minimum standards set by WSCUC. He believed that his IHE could leverage their work around diversity to bolster the strength of their case for reaffirmation.

Phil's IHE similarly tried to highlight diversity initiatives for the WSCUC site team. "I would say [DEI] was a big part of the context that we wanted to make sure our evaluators appreciated." This focus was reflected in the Institutional Report at Phil's IHE, which described some of the conversations that emerged during preparation for WSCUC accreditation. "Discussions revolved around several individual points, including: the need for developmental education on campus, whether high-impact educational practices are equitably distributed across campus, diversity training for faculty members, and how to assess the campus learning outcome of Engaged Citizenry." The report later states that "the process of self-reflection has demonstrated that the University actively develops and implements programs that increase persistence and retention among student populations that have historically experienced lower graduation rates." When asked about the ways that the preparing for accreditation inspired change related to DEI, Phil noted that he started in his role as ALO after much of the report writing process was underway. However, he believed that the preparation process likely influenced recent campus efforts. He said, "It's easy for me to picture things, like, we need a

chief diversity officer, or we need to do a campus climate survey arising out of the writing of those essays. I just can't say whether it did." In contrast to Russell, Phil believed that preparing for the WSCUC accreditation process more likely than not impacted campus decisions and efforts to support minoritized groups on campus.

The Institutional Report from Rachel's IHE described the need to continue work that began during the preparation process to interpret and actualize results from a recent diversity mapping project. The WSCUC site team also described this process and the IHE's recognition of "the necessity to take the results of the [recent] diversity mapping project and move forward to 'even more consideration of what diversity means at [the IHE].'" Thus, DEI issues were apparent at Rachel's IHE in both the preparation for and the response to WSCUC reaffirmation.

Responding to Accreditation. Despite a low number of explicit references to both the EIP and CfR 1.4 in preparation for a WSCUC accreditation process, there was still significant data in site team reports that required response. There were mixed responses from ALOs regarding this feedback.

Each of Beth, Phil, and Russell's campuses received formal commendations related to DEI in their site team reports. For Beth's IHE, the site team wrote that they were impressed by "[t]he significant dedication of its teaching faculty, administrators, and staff to the success of its diverse student body as evidenced by much higher than predicted retention and graduation rates." Phil's site team was impressed by "[r]emarkable improvements in student retention and graduation rates and a focus on student success and achievement" since the last accreditation cycle. Russell's site team commended his IHE for "closing the gap in rates for underrepresented minority students and first-generation students, while growing the student population and

increasing diversity.” It is important to note that each site team focused on the retention and graduation metrics in their commendations but did not address campus climate or overall campus definitions of diversity or inclusion. It seems that because these institutions outperformed retention and graduation expectations based on diverse student demographics, WSCUC did not provide further expectations regarding the EIP.

On the other hand, when the site team provided critical feedback or recommendations regarding DEI for four of the participating IHEs, the focus was on less specific metrics like retention and graduation, and more on diversity plans or creating shared definitions to guide overall campus efforts. This feedback yielded mixed responses from different IHEs. For example, the Institutional Report at Rachel’s IHE indicated that they planned to continue to expand work on an existing diversity-focused project “to promote richer and nuanced campus wide conversations that culminate in appropriate action to realize the institution’s long-standing commitment to diversity, educational equity, and inclusion.” The site team, however, noted that “[t]he recent, unexpected departure of the Chief Diversity Officer has brought to the surface several concerns about diversity and inclusion.” The site team gave Rachel’s IHE a formal recommendation to “build on the Diversity Mapping Project to promote richer and nuanced campus wide conversations that culminate in appropriate action to realize the institution’s long-standing commitment to diversity, educational equity, and inclusion.” Formal recommendations, as described earlier in this chapter, were perceived by ALOs as one of the most significant ways that WSCUC could leverage change. Rachel only discussed two of the five recommendations in our interview and never mentioned this substantive recommendation regarding improving campus efforts towards DEI.

At Phil's IHE, even though the institution received a commendation for strong graduation and retention metrics, the site team commented, "Finally, it was noted that while the institution is committed to providing educational opportunities and support for diverse students, it does not have a diversity plan." Phil mentioned that in response to the WSCUC report, "After we got our verdict, we commissioned a survey on campus climate that was extremely well-promoted. One of the best efforts we've been able to mount, and so the response rate was very high." He did not yet have the report results, but he was excited to see the opportunities for future improvement regarding campus climate and developing a more robust diversity plan.

For Andre, the site team said:

While [the IHE] has stated its commitment and demonstrated a willingness and capacity to identify and address equity concerns on campus, it is still unclear what communities the College seeks to serve or how changing social demographics will impact the way the institution serves its students and the public good. There is also no evidence that the College assesses perceptions of campus climate by students, staff and faculty on a regular basis and share that data with the campus community or that said data is used to inform institutional action.

Andre's site team had two formal recommendations related to DEI. The first was to "develop a holistic advising system, in particular for students from under-represented groups, which considers equity in workload for faculty," and the second was to "strengthen experience and sense of belonging throughout the student lifecycle."

And finally, at the site team for Jaina's IHE had a formal recommendation to "foster equity and inclusion across all three campuses through implementation of the Diversity Plan

developed by the Diversity Leadership Team (CfRs 1.4, 3.1).” However, Jaina did not view this feedback, even as a formal recommendation, as very significant. She said:

The diversity as an action item was actually very, very, very, very small. It was simply, within the context of the action item itself, was actually continue the work that the institution was doing around student success, including the disaggregation of data, and that the university had a chance to actually be a model.

Jaina acknowledged that formal feedback from the WSCUC influenced her IHE’s action, stating, “They’re coming back to check on this, right? And so they’re going to want to see that we’ve actually implemented. And so, that’s going to be, I mean, that’s an important lever for getting stuff done internally.” Her admission that WSCUC feedback would be a driver of institutional change while simultaneously minimizing the significance of this feedback supported the first theme in the findings for the second question that there was inconsistency surrounding the EIP. As illustrated in the next section, a lack of operationalization of the term “campus climate” also contributed to this lack of consistency in the accreditation process.

Campus Climate Vagueness

The last subtheme regarding inconsistency surrounding the WSCUC EIP was vagueness surrounding the use of the term “campus climate” in both the interviews and document analysis. As described in Chapter 2, this term has been often poorly defined in practical usage; at times, ALOs did not even use the term consistently with what was reported in their institutional reports.

For example, the Institutional Report from Rachel’s IHE noted that a core strategic priority in a recent strategic planning process was “campus climate.” In the linked strategic planning document, the definition and objectives related to campus climate did not explicitly

reference DEI issues; rather, the document focused on the “ability to work together as a team” and other statements that did not address student experience. Another core strategic priority addressed in the report was diversity and educational equity. However, in the document’s conclusion, campus climate was explicitly mentioned as a part of addressing diversity goals on campus. When asked about any work happening recently around campus climate, Rachel said:

Not lately. There, we got this award a couple years back from [a national publication] for campus climate. So, there was a little bit then. I honestly don’t know what’s up right now. As part of that, there were a couple of campus-wide surveys, I want to say [a couple of years ago].

Even though campus climate was a core strategic priority that was unrelated to DEI, Rachel did not recall any details of these campus efforts, nor did she distinguish the work on campus happening around educational equity and diversity.

The Institutional Report at Russell’s IHE, in contrast, directly connected campus climate to DEI issues. The WSCUC site team also noted that the IHE, “is addressing a healthy campus climate across all populations,” including faculty, staff, and students. In the interview, though, Russell indicated that recent efforts around campus climate were only focused on student experience, and any broad assessment of campus climate was sporadic:

There was a big system-wide one that was a little while ago. Maybe that’s around 2013 or something like that. We haven’t done another big survey like that. We are in the process of doing focus groups, I think primarily for students, so I’m not a big part of that effort. There is some work going on with focus groups for students for assessing campus climate.

There appears to be a general understanding that campus climate issues relate to DEI, but it remains unclear in what types of issues are included when discussing campus climate.

Other ALOs offered similarly mixed definitions or few references to campus climate. The Institutional Report from Beth's IHE only made one reference to campus climate, and it implied that for their IHE, climate was tied to DEI issues. In site team report for Jaina's IHE, reviewers pointedly noted that, "The most recent climate study was not comprehensive of the entire campus, and was arguably out of date by the time of the visit," but did not indicate a climate study should assess. When asked if there were any recent campus climate assessments or work happening on campus, Jaina and Grace both described still nascent efforts to regularly assess campus climate through a robust sample.

The lack of a consistent operationalization and understanding of campus climate resulted in a wide range of perspectives from ALOs on its importance. This ambiguity also appeared to be tied to the second theme in the findings for the second research question—widespread skepticism among participants about the possible impact of WSCUC accreditation on campus climate for diversity.

Theme 2: Pervading ALO Skepticism

Across all interviews, ALOs consistently expressed skepticism about any substantive relationship between WSCUC accreditation and campus climate for diversity. Some participants believed their institutions would always be ahead of any WSCUC definitions or standards related to DEI issues. Grace was dubious that the WSCUC process was set up to effectively evaluate campus climate for any IHE. Many participants did not believe that external pressure was sufficient to sustain changes related to DEI issues including campus climate for diversity.

Phil, Russell, and Rachel believed that their IHEs were already focused on DEI issues, and the WSCUC likely added little to institutional improvement efforts. When asked how WSCUC may have impacted changes related to DEI, Russell said:

I can't name any for us. . . . No, this was just reporting on what we were already doing and we are continuing to do and are doing because of other reasons, you know, a combination of intrinsic as well as the legislature pushes us on a number of these issues.

Russell later softened his stance slightly and acknowledged that the WSCUC process could inspire DEI-related change:

And so for us, it's been the assessment side that's been where the accrediting commission has pushed us, but I can see how for some campuses on accreditation would result in changes on the diversity side. That's just not our particular situation.

