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International Accreditation and the Standards of US Regional Accrediting Agencies

by

Calley Stevens Taylor

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative and International Education

Lehigh University

2018

Copyright

Calley Stevens Taylor

2018

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

In addition to accrediting American colleges and universities that enroll over 20 million students a year, the US regional accrediting agencies also accredit international institutions. Existing research on international accreditation has not previously investigated the impact that international activity might have on the standards used by US regional accreditors. Examining the changes in accreditation standards from 2000 to 2017, relative to regional accreditation agencies' international activity over the same period, this research found that international activity is associated with changes in accreditation standards. In particular, international accreditation was found to be associated with the content of accreditation standards pertaining to curriculum and education, faculty and instructional staff, students, and a small number of additional topics pertaining to institutional operations. In some topics, international accreditation was found to be associated with isomorphism across regional accrediting agencies, while in others areas, this study found that international activity was associated with increased diversity among accreditation standards. This variation suggests that the relationship between international accreditation and accreditation standards is complex and warrants further research.

Keywords: accreditation, higher education, isomorphism, internationalization.

Chapter I: Introduction

Higher education accreditation is a high-stakes enterprise. In the US, the quality and legitimacy of higher education institutions and programs are assured by a system of accreditation through peer evaluation that is managed by accreditation agencies. These agencies -- privately owned, non-profit organizations -- can be organized into four categories: regional accreditors, faith-related accreditors, career-related accreditors, and programmatic accreditors (Eaton, 2012). Regional, faith-related, and career-related accreditors accredit whole institutions. Together, these organizations accredit nearly 8,000 higher education institutions, assuring quality educational experiences for over 23 million students ("CHEA Almanac Online," 2016). Over 20 million of these students are enrolled in institutions accredited by regional accreditors, making regional accreditors the most significant factor in ensuring the quality of higher education in the US. Therefore, changes in the policies