Similarly, Rachel indicated that a commitment to DEI issues is embedded at her IHE. She saw any change or conversation related to DEI as only coincidental during that last WSCUC reaffirmation process.

Phil did not rule out the possibility that WSCUC expectations impacted DEI. He pointed to a regular commitment to DEI work as prominent at his IHE, saying, “[Equity and inclusion discussion is] hard to disentangle. You know, it's embedded in all our discussions, whether or not they're focused on accreditation.” But he was tepid about the WSCUC EIP or related criteria having a substantive impact:

There really wasn't anything in the policy for us to object to or that struck us as alien. If anything, it was useful for setting some rules of thumb or benchmarks, like we expect to see this number of staff. We expect to see this number of, who are these indicators of

institutional commitment. Those were kind of helpful for us, but it was all going with the grain.

Like Russell and Rachel, Phil repeatedly emphasized that his IHE was already doing work that exceeded any of the standards set by WSCUC.

Grace was also uncertain of the efficacy of WSCUC reaffirmation process as a mechanism for significant change around DEI issues. She felt that site team reviewers struggled to accurately assess areas of growth at her IHE's highly demographically diverse campus in the most recent reaffirmation process. She said, "I think a lot of the external reviewers have assumed that as well because they come from campuses that have to really struggle with inclusion. And so they walk on campus, and they're like, 'Wow!'" Grace felt that one of the struggles at her campus was diversity being taken for granted due to the diversity of the campus and surrounding community. She acknowledged that there were issues at her IHE, but the site team did not provide any recommendations, formal or otherwise, related to DEI issues.

This lack of ability or willingness to name obvious issues related to the EIP mirrored Grace's experience as a site team reviewer:

I tried bringing it up with the sub[stantive] change people. I guess, they were a little uncomfortable with trying to talk about that when to me, it's like, it's kind of crystal clear what your problem is. So, I think that there's this ideal world where [CfR] 1.4 is about, right, recognizing, and really, urging institutions to think about inclusivity, and some of the gaps in education. But here you had an institution that obviously was struggling. And yet we weren't able to make any kind of, you know, because people, I think, still are uncomfortable with making those kinds of, you know, assertions.

Grace noted that, as a site team reviewer, obvious issues with campus climate and recruitment that were explicitly referenced in the EIP but her other site team reviewers were unwilling to name these issues in their feedback to the IHE under review. She therefore did not believe that WSCUC could make a significant impact on DEI until the EIP was applied consistently.

Other participants expressed doubt that *any* external force would create sustained positive change for campus climate for diversity at their IHE. For Russell, the concern was pragmatic:

Trying to get a definition of diversity that applies to a large public to a small private religious institution to a graduate-only specialized institution, they're all really different.

And so I think it makes sense that for some institutions the accreditation process is going to have a bigger impact than for others.

Russell revisited the idea that accreditation could only impact campus climate for diversity at a narrow set of institutional types, and he did not believe that the WSCUC standards would ever exceed or drive change at his IHE.

Andre and Jaina were also dubious that shifts in campus climate for diversity may come from an external force because of the complicated nature of DEI issues. Jaina believed that “[WSCUC accreditation] still can be a powerful lever for making some kind of shift in a culture.” However, she went on to say:

It doesn't mean that it changes the climate. It means that [the IHE will] be able to demonstrate that they've done stuff, right? And that's what you need. Right? You just need to demonstrate progress, and then it can still appear on the next kind of thing. So, to get the kind of inclusive environment that we'd like to have, does it produce that? Does that ever come from external, *just* external means?

Andre also felt that if WSCUC accreditation had any impact, it was only as a part of a larger, ongoing effort. He made clear his belief that DEI issues were, “by definition... not quick fixes.” He was concerned that some IHEs, in an effort to meet the WSCUC standards, might undermine “the longer-term sustainability of some of these [DEI] initiatives” by trying to check off short-term metrics in the reaffirmation process. He felt it was important that IHEs balance ongoing and sustainable change with WSCUC expectations related to DEI.

ALOs did not believe the WSCUC accreditation process could consistently or sustainably cause change related to campus climate for diversity for a variety of reasons. However, as illustrated in the third theme for the second research question, the combination of ALO skepticism and inconsistency surrounding the EIP meant that participants and the institutional and site team reports only emphasized a few elements of campus climate for diversity.

Theme 3: Lack of Multicontextual Emphasis

The third theme in the findings for the second research question about ALO perceptions of the possible impact of the WSCUC accreditation process on campus climate for diversity is the lack of multicontextual emphasis in both participant interviews and document review. As described in Chapter 2 (see Figure 1 for a visual representation), the theoretical framework for this study is the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) created by Hurtado et al. (2012). The MMDLE identifies five dimensions of campus climate for diversity that are a part of the institutional context—historical, organizational, compositional, psychological, and behavioral. The institutional context, in turn, influences and is influenced by three additional external contexts—sociohistorical, policy, and community context and external commitments. In Chapter 3, I described the analytical process for mapping elements of the

WSCUC EIP onto these eight discrete elements for the MMDLE. Four elements of campus climate for diversity—the compositional and organizational dimensions and the sociohistorical and community contexts—were frequently addressed in the data sources; the remaining three dimensions and the policy context were infrequently mentioned in the interviews or reports. The findings are organized below according to these two main subthemes of frequently and infrequently addressed internal dimensions and external contexts.

Frequently Addressed Internal Dimensions and External Contexts

Compositional. The compositional dimension of the MMDLE refers to the number of students, staff, and faculty who hold diverse identities at an IHE (Hurtado et al., 1999; Milem et al., 2004). Each of the main data sources addressed the compositional dimension in different ways. Institutional reports focused largely on student demographics, especially as compared to peers, with some examination of student achievement disaggregated by key demographics. Site team reports discussed the importance of continuing to increase compositional diversity for both students and faculty. A couple of ALOs acknowledged that the compositional diversity was only a starting point for IHEs to impact student success or campus climate for diversity.

Institutional Reports. Five participants had publicly available institutional reports, wherein there were frequent references to campus demographics that often highlighted an increasingly diverse composition among the student population. There were less frequent references to staff or faculty demographic composition. In most references to composition in the institutional reports, participants highlighted greater diversity on their own campus compared to peer institutions or the IHE during its last WSCUC reaffirmation cycle.

While these five institutional reports often cited institutional student diversity, fewer described how the IHE continued to try to expand or improve compositional diversity. In the Institutional Report from Grace's IHE indicated that, "As tuition has increased, we have allocated 1% more of it per year to scholarships, to remain accessible even to low-income students," showing a commitment to at least maintaining access for diversity across class. A single graduate program was highlighted in the Institutional Report at Russell's IHE report for "a focus on attracting and retaining a new generation of scientists, particularly among women and underrepresented minorities." The same report indicated that many programs at Russell's IHE examined many different student identity markers to not only ensure compositional diversity in accessing programs but to find ways to improve equity in student achievement. Other institutional reports disaggregated student achievement data across key identity markers like race, ethnicity, and gender, and reports include some limited references to support programs for minoritized student groups.

Site Team Reports. While the institutional reports focused mostly on student compositional diversity, site team reports were focused on increasing student demographic composition and closing student achievement gaps across groups. Multiple site team reports commended IHEs for achieving designations such as Asian American/Native American/Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) or Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). In addition to these formal designations, site teams were attentive to increasing student diversity related to first-generation college students and Pell-eligible students. A few site teams indicated the need to address support services and consider the future ramifications of campus recruitment efforts if compositional diversity were to increase. For example, the site team for Andre's IHE wrote,

“The college’s ability to attract and provide access for high-need and Pell eligible students will be difficult if the discount rate remains” at its current rate for student financial aid. Site teams consistently referenced campus demographics and reflected, if sometimes in a limited manner, on what disaggregated student achievement data meant for the IHE. Grace’s site team was more direct in their assessment of the need to improve outcomes for an already quite diverse student body:

One significant challenge to the University’s efforts to retain and graduate its students is what it describes as the “high risk” community which it serves and the general under-preparation of its students which led to 40%-50% of in-state students being on academic warning or probation. . . . Access in the absence of clear evidence of accomplishment is not enough.

In other site team reports, reviewers tended to be less critical of IHEs with significant compositional diversity, mostly praising those colleges for the efforts made to improve outcomes without actually addressing reported disparities for minoritized student groups.

Site team reports discussed faculty demographics frequently compared to the corresponding institutional reports. Similar to their feedback on student compositional diversity and outcomes, site teams lauded efforts while occasionally challenging IHEs to increase compositional diversity. However, these reports either noted the need for improvement without tangible feedback or, more often, vaguely acknowledged existing policies and processes as adequate for expected improvement by WSCUC. For example, in the site team report for Beth’s IHE, reviewers said that faculty compositional diversity is “well-positioned nationally; however, the effort to improve the number of URMs [underrepresented minorities] in the faculty ranks

needs to continue.” In the site team letter to Phil’s IHE, WSCUC feedback noted that his IHE is “instituting best practices to develop a diverse faculty and discussed approaches to address the lower yield rate of TT [tenure-track] hires than other campuses.” It was implied in this statement that the IHE should have had a similar yield rate to other system schools, and that the site team accepted that the current efforts aligned with “best practices” were adequate to the task. Site teams regularly acknowledged trying to diversify faculty was an important goal, though rarely with any reference to measurable expectations or goals.

ALO Interviews. References to compositional diversity were more limited in the ALO interviews. Andre and Russell each positioned the compositional dimension within the larger institutional picture through more nuanced perspectives than was evident in the document review data in either institutional reports or site team reports. Russell put his view succinctly, saying, “Well, it’s not just having diverse people, but then you need to take actions around it. That’s important.” He believed that because his IHE was a public institution, there was a relatively recent pressure that had developed to reflect the state high school demographics. He said that this newer development exposed the challenge of keeping faculty aware that it was no longer enough to only have representation. He said, “First it was, you know, do we have people here? It’s the diversity part. But now we’re on the equity part of, you know, are these people graduating at the same rate? Are they graduating the same time?” Russell understood that compositional diversity was only one element of student success, and throughout the interview he raised the need for IHEs to think beyond just demographic representation.

Andre held a similar view of compositional diversity, noting that it was only a “beginning point” for IHEs, and that “what’s important to me is that thinking about the fact that if we admit

them, we have the burden to, we have the burden of responsibility, the duty, to serve them.”

Andre returned to the idea of serving all admitted students from multiple angles during the interview, including a critique of campus designations related only to hitting certain demographic thresholds:

You know, calling yourself a Hispanic-serving institution just because 25% of your enrollment happens to be Hispanic. To me, that means something different. You know, being a Hispanic-serving institution is that you’re cognizant that it’s not just a matter of, well, Hispanic is one big bucket. But you’re also looking at all the subgroups that are embedded within that demographic term that was commandeered by the Census Bureau.

He was concerned with the idea that once IHEs achieve a certain level of compositional diversity, representation alone will be enough to ensure student success. He wanted to know that IHEs also have the organizational resources and commitment to support minoritized students.

Organizational. The organizational dimension of the campus climate for diversity refers to current regular functions at the IHE through processes like admissions, hiring, budget, academic goals, and curriculum (Hurtado et al., 2012). Many of these elements have been reported through the WSCUC accreditation process, and thus the organizational dimension was addressed often in the data sources. As described in Chapter 2, the organizational dimension has three main categories of current research—context for policy and practice, important policies and practices, and organizational processes to improve climate for diversity. Institutional policies and practices, both formal and informal, demonstrate the degree to which an IHE is committed to supporting diverse groups (Hurtado et al., 2012). This section begins by describing important policies and practices grouped by administrative, academic, and informal categories. The last

part of the section describes the degree to which processes to improve climate for diversity were discussed in the interviews and two reports.

Important Administrative Policies and Practices. WSCUC reaffirmation has focused on the degree to which an IHE is fulfilling its mission, and it has been standard practice for participating IHEs to submit significant information about campus- and unit-level mission statements, strategic plans and goals, and core institutional values in their institutional reports. Thus, it was unsurprising that institutional reports were the most common data source regarding administrative policies and practices related to campus climate for diversity.

In the five accessible institutional reports, there were considerable references to formal structures for addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion. These reports used phrases like “diversity and cultural infusion” and “accessible education” in mission statements, strategic goals, and core values. Many references to these types of goals or values included specific supporting evidence of new or ongoing programs. For example, Rachel’s institutional report noted that one of the strategic core values is rooted in “diversity and educational equity.” The report highlighted a “Diversity Strategic Plan” being developed to identify “a comprehensive strategy and vision for diversity and educational equity that will result in an optimal deployment of resources and talent to meet the growing needs of a diverse university community and region.” The Institutional Report from Rachel’s IHE also described the prominent role of the office—which reported directly to the President’s Office—responsible for these efforts as well as consistent themes around diversity across departmental mission statements. Overall, the five institutional reports demonstrated that IHEs wanted to emphasize their commitment to DEI and

illustrated this through tangible resources like programmatic resources, grant-funded programs, and prominent placement in strategic goals and mission statements.

Site team reports also made limited references to administrative roles and programs that either advanced DEI goals or did not provide enough evidence of resources to meet the IHE's stated goals or mission. For example, in the site team report for Andre's IHE, the reviewers said that the IHE "states it has a multi-pronged approach to improving diversity, equity, and inclusion across the campus." It then described a new committee that was established to play a primary role in improving diversity in hiring practices for faculty and staff and noted a high-ranking administrator position that coordinates efforts and finances across campus programs to support DEI initiatives.

Jaina's site team reviewers similarly lauded new positions hired to support the success of minoritized student groups. However, while they noted the "significant progress . . . toward the commission's expectations," the reviewers also said that "the team discovered more work still to be accomplished," and criticized a recent initiative for stopping out due to staff turnover in key roles.

Unlike the institutional and site reports, there were few specific references in the ALO interviews to administrative policies and practices related to DEI. Nevertheless, the reports provided enough evidence to illustrate that IHEs and WSCUC site team reviewers were concerned with demonstrating robust administrative efforts to support campus climate for diversity. As described in the next section, data from institutional reports and site team reports also indicated a commitment to infusing DEI conversations and outcomes in academic policies and practices.

Academic Policies and Practices. Similar to the administrative policies and practices, evidence of attention to academic policies and practices was found almost exclusively in institutional reports with some reference in site team reports. In the five available institutional reports, there were many references to the way that DEI has been woven into the fabric of the institution. For example, Russell’s institutional report discussed how it is an institutional value to place “an emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, aligned with our campus principles of community.” Phil’s institutional report asserted that “diversity and valuing diversity are embedded throughout the curriculum.” These broad statements were not often backed with embedded evidence, but there was clear data for all institutions that DEI and related terms were addressed in core competencies or institutional learning outcomes for all students.

Many IHEs noted general education course requirements in the curriculum beyond these broad learning outcomes, especially for undergraduate programs. Curricular policies were not static either. During her interview, Rachel said, “That we’ve got, not as a result necessarily of the WASC visit, but we do, we did revisit three years ago, our course requirements around diversity and have created a six-unit diversity and equity requirement.” Rachel’s IHE previously had a three-unit requirement, and while she did not attribute it to the recent reaffirmation process that coincided with the change, the institution had expanded this curricular requirement to six credits.

Site teams noted when IHEs had a longstanding or recently revised commitment to DEI in the curriculum. Russell’s site team report indicated that, “in 2010, [the IHE] reviewed its general education requirements to take into account diversity.” As another example, Andre’s site team wrote, “Social responsibility and intercultural understanding were officially incorporated into the curriculum and educational objectives for students to meet [more than 20 years ago].”

Site teams also commended some IHEs for ongoing improvement for these types of learning outcomes or core competencies. Members of the site team for Andre’s IHE also observed:

When [the IHE] discovered that students were not meeting expectations for social responsibility and interdisciplinary and intercultural exploration, a task force was established to research best practices on related educational objectives elsewhere, define these educational objectives for [the IHE], and develop course criteria and student learning outcomes for meeting these educational objectives.

Like other expectations from WSCUC around assessment, site teams were concerned with the measured outcomes from DEI-related core competencies and learning outcomes beyond just the existence of such academic outcomes.

Informal Practices and Attitudes. All three data sources noted informal practices and attitudes that related to the organizational dimension of campus climate for diversity, usually through a perception of high levels of commitment or engagement with DEI topics. Site team and institutional report data were also consistent with interviewee perspectives at each participating IHE. For example, in the site team report, for Andre’s IHE, WSCUC reviewers commented that, “The social justice and community engagement focus of the college was particularly distinctive, according to community members.” Andre described the level of commitment this way:

You’ll notice that some of the things that I’m referring to here intersect across different functional areas. . . . But it’s try not to do that in an add-on way. It’s trying to integrate that DEI conversation across various functional areas very intentionally.

While Andre did not identify specific programs or policies that organizationally drove work on campus climate for diversity, his view of his IHE's commitment to this work aligned with the impressions left on the site team.

Phil's site team reports and interview perspectives were similarly aligned. The site report lauded the IHE for being "clearly committed to student access and success based on a myriad array of support programs for first-time freshman and transfer students as well as equity-focused programs for historically underserved populations." During the interview, Phil gushed about the level of institutional commitment to DEI issues:

Absolutely the highest it could possibly be. There's, there's really no, nothing gets in front of that in the priorities of our president or his cabinet. It comes up in every public speech. It's part of the communications that draw people here to work in the first place or to be students. It's just baked in every step. It's pretty great.

Other participants, including Beth, Russell, and Rachel, described a regular focus on and a commitment to serving minoritized student groups with corresponding site team confirmation.

Processes to Improve Climate for Diversity. While informal practices and attitudes are an important part of the organizational dimensions of campus climate, it is also critical to the organizational element to have dedicated processes to improve campus climate for diversity that are deeply embedded from start to finish (Hurtado et al., 2012). There was limited evidence of processes designed to specifically improve climate, all of it located in institutional reports, despite the other elements of the organizational dimension having been broadly addressed in the data. For Beth and Phil, there were references to multiple comprehensive programs intended to

support the success of minoritized students. But neither mentioned campus-wide efforts to assess or improve campus climate for these groups.

The Institutional Report at Rachel's IHE indicated the start of a more thorough effort to improve climate for diversity. The report indicated:

As part of [the IHE's] Strategic Plan for Diversity and Educational Equity . . . the campus contracted with [a consulting group] to assess the inclusion of the value of diversity throughout the University by carrying out a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative diversity mapping study across the entire campus.

As previously described in this chapter, the WSCUC site team reviewers noted that Rachel's IHE had yet to implement any changes in response to this consulting data and it was unclear if Rachel's IHE will ever implement processes to improve climate for diversity.

The Institutional Report for Russell's IHE also indicated recent shifts in processes and to improve campus climate for diversity:

The campus has evolved its organization and consultation processes to better support overarching goals such as furthering the cultural and social diversity of the campus community and cultivating an inclusive campus climate. The Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion was established . . . and the campus has a broad-based Advisory Council on Campus Climate, Culture and Inclusion that includes faculty, staff, students, community members, and alumni, and reports directly to [campus leadership].

Throughout all data sources, this excerpt described the most deeply embedded organizational element with a direct stated goal of improving campus climate for diversity. However, there was

no reference to work completed by the advisory council or any outcomes related to campus climate.

Overall, there was significant data covering various elements of the organizational dimension across all participants. Interviews and reports described both formal and informal processes and practices administratively and academically. However, there was limited evidence that participating IHEs had deeply embedded organizational processes specifically designed to improve campus climate for diversity. The next sections describes one of the external contexts illustrating frequently addressed elements of the MMDLE, the sociohistorical context.

Sociohistorical. The sociohistorical context is the widest external context within the MMDLE, and it includes all elements of the broad culture in which an IHE is situated (Hurtado et al., 2012). It has been an underdeveloped area of the MMDLE with limited direct research linking the sociohistorical context to institutional change. Nevertheless, there were references in seven of the eight data sets to elements of the larger sociohistorical context. The most common reference to sociohistorical context was the pending demographic shift for college students—a challenge that participating IHEs appeared to be approaching more proactively than reactively. In interview or institutional data for seven of the eight participating ALOs, there were references to the need to anticipate the likely increase in compositional diversity at their IHE. Participants used phrases like “the changing landscape of who’s going to college” and “the demographic shift” to describe the need to plan ahead for the mid-2020s when a major shift in college-bound student racial and ethnic diversity has been projected. Half of the site teams also commented on IHE preparedness for this shift. For example, Andre’s site team wrote, “Discussions with multiple groups in academic and student affairs suggested the college is beginning to prepare for

the changing higher education environment.” The frequency with which WSCUC site team reviews noted this sociohistorical context also supported the conclusion that this aspect of the sociohistorical context was regularly addressed.

There were limited data related to other aspects of the sociohistorical context. Two institutional reports pointed to specific conditions in the local community that still had a lasting impact on students and the role of the IHE. Grace’s institutional report noted:

Our unique position in a community that is both rich in history but also victim to the collapse of large-scale colonial-era agriculture provides us with a responsibility not only to uphold respect for the values and lessons of the past but also to lead the way in sustainable development.

Grace directly connected colonial-era historical remnants that impacted the local community and her IHE as a result. As described in the next section, Grace made multiple references to the community context, but the quotation above indicated a clear understanding of the larger sociohistorical context for current local conditions. Similarly, Phil’s institutional report identified some institutional challenges as “[c]omplex societal problems such as economic adversity, food and housing insecurity, and the ongoing problem of relatively high urban-area crime rates, which impact . . . students.” While these challenges are a part of the wider sociohistorical context, Phil’s IHE directly linked these issues to student achievement. Both of these references, while sociohistorical in nature, alluded to the importance of understanding the local community context. The next section addresses this final supporting theme for the frequently referenced element of the MMDLE.

Community Context and External Commitments. The community context and external commitments include such things as the local context where the IHE is situated as well as communities not formally connected to the IHE where students maintain connections to other communities, such as religious or cultural (Hurtado et al., 2012). Two participants, Jaina and Rachel, made limited reference to the local community context. Three participants (Phil, Beth, and Grace) made regular references to the importance of the local community context and its role as a driver of many aspects of their IHEs.

For Phil, the local context was used to frame some of the challenges the IHE perceived it faced in recruitment and incoming student readiness. The institutional report indicated that one of the key challenges for the IHE was, “Underserved, underfunded, and overburdened area K-12 schools that leave many students unprepared for the rigors of university education.” The WSCUC site team report indicated that it was founded to be “responsive to the area’s racially and ethnically diverse population and their desire for access to higher education,” and Phil understood this history. He acknowledged it as a challenge but also described it more as a natural feature of the IHE from its inception.

Beth described similar challenges, and as her report notes, the IHE is “located in a substantially poorer region of the state. This is a region that has been historically underrepresented in higher education and lacks local opportunity for students to get high tech internships and subsequent employment.” The site team report lauded Beth’s IHE for an excellent relationship with the city where it is located in spite of these challenges. There was also evidence that the community context influenced campus programs. Their orientation for new undergraduate students touted a “concurrent program for parents or guests, offered in Spanish

and English, communicates expectations for families as partners in their student's success, with learning outcomes emphasizing a student-centered perspective of the university experience.”

This program has been intended to meet common needs for a large portion of students attending from surrounding communities who have often been first-generation students from predominantly Spanish-speaking households.

Of all the participants, Grace illustrated the most reciprocal influence between the community context and the IHE. Her IHE's institutional report noted its special positionality within the community context in multiple instances, including that, “One of [the IHE's] greatest strengths comes from being in a unique position to meet the needs of our community.” The site team report reflected this view, describing the IHE as “an intellectual, cultural, and social center for many of the community activities of the [region].” Grace's IHE has been dedicated to meeting the regional needs, going so far as to develop a “Rubric for Cultural Diversity” that helped assess campus efforts, academically and otherwise, in a way that adapts to the many different cultural needs. The WSCUC used this rubric as an example for other regional campuses to perform similar work.

Grace also described some ways that the local community context and external commitments impacted major decisions at her IHE. As a highly diverse campus, some subgroups of broader demographic categories underperformed but the IHE had not always disaggregated data on student performance finely enough to parse out these discrepancies. Grace credited, “advocacy groups in the communities that are always putting pressure on us,” as a major cause for some institutional changes, both for data disaggregation and for program development.

While not all participants showed the same awareness of the relationship between community contexts, external commitments, and the IHE, there was evidence that this element of the MMDLE was addressed with some regularity through the WSCUC accreditation process. As described above, the compositional and organizational dimensions were also significantly covered through the data in the institutional reports and site team reports with some references in the ALO interviews. However, the remaining internal dimensions and external contexts were rarely, if at all, present in the research data.

Infrequently Addressed Internal Dimensions and External Contexts

The third theme for the second research question was the lack of multicontextual emphasis when considering all aspects of the MMDLE. This section describes the few references to each of the remaining internal dimensions (historical, behavioral, and psychological) and external contexts (policy and sociohistorical). These elements of the theoretical framework described in this section were infrequently addressed overall, but it is important to note that the degree to which each element was addressed by each participating IHE still varied.

Historical. The historical dimensions of MMLDE describes the legacy of access and full inclusion (or lack thereof) for certain identity-based groups (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999). Three of the eight participating ALOs worked at relatively new IHEs. For these three (Beth, Rachel, and Phil), there was evidence of a greater commitment to diverse populations from the IHE's inception. For example, Phil said that, "We are an equity-minded, access-oriented institution. We're Hispanic-serving. We're minority-serving. We were conceived in the aftermath of [an important local historical event related to race], specifically to serve this community in this location." He tied core institutional values and characteristics to the IHE's historical context.

Similarly, institutional reports for both Beth and Rachel noted the historical circumstances surrounding their young IHEs.

The historical impact on current circumstances and policies was rarely considered in other research data. There was a minor reference in Russell's institutional report to the impact of history, "Collective bargaining is strong at [the IHE], as befits a campus with our legacy of political activism." It was unclear how this history impacts current efforts around campus climate for diversity. For Jaina, she perceived a lack of continuity in institutional DEI efforts that preceded her time at the IHE. During her interview, she said, "There was other work going on around diversity that way precedes me that had been stop-start, stop-start, stop-start, stop-start. And we still don't know whether stop-start, stop-start, but that's kind of its history." This insight from Jaina does not necessarily indicate a historical precedent for inclusion or exclusion, but it was one of the few contextual pieces of insight into what perspective participating ALOs have on the historical dimension of campus climate for diversity.

Individual-Level Dimensions. The MMDLE has two individual-level dimensions, behavioral and psychological. The behavioral dimension covers all interactions between people across different identity groups, while the psychological dimension includes individuals' perceptions of intergroup interactions, discrimination, conflict, or the general institutional environment (Hurtado et al., 1999). As described in Chapter 2, studies and campus surveys have often measured both of these dimensions together. In this study, the limited data points on both of these dimensions also included evidence that these dimensions have been lumped together. For example, in Russell's institutional report, the IHE considered, "the influence of experiential factors such as satisfaction, sense of belonging, academic engagement and disengagement, self-

assessed gains in academic and social competencies, and perceptions of campus climate.” Many of these factors were tied up in both psychology and behavioral dimensions, and there was no clear indication that these factors were disaggregated by these individual-level elements. Andre expressed concern for minoritized students’ experience, both behavioral and psychological, “What are we doing to ensure that students are not feeling isolated? That they’re not feeling, like, you know, they’re being tokenized? That they feel that they’re part of the campus community?” Unpacking the answers to these questions requires understanding of both the behavioral and psychological dimensions of campus climate for diversity, but there were limited references to either of these dimensions in the data sources of this study.

Behavioral. The only direct references to IHE attention on the behavioral dimension of campus climate for diversity were in the institutional reports. In both Rachel’s and Grace’s reports, the authors mentioned national survey results which indicated that students had more frequent and more positive contact across racial identities than peer schools. While both of these reports highlighted these results as a strength, there was no evidence of reflection on disaggregated results across racial identities or intentional campus programs to produce these results. Similarly, Russell’s institutional report touted cross-group interactions:

Multicultural and interdisciplinary aspects of the first-year experience are also reinforced as students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and different academic interests develop relationships and a strong sense of community in their colleges. These experiences help shape their subsequent years as learners.

It may be true that these experiences shape later years in student experiences, but it was unclear if these cross-group interactions are incidental or intentional. In these few data points on the

behavioral dimension, there was little to understand to what degree, if at all, participating IHEs sought to understand the frequency or quality of intergroup interactions.

Psychological. Unlike the behavioral dimension, ALO interviews were the only substantive data source for reference to the psychological dimension of campus climate for diversity. They were, however, a few examples, similar to the extent that data was scarce for each dimension. When describing a recent campus climate survey, the results of which were still being sorted and aggregated, Phil said, “We thought, ‘Well, as diverse as we are, really no one should be feeling any intolerance.’ And yet we feel like there probably are some issues there we should address.” Only in a very recent survey did he indicate that his IHE was considering the perceptions of campus climate for diversity. Andre also talked about efforts still in nascent development through institutional research at his IHE, “to get a clearer sense of how students are viewing their experiences here with us, and how it may shape or color the lens that they then take with them as they pursue graduate school, employment, or other things.” Ciara described a broad institutional concern about “student belonging on campus, particularly for our historically marginalized students, our first-gen students.” However, she did not describe any similar efforts or concern for the psychological dimension of campus climate for diversity at her IHE.

Policy. The policy context is the external context directly above the full institutional context, considered part of the macrolevel system (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). It includes local, state, and federal policies that influence student access, experience, and outcomes; regional accreditation is clearly situated within this external context (Hurtado et al., 2012). There were few other references to other aspects of the external policy context. For the five public schools in the study, ALOs occasionally referred to system-level initiatives as important drivers of

institutional change or standard-setting. In one or two instances, these system-level efforts were tied to state goals or expectations; there were virtually no references to federal policies. Because the focus of this study was on the relationship between the WSCUC accreditation process and institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity, there was significant evidence in this narrow part of the policy context described throughout this chapter.

Research Question 2 Conclusion

There was an inconsistency in understanding and applying the EIP, part of which was the lack of a clear definition of “campus climate,” as illustrated in the first theme related to second research question about ALO beliefs and perceptions of the relationship between WSCUC accreditation and change related to campus climate for diversity. The second theme that emerged from the data was the pervasive skepticism from ALOs that WSCUC accreditation could be a catalyst for change related to campus climate for diversity, even for participating ALOs who had direct experience to the contrary. In the third theme in the findings, evidence from both interviews and document review shows that participating IHEs focused in varied ways on certain internal and external elements of the theoretical framework of this study, the MMDLE. This lack of multicontextual evidence and perspective limits the ways in which accreditation appears to be related to campus climate for diversity for these IHEs.

Summary and Conclusion

The data in this study illustrated consistent evidence of the impact of WSCUC accreditation on institutional decision-making and change in general. There was less, but still substantial, evidence that change and decision-making related to campus climate for diversity are impacted by WSCUC accreditation. Despite this evidence, ALOs were skeptical of such an

impact and there was a lack of consistency in understanding and applying the EIP at each participating IHE. These findings point to opportunities to change the practice and policy related to WSCUC regional accreditation and illuminate other areas of possible research. Chapter 5 discusses these future possibilities for ALOs, IHEs, and the WSCUC.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Study

The institutional accreditation process has evolved significantly since its inception in the late 1800s among geographically proximate schools as an optional peer review process to exhibit institutional quality and prestige. At the time of this study, the federal government exerted considerable influence through its immense funding programs for colleges and universities, all of which were tied to accreditation through an approved organization.

Simultaneous increases in financial support for students has led to explosive growth in enrollment numbers, including a substantial increase in access for many minoritized student groups. Many IHEs have intentionally recruited heterogeneous student bodies including increased racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Both access and success for minoritized groups has continued to lag behind dominant-group peers for most groups. Research has continued to demonstrate the positive and negative impacts that campus climate for diversity may have on student outcomes and that campus climate for diversity has been embedded as a systemic issue at IHEs. Positively shifting campus climate for diversity across higher education requires a systems-level mechanism. Institutional accreditation appears to be a potential avenue to address ongoing systemic inequity for minoritized groups by acting as a catalyst for institutional change, especially related to campus climate for diversity.

Purpose

Institutional accreditation may be uniquely suited to leverage change in higher education. It has often been assumed that regional accreditation already has this effect on institutional

change, but there has been scarce research on its effectiveness toward improving higher education in general, and even less research on the specific impact it could have on minoritized student experience and outcomes.

This study started to fill this literature gap by exploring accreditation liaison officer (ALO) perceptions and beliefs about the WSCUC accreditation process and its relationship with institutional change, particularly change related to campus climate for diversity. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the perceptions and beliefs of ALOs in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on institutional change?
2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of ALOs in the WSCUC region regarding institutional accreditation's role in and impact on campus climate for diversity?

Significance

The findings of this study have the potential to lend credibility to the notion that regional accreditation impacts continuous improvement efforts in higher education. Participating ALOs often referenced other mechanisms for change as more influential or sustainable, but the study illustrates that preparing for and responding to the accreditation process may be a catalyst for change in many organizational areas—including campus climate for diversity. Broadly speaking, improved credibility through accreditation could impact public perception of higher education as well as incentivize greater governmental investment in higher education.

From a scholarly perspective, the findings of this study indicate fruitful future research projects. IHEs vary greatly from each other but regional accrediting bodies serve as an important shared reference point. Understanding more broadly how accreditation may act as a catalyst for

institutional change could help researchers better provide practical research outcomes toward improving student learning outcomes ahead of impending demographic shifts that many believe will have a significant impact on higher education as a whole in the mid-2020s.

For ALOs, the results of this study may challenge their perceptions of the limited or periodic role that accreditation plays at their IHE or in higher education more generally. These results may also motivate ALOs to utilize their unique positionality to push for and sustain positive institutional change more effectively. ALOs may also see more opportunities for effective change by understanding and applying regional standards, like the WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy (EIP), more intentionally through upcoming reaffirmation cycles at their IHE.

Finally, this study has the possibility to impact policy and standards development for the WSCUC and other institutional accrediting bodies. Policies and expectations related to campus climate for diversity are relatively new in the history of accreditation. Less than 30 years ago, WSCUC was the first regional accrediting organization to include diversity standards in the accreditation process. As a relatively new set of standards and expectations, accrediting bodies may be more apt to make significant changes that incorporate the results of this or future studies. The findings illustrate the need for clearer definitions of key terms like “campus climate,” as well as improved training for both ALOs and site team reviewers to develop a common understanding in evaluating and improving campus climate for diversity across all internal and external elements of this critical concept.

Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments

This study utilized the multicontextual model for diverse learning environments (MMDLE) developed in 2012 by Hurtado et al. as a theoretical framework to understand how

ALOs viewed the relationship between WSCUC accreditation and campus climate for diversity. The MMDLE identifies five internal dimensions of campus climate for diversity, three of which function at the institution-level and the other two at the individual-level. All of these dimensions are shaped by individuals at each IHE and by external contexts that exert force on the institutional context, including climate for diversity. Figure 1 in Chapter 2 visually represents the relationship between all of these elements of the MMDLE, and Table 1 in Chapter 2 illustrates the intersections of the MMDLE with the WSCUC EIP.

Discussion of Findings

This study utilized the three main data sources (ALO interviews, institutional reports, and site team reports) to understand ALOs' perceptions and beliefs about the relationship between the WSCUC accreditation process and institutional change in general and more specifically related to campus climate for diversity. Three major themes emerged for each of the two research questions and are summarized in Chapter 4 in Table 4. The sections below discuss the findings in the context of current research literature.

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on the perceptions and beliefs of WSCUC ALOs regarding the relationship between institutional change and the most recent accreditation cycle. The three themes that emerged in the research data were a focus on other mechanisms of change, a clear relationship between WSCUC accreditation and institutional change, and the need to consider multiple mediating factors of the WSCUC process.

Other Mechanisms of Change

As described in Chapter 2, there has been little direct research about accreditation's impact on institutional change. However, despite this gap, higher education organizational change literature has been consistent with the mechanisms described by ALOs. During interviews, participants identified multiple internal and external factors that contributed to change, consistent with Kezar's (2001) assertion that organizational change in higher education is often a *combination* of both internal and external factors. Additionally, IHEs are loosely-couple organizations, often with decentralized decision-making processes (Boyce, 2003). Tierney and Lanford (2018) argued that an "institutional culture" perspective has been the best route to understand the nuanced and unique attributes of each IHE. Such a perspective is also consistent with the interview participants who described specific institutional characteristics like changes in leadership or strategic planning as most critical to instigate institutional change.

At both public and private IHEs, ALOs described ways in which peer schools function as an external factor that influenced institutional action and change; this awareness of peer comparison is congruent with the research. While college presidents have been hesitant to acknowledge that college rankings are a measure of leadership success (Gallup, Inc., 2016), decades of data have illustrated the increased reliance on such rankings in the college admissions process (Eagan et al., 2016; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2011). Similarly, the federal government has reinforced the need for peer comparison through programs like the College Scorecard that purport to help students and families make more informed matriculation decisions by focusing on student economic outcomes through a comparative framework (Obama, 2013).

WSCUC Accreditation and Institutional Change

Despite focusing on other mechanisms of change and downplaying the impact the most recent WSCUC accreditation cycle had on institutional change, ALOs identified many tangible ways participating IHEs made changes throughout the WSCUC process. ALO attitudes about the impact accreditation has on institutional change were consistent with some skepticism expressed in the literature about accreditation's actual impact on institutional change (e.g., Gaston, 2014). These attitudes were also somewhat consistent with Kezar's (2001) view that higher education organizational change requires both internal and external factors.

On the other hand, the tendency of ALOs to downplay the impact that both the preparation for and response to WSCUC accreditation was inconsistent with Kezar (2001) because this attitude does not recognize the important interplay between multiple factors to inspire and sustain organizational change. Additionally, the practical impact of the WSCUC process demonstrated through the research findings were consistent with the assumptions made by Bok (2017), Kelchen (2018), and Studley (2018) about institutional accreditation's efficacy. In short, applying a singular organizational model does not work for the various diffuse ways in which higher education operates (Manning, 2012).

Mediating Factors

While the findings indicated a clear relationship between the WSCUC process and institutional change, ALOs identified several mediating factors that affected accreditation's role in and impact on these changes including campus perceptions, sustainability of change, ALO personal influence on results, and site team reviewer impact on results. At first glance, these factors may appear to undercut the conclusion that regional accreditation did indeed have a clear

and significant impact on institutional change at the participating IHEs. However, these mediating factors are consistent with Manning's (2012) assertion that it has been important to use multiple organizational models to understand change in higher education. While not all organizational models will account for the impact of particular actors or stakeholders, the loosely-coupled nature of higher education has allowed for, at times, individual participants in a process to have an outsized impact on organizational change or stagnancy.

Similarly, observations about mediating factors in the WSCUC process were congruent with a social network analysis (SNA) of IHEs to understand change in higher education (Kezar, 2014). In SNA, central actors—like ALOs, depending on their positionality—are individuals with the most ties across a network while opinion leaders are key members of a social network who influence others' behaviors within the same network, especially through the adoption of a change. Neither central actors nor opinion leaders need to be in formal leadership roles to exert social influence. Finally, formal leaders need to have adequate cachet among the many networks of an organization, both to provide insight to a change, but also to support complex and systemic changes across the organization they lead (Kezar, 2014).

Research Question 2

Three themes also emerged in the findings related to the second research question. They focused on the perceptions and beliefs of WSCUC ALOs regarding the relationship between the most recent accreditation cycle and campus climate for diversity. These themes were inconsistency related to the WSCUC EIP, strong ALO skepticism about this possible relationship, and a lack of multicontextual emphasis across all data sources for issues related to campus climate for diversity.

Inconsistency Surrounding the WSCUC EIP

During interviews, ALOs self-reported a wide range of familiarity with the WSCUC EIP, from almost no knowledge to a deep understanding. Regardless of their respective backgrounds, the EIP and related criteria for review (CfR) were almost never referenced explicitly in the institutional reports and were similarly omitted from site team reports. However, there was some limited evidence that WSCUC expectations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were impactful while preparing for and responding to the most recent reaffirmation cycle. The lack of consistent demonstration of the application of the EIP was consistent with research on processes to effectively transform campus climate for diversity. For example, the lack of familiarity with the EIP illustrated for this participant group that there was generally a lack of clear vision and buy-in related to WSCUC's possible impact on campus climate, and this gap often has led to failure for DEI change (Williams et al., 2005).

Lastly, the term "campus climate" was used inconsistently across document sources, sometimes even inconsistently between an ALO during the interview process and what was described in their institutional report. The term has also not operationalized by the WSCUC. This lack of a clear definition was congruent with inconsistencies in research literature described in Chapter 2. While there has been a decent amount of literature that uses the term "campus climate," it has not been consistently operationalized by researchers, and it has often been used interchangeably with other terms like "campus environment" (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014; Stebleton et al., 2014; Wells & Horn, 2015).

Pervading ALO Skepticism

One of the few consistencies in the interview data was the ALOs' skepticism of any significant relationship between WSCUC accreditation and change related to DEI issues at their IHE. It is difficult to contextualize this skepticism because there is no current literature on the intersection of accreditation and DEI issues. However, due to the systemic nature of campus climate for diversity, many efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion have failed (Hurtado et al., 2012). Williams et al. (2005) described four key areas that IHEs must focus on to effectively transform campus climate for diversity. First, efforts must be driven by leadership at, and accountability to, the highest levels of the institution. Senior-level leadership has been necessary to ensure ongoing accountability and support for cultural shifts. Second, there must be a clear vision and the ability to create buy-in at all levels of an IHE. Senior-level mandates alone have not created organizational change because the final vision must be adapted and embraced from all organizational vantage points (Williams et al., 2005). Third, established well-rooted, long-term change has necessitated greater organizational capacity for sustaining the desired change. Cultural shifts have required infrastructural commitments (Chun & Evans, 2015). Fourth, a critical part of infrastructure has been intentionally dedicated resources including "financial, technical, human, and symbolic resources" (Williams et al., 2005, p. 28). Many efforts fail precisely because IHEs have not allocated the necessary resources to sustain efforts for change. Based on the complicated and challenging nature of transforming campus climate for diversity, it seems likely that ALO skepticism stems from a lack of examples of effective transformation in this area.

Lack of Multicontextual Emphasis

The last theme related to the question of ALO perceptions and beliefs about WSCUC accreditation's relationship to campus climate for diversity was the lack of multicontextual emphasis in any of the data sources. Data showed that participating ALOs and their IHEs made significant references to the compositional and organizational dimensions of the MMDLE, as well as the sociohistorical and community external contexts. However, there were few substantial references to the historical, behavioral, and psychological dimensions of the MMDLE; there were also few references to the policy context outside of the focus of this study on accreditation as one element of the policy context.

In certain aspects, the emphasis (or lack thereof) on certain dimensions of the MMDLE were consistent with the existing literature. For example, the compositional and organizational dimensions have both been well-researched and have had a clear connection to a positive campus climate for diversity (Hurtado et al., 2008, 2012; Milem et al., 2005). The robust body of research in these areas has matched the amount of emphasis by participating IHEs across the interviews and reports. Similarly, the lack of references to the historical dimension was congruent with gap in research around this dimension (Hurtado et al., 2012).

However, other dimensions and external contexts were referenced in the research data inconsistently with the existing research and theory. The lack of reference to behavioral and psychological dimensions of the MMDLE is surprising given the amount of research and theory that has connected these individual-level dimensions to student success and positive educational outcomes (e.g., Allen, 2018; Bowman, 2010, 2011, Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015; Denson & Chang, 2009; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1999). While these two dimensions were

underrepresented given the existing literature, the frequency of reference to the sociohistorical and community and external contexts seems out of place due to the dearth of literature connecting these contexts to campus climate for diversity (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Future Research Opportunities

With so little previous research and literature on the relationship between institutional accreditation and its impact on change at IHEs, this study illuminates multiple interesting opportunities for future study. Some of these pathways relate directly to improving the WSCUC process while other research opportunities could explore regional accreditation more generally.

Improving the WSCUC Process

As noted in the limitations in previous chapters, the results of this study cannot reliably be generalized. Future research in the WSCUC region could include a broad survey of ALO perceptions utilizing the results of this study to guide content areas. Broad, mixed-methods research of ALOs could also illustrate institutional characteristics that influence perceptions and beliefs about WSCUC's impact on institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity.

Another possible research opportunity may be to conduct focus groups of ALOs to explore more deeply the themes that emerged in the findings of this study. Focus groups could be comprised of ALOs at similar peer institutions or intentionally mixed groups. These focus groups could explore common themes and differences that emerge across ALO perceptions. As a side effect, these groups could also foster greater collaboration and resource-sharing among ALOs as they prepare for and respond to the WSCUC process.

WSCUC commissioners and external site team reviewers also have critical perspectives on the relationship between accreditation and institutional change beyond the ALOs which were the focus of this study. Further analysis of these two groups could help the WSCUC identify any gaps and new opportunities to improve its regional accreditation standards. It could also elucidate possible disconnects between WSCUC leadership and ALO perceptions described in the results of this study.

Lastly, it could be valuable to conduct a case study at an IHE that was identified by their site team as needing improvement related to the EIP and CfR 1.4. The case study could explore each element of the MMDLE in depth, including how various campus constituents viewed campus climate for diversity before and after the accreditation recommendations. A thorough, qualitative examination of a single campus could illustrate how WSCUC accreditation may be used to sustain changes related to campus climate for diversity. A comparative case study of two or three campuses could also describe the variations unique to particular campus conditions that impacted IHE response to similar WSCUC feedback.

Regional Accreditation in General

The WSCUC is only one of six federally recognized regional accrediting bodies in the United States. It was necessary to limit the scope of this study to a single region, but future research could explore other regional processes and their possible impact on institutional change, either generally or more specifically related to campus climate for diversity. This research could mirror the research design of this study to understand key IHE accreditation leader perspectives or it could utilize some of the possible future research methods described in the previous section.

Another research possibility could be a historical analysis of policy development for each regional accrediting body. As described in Chapter 2, WSCUC did not approve a diversity statement until less than 30 years ago. Other accrediting bodies' statements, policies, and standards related to DEI issues are likely to be as new or newer. One region, the Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) still does not have specific DEI criteria or policies (Ferreira et al., 2014; SACSCOC, 2017). A historical policy analysis could build understanding among regions of the types of barriers that hinder this work and effective methods for instituting effective standards. It may also be possible to do a meta-analysis of campus climate for diversity at peer institutions in different regions to understand if there are trends that correlate with regional accreditation policies.

Recommendations

Future research on the relationship between regional accreditation and institutional change is necessary to understand to what degree, if any, the findings of this study are more generalizable. Even with the limitations described, this study points to many practical recommendations to better leverage the accreditation process for positive institutional change—especially changes related to campus climate for diversity. The sections that follow describe these recommendations for ALOs, IHEs, and the WSCUC.

Accreditation Liaison Officers

To effectively instigate change, ALOs should embrace accreditation as an effective and important tool. During interviews, ALOs frequently focused on other internal and external mechanisms as more important than the WSCUC accreditation process. There was significant evidence that both preparing for the accreditation cycle and responding to WSCUC feedback led

to sustained change at the participating IHEs despite inconsistent perceptions among ALOs regarding the accreditation process's impact on institutional change. While things like leadership turnover or system-level standards will always be important levers, institutional accreditation is uniquely positioned to encourage changes that might be difficult to spark or sustain through everyday processes.

ALOs should attempt to educate institutional leadership and the wider campus about the many opportunities that a reaffirmation may provide to an IHE, particularly for deeply entrenched issues like campus climate for diversity. As Grace noted, "Change really happens when you can show people that assessment, accreditation is not this lofty ideal, but that the principles of, say, accreditation really are about what's happening on the ground." However, it is also important for ALOs to understand the power dynamics inherent in their institutional hierarchy. As described in Chapter 4, some ALOs expressed varying degrees of effectiveness depending on title and reporting structure.

Chapter 4 also discussed that ALOs often lamented that pushback from their IHE limited the immediate or ongoing efficacy of change related to WSCUC reaffirmation. However, some ALOs lauded campus leaders for embracing the process as a significant opportunity. During our interview, Phil repeatedly revisited the idea that the president and provost's commitment to utilizing the reaffirmation cycle intentionally and publicly as a catalyst for change made the process more productive for his IHE. Unfortunately, not all institutional leaders will understand accreditation as an opportunity. ALOs are in a unique position to make this case ahead of each reaffirmation cycle, particularly as it relates to complicated and embedded campus elements like campus climate for diversity.

Lastly, ALOs must understand their ability to influence site team reviewers in all stages of the reaffirmation process. Data from all document sources indicated that ALOs could influence the direction or focus a site team employed to emphasize the IHE's preferred institutional priorities. As with the internal hierarchy at an IHE, an ALO's influence with the site team may be similarly impacted by their title or institutional power. On the other hand, some ALOs described situations where they were surprised by the focus of site team reviewers' recommendations in areas that were frustrating to manage. Building relationships through transparency and authenticity with colleagues serving on these site teams may better assist ALOs in utilizing the WSCUC accreditation to intentionally shift or sustain campus change efforts after reaffirmation.

Institutions

There are practical recommendations for IHEs that follow from the findings of this study. First, IHEs need to ensure that their ALO is positioned organizationally to have significant influence across campus constituencies. Ciara felt a clear distinction between the two IHEs where she had served as an ALO—the lack of access to senior leadership at her current IHE limited her efficacy, even in ensuring that minimum compliance standards were met for an upcoming mid-cycle review. Other ALOs also discussed the need to have broad reach across institutional areas to create the buy-in necessary to utilize reaffirmation as a lever for systemic change.

Second, IHEs should embrace each WSCUC accreditation cycle, from the earliest stages of preparation through response to recommendations, as a critical opportunity to advance institutional changes. As many IHEs continue to try to adapt to a rapidly diversifying incoming

student population, the reaffirmation process could be used as an important external catalyst to motivate institutional change for improving campus climate for diversity. Ideally, IHEs are already motivated to make these types of changes. As illustrated through the MMDLE, the multidimensional and multicontextual nature of campus climate for diversity make it incredibly difficult to implement and sustain tangible change related to DEI issues. Systemic issues require systems-level change, and an external and increasingly influential process like institutional accreditation may be an effective policy-level external context to drive such changes, but only if it is used treated as such.

IHEs need to internally standardize the term “campus climate” before attempting any significant change efforts around campus climate for diversity. The literature review and the data collected in this study demonstrate that IHEs continue to use terms like “campus climate for diversity” or just “campus climate” with no clear operational definition. This inconsistency impedes internal conversations about DEI issues and muddles any connection between WSCUC standards and assessing how effectively IHEs are addressing these issues. Even if the term “campus climate” is defined more broadly than only DEI issues, a vague definition creates the sense that issues related to climate are intangible and nearly impossible to target for intentional change. Standardizing a definition for “campus climate” grounds the concept in shared institutional understanding.

The final recommendation for IHEs is to utilize existing theoretical models of campus climate for diversity as the basis for internally defining this concept. While this study utilized the MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 2012) as a theoretical framework, there are other well-regarded campus climate for diversity models that set clear parameters for the important elements that each IHE

should consider. For example, Rankin and Reason (2008) developed a “transformational tapestry model” approach to changing and improving campus climate for diversity that many campuses utilize to assess and improve campus climate. IHEs’ use of existing theoretical models to drive internal definitions of campus climate is critical because these models capture the nuanced and complicated nature of campus climate for diversity. A vague definition may lead to overemphasizing some elements of campus climate while largely ignoring others.

WSCUC

The findings of this research study indicate multiple recommendations that WSCUC may consider. First, there are clear opportunities for WSCUC to further clarify and streamline processes, terminology, and training for ALOs, IHEs, and site team reviewers. Given the relatively recent changes to the EIP, the WSCUC should increase emphasis on and training around the EIP and expectations related to CfR 1.4 for both ALOs and site team reviewers. As noted in Chapter 4, familiarity with the EIP varied widely among participating ALOs. For those ALOs who had also served as a site team reviewer, each described a lack of understanding or consistent application of the elements of the EIP during the site team review process.

There are also opportunities to analyze the composition of site teams based on accounts from ALOs about internal disagreements related to DEI-related feedback. While some ALOs reported a mix of expertise while serving as a site team reviewer, there was no mention of ensuring that a member of the team had specific expertise in campus climate for diversity or DEI issues more generally. This gap may perpetuate issues at accredited IHEs when a site team either lacks the knowledge to adequately notice and address problems, or, as Grace described, the

internal site team power dynamics may stifle voices not adequately recognized for their expertise in these areas.

A relatively straightforward and immediate action for the WSCUC is to operationalize organizational definitions of key terms such as “diversity” and “campus climate.” Multiple site team reports recommended, formally or informally, that participating IHEs needed to clarify institutional definitions of diversity, but this term is not effectively operationalized in the EIP. Similarly, the data demonstrates that the term “campus climate” is not defined. This is especially problematic because two of the core questions IHEs must consider as expectations for institutional review in the EIP fall under the ambiguous header of “campus climate” (WSCUC, 2017a). ALOs and IHEs are left to their own interpretations of this term without a clear definition.

As suggested for IHEs, adopting a theoretical model of campus climate for diversity will give the WSCUC and its site team reviewers clearer elements and related metrics through which to measure progress and compliance during the accreditation review process. If both the WSCUC and participating IHEs fail to tangibly define campus climate, it remains nearly impossible to effectively assess how well an IHE is achieving its stated goals and outcomes as an element of its educational mission.

A possible route to better operationalizing campus climate for diversity in the WSCUC process is to use the analytical model developed for this study to map the EIP onto the MMDLE. The WSCUC could seek participating member school contributions to adapt this analytical model to create templates and tools for program and self-review related to CfR 1.4 as IHEs prepare for each major report to WSCUC. Similarly, the WSCUC could utilize this analytical

model to identify schools performing well around DEI issues, and invite these IHEs to help develop templates or tools that more effectively address the expectations of CfR 1.4 and the EIP. Furthermore, using these premade templates could then help IHEs identify strengths, opportunities, and gaps related to campus climate for diversity. Site team reviewers would, in turn, need less expertise and training to interpret IHE performance related to the current WSCUC standards that address DEI issues.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand ALO perceptions and beliefs regarding WSCUC's impact on institutional change related to campus climate for diversity. With so little literature on the impact of the accreditation process on IHEs, this study was limited to a small, localized sample to begin to understand the possible ways in which institutional accreditation could be an effective external catalyst for institutional change in higher education. The answer appears to be “yes”—institutional accreditation already impacts decision-making at IHEs and can be leveraged for sustained change. There is even limited evidence that it could directly impact campus climate for diversity.

Despite increased access to higher education for many minoritized groups, students from these groups often still lag behind their peers from dominant groups. As noted in the preface, the shift in national conversations around racial justice due to the highly publicized police violence against Black communities combined with the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities of color has accelerated the need for higher education to address campus climate for diversity in new ways. IHEs must address these inequities to fulfill the promises of admission, regardless of institutional type or characteristics. These are deeply embedded

systemic issues—a reflection of the larger sociohistorical reality of the United States. Decades of research demonstrates that campus climate for diversity is complicated, systemic, and requires significant and broad effort to positively shift it for all students.

If institutional accrediting bodies like the WSCUC value improving student success at all accredited IHEs, these organizations must take seriously increased calls for access, equity, and inclusion—even further, these organizations must embed equity and inclusion as clear, undeniable expectations to further student success and learning as a condition of accreditation. As illustrated in the MMDLE, the sociohistorical external context influences IHEs and campus climate for diversity. There is a national reckoning with the historical injustices perpetrated against minoritized communities. More than ever before, there is an opportunity to utilize the current sociohistorical context to improve campus climate for diversity at the systemic level. Accreditation must seize this opportunity with focus and purpose towards greater equity and social justice.

APPENDIX A

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Aug 07, 2021

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APPENDIX B

Initial Interview E-mail Template

Hello Name,

My name is Dave Sundby, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership for Social Justice program at Loyola Marymount University. My dissertation topic is an examination of the accreditation liaison officer (ALO) perceptions and beliefs regarding WSCUC's impact on institutional change, especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity.

If relevant, refer to ALO who suggested I reach out. I am currently seeking regional ALOs whose institutions have participated in the accreditation reaffirmation process since 2013 to interview for up to one hour on this topic. I know your time is valuable and likely in high demand, and I appreciate your consideration in supporting my research.

Participation is completely voluntary and confidential. If you agree to participate, you will be able to select a personal and campus pseudonym, or I will provide you with appropriate pseudonyms. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any point before, during, or after the interview.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me via this e-mail address or directly at [phone number].

The chair for my research is Dr. Franca Dell'Olio at Loyola Marymount. She can also be reached at [Dr. Dell'Olio e-mail address] or [Dr. Dell'Olio phone number].

Sincerely,

Dave

APPENDIX C

Interview Confirmation E-mail Template

Hello Name,

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my research study. I've attached three important documents to this e-mail.

1. LMU Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights – as a study participant, you are afforded the rights outlined in this document including the ability to opt out of the study at any time before, during, or after you have interviewed.
2. Informed Consent Form – I will need a signed copy of this form returned before we can start the interview. This document outlines the basic elements of my dissertation research including the purpose, possible risks and benefits, and a reiteration of the voluntary nature of your participation.
3. WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy – while you likely are already familiar with this document, I thought it would be convenient to have it in advance of our conversation. This policy is tied to CfR 1.4 in the 2013 WSCUC Handbook of Accreditation. None of my research questions require specific knowledge of this policy, but my overall research interest in campus climate for diversity is connected to it.

I look forward to speaking [**in-person/via GoToMeeting**] on [**date & time**]. [**To access the GoToMeeting, please use the following link <insert link>. You will have the option of using computer audio or calling in for the interview. I will resend this meeting information the day before our schedule conversation.**]

Thank you again for your support of my research. I look forward to our conversation!

Sincerely,

Dave

APPENDIX D

WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy



Equity and Inclusion Policy

PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

WSCUC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) member institutions are expected (Standard 1) to have a clear and explicit sense of their essential values and character, their distinctive elements, and their place in both the higher education community and society, and their contribution to the public good. This includes demonstrating an appropriate response to the increasing diversity in society through its programs and practices. Through their commitment to student learning and success and to quality and improvement, institutions are expected (Standard 4) to engage in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory self-reflection about how effectively they accomplish their purposes and achieve their educational objectives.

Since its 1994 Statement on Diversity was incorporated into the *2001 Handbook of Accreditation*, the Commission has had more than a decade in which to observe the responses to these expectations by member institutions, which have a remarkable diversity of institutional types, missions, and student profiles. That experience has confirmed that issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are systemic, related to student success and institutional effectiveness in a number of ways.

The goal of this document is two-fold: to update the diversity policy to clarify Commission expectations for institutional reviews and to share principles and good practices that have been observed in member institutions that have successfully advanced their inquiry in these areas.

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL PRINCIPLES

As institutions of higher education, the purpose of colleges and universities is to deliver an essential public good, namely a high-quality post-secondary education. Institutional commitments to advancing educational excellence and fostering an engaged, civil society are demonstrated in part by policies and practices that help ensure the success of diverse student populations and prepare all students to learn and derive value from the broad representation of colleges and universities that are members of WSCUC.

WSCUC member institutions have valuable assets, including rich programs that are reflective of the goals of the diverse student populations that they serve, that stem from a belief that educated people are engaged “citizens of the world” as well as a commitment to scholarship as a form of expression and expansion of knowledge. Students benefit most from these assets where there is a climate of respect for

a diversity of backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives, and where the institution's various constituencies deal honestly and constructively with issues of equity and inclusion. All institutions face a fundamental challenge to create a campus culture where the wisdom and will to build trust among people and groups is widely distributed, and opportunities for enhancing equity, inclusion and community are encouraged and supported. At the same time, there is no expectation that, with the variety of institutions in our region, there will be a uniform approach or response to this challenge. The common goal among member institutions is to realize the potential of their students through higher education.

Given the importance of institutions valuing diversity and fostering inclusion to serve all of their students and the public, thereby truly contributing to the public good, the Commission notes the following principles that underlay its standards and expectations for institutional reviews.

- Commitment to student learning and success requires that institutions actively seek to support the success of all of their students.
- Engagement with historical and contemporary issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are educational objectives that can be productively incorporated into programs at any level.
- Seeking and valuing multiple dimensions of diversity within its various constituencies strengthens an institution's effectiveness.

EXPECTATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW AND PRESENTATION

To fully respond to the expectations of the Standards, an institution should be prepared to provide evidence of inquiry and action to address the following questions, especially in the context of seeking initial accreditation or responding to previous Commission recommendations concerning diversity.

Institutional Commitment

- How does the institution define diversity within its mission and purposes with reference to existing students, staff and faculty? What communities does the institution seek to serve? How may changing social demographics affect the way the institution serves its students and the public good?
- How have institutional leaders, particularly governing boards and senior administrators, demonstrated the willingness and capacity to identify and address equity concerns among campus constituents and to help educate the broader community regarding the need for equity and inclusion at their institutions?

Access/Inclusion

- Has the institution identified groups of prospective students who may have been historically underserved by the institution? Has it taken steps and devoted resources to increase access and success for these students?
- How do the institution's decision-making structures and planning processes integrate the perspectives of members from its multiple constituencies, including those who may have been historically underserved?

Support/Success

- How has the institution tracked and analyzed the educational achievement of distinct groups of students and acted to close gaps between groups over time?
- How does the institution identify needs or concerns of distinct groups among its constituencies and provide support consistent with the needs expressed by those groups?

Campus Climate

- Does the institution regularly assess perceptions of campus climate by students, staff and faculty? How are the results shared with the campus community and how do they inform institutional action?
- Does the institution have effective mechanisms for addressing bias-related concerns from members of its community?

Educational Objectives

- Do any curricular or co-curricular programs incorporate student learning outcomes specifically related to the ability to acknowledge and interact productively and respectfully with people of diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives?

GOOD PRACTICES FOR VALUING DIVERSITY AND FOSTERING INCLUSION

Drawing upon the success of its member institutions in engaging with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Commission shares the following good practices that can be adapted to a diverse spectrum of institutional missions and contexts.

1. *Institutional mission and purpose are reexamined.* Governing boards have an especially important role in this regard. As students, faculty and staff within institutions become more diverse, there is an even greater need to focus on common purposes and to identify core values. Reflection on institutional purpose, which should be at the heart of every self-study, also implies a sober assessment of changing and sometimes conflicting goals.
2. *Institutions seek and nurture diversity within their student bodies, faculty, administrative staff, and governing boards.* In many cases, colleges and universities choose, at their own initiative, to compare their composition to regional, state or national populations as a whole. In other instances, the reference group is the particular constituency, sometimes religious in nature, which the institution intends to serve. In applying its Standards, the Commission respects the institution's own view of its constituency, based upon its unique mission. Each institution, however, analyzes the diversity present in the constituency it chooses to serve, honestly represent that aspect of its mission to prospective students, actively seek to reflect that diversity in its membership, and consider the role of diversity in addressing student needs.
3. *Institutions include an appreciation of diversity as an outcome of instruction appropriate to students' level and goals and consider all forms of diversity as they intentionally and*

unintentionally affect the educational process. WSCUC member colleges and universities are diverse in many ways (e.g., the various academic disciplines and fields of professional study as well as the diversity of the community in terms of age, ethnicity, political belief, socioeconomic class, religious faith, gender and sexual orientation, interest in the arts and athletics, regional and national background). Each institution considers how the various forms of diversity can be understood, respected, and valued in the curriculum. Faculty of each institution have primary responsibility to rise to this challenge as they plan curricula, design courses, and teach and advise students.

4. *All students enrolled at the institution have their learning and success supported by environments that foster their intellectual and personal development.* In particular, institutions seek to achieve a better understanding of the characteristics, interests, aspirations and learning needs of the diverse segments of their student populations. As institutions address challenges faced by students from historically underserved populations, particularly in terms of student learning, support from faculty, the availability of academic support services and the quality of residential life, they consider responses and solutions that benefit all students and are informed by communication and collaboration across units.
5. *Institutions assess their efforts to make equity and inclusion integral to plans for institutional improvement.* Assessment includes well-articulated metrics that measure progress over time, an examination of disaggregated retention and graduation statistics, and the gathering and analysis of comparable data and trends in individual schools and departments as well as for the campus as a whole. Of equal importance is probing beneath the numbers to illuminate individual perceptions and patterns of interaction among the members of various groups. Institutions conduct periodic systematic assessments of how different students, faculty and staff view their experiences on campus (often referred to as studies of campus climate).

Approved by the Commission, 1994

Revised, November 2017¹

¹ Prior to November 2017, this policy was known as the Diversity Policy

APPENDIX E

IRB Informed Consent Form

Loyola Marymount University Informed Consent Form

- TITLE:** Transforming Campus Climate for Diversity: Accreditation Liaison Officer Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding the Impact of Regional Accreditation on Institutional Change
- INVESTIGATOR:** David Sundby, School of Education, Loyola Marymount University
- ADVISOR:** Dr. Franca Dell'Olio, School of Education, Loyola Marymount University
- PURPOSE:** You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to understand accreditation's impact on organizational change especially as it relates to campus climate for diversity. You will be asked to complete a 30- to 60-minute, audio-recorded interview.
- RISKS:** Risks associated with this study include possible discomfort or anxiousness in discussing topics related to equity and inclusion, especially as these topics relate to the participant's personal identities and experiences. However, all participants are ensured confidentiality, and they have the option to decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time.
- BENEFITS:** The potential benefits of this study include increased awareness of the current WSCUC policies related to equity and inclusion. Additionally, the study may contribute to greater understanding of effective mechanisms for leveraging change to campus climate for diversity.
- INCENTIVES:** You will receive no gifts/incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.
- CONFIDENTIALITY:** For the purpose of this study, some basic professional experience data will be collected, however, participant identity will be confidential. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.). All research materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked storage cabinet and password-protected cloud storage for digital assets. When the research study ends, any identifying information will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled, your class standing or relationship with Loyola Marymount University.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Contact Dave Sundby at [omitted for publication] or e-mail at [omitted for publication]. The summary will be available in early summer 2020.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. If the study design or use of the information is changed I will be informed and my consent reobtained. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any further questions, comments or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659 or by email at David.Moffet@lmu.edu.

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX F

LMU Experimental Subjects' Bill of Rights

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.
2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.
3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.
4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.
5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.
6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.
7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.
8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.
9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.
10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

Reminders

- Participation is voluntary, you can opt out at any time during or after the interview
- (If consent form is not yet received) I need your signed consent form at your earliest convenience.
- Do you have any questions about the general purpose of the research?
- Do you consent to recording? If so, I will start recording now.

Demographics

- What is your name and title?
- How long have you been in your role as ALO? And how long have you been involved with institutional accreditation in general?
- Where is INSTITUTION NAME in the accreditation cycle?

Accreditation in General

2. Thinking broadly about the accreditation process, in what ways does preparing for a review inspire institutional change at INSTITUTION NAME? Can you think of any examples?
 - a. Possible follow-up topics: other mechanisms for institutional change, how change is usually created on campus
3. And after the site team visited and provided their summary report, in what ways did WSCUC feedback instigate change on campus? Examples?
 - a. Possible follow-up topics: institutional commitment to sustaining change; perceived commitment to changes in response to WSCUC

Equity and Inclusion Policy

4. As mentioned in e-mail communication prior to this interview and during the introduction, my research is related to the WSCUC Equity and Inclusion Policy. How familiar are you with CfR 1.4, the criteria related to the Equity and Inclusion Policy and with the policy itself?
 - a. Possible follow-up question topics: other staff or departments who were instrumental in developing this part of the self-study; degree to which equity and inclusion was embedded in broader institutional discussion
5. What are some ways that diversity, equity, and inclusion played a role in the most recent institutional accreditation process at INSTITUTION NAME?

- a. Possible follow-up question topics (see EIP for descriptions): institutional commitment; access/inclusion; support/success; campus climate; and educational objectives
6. What, if any, institutional changes related to diversity, equity, and/or inclusion resulted from the most recent self-study or WSCUC report feedback?

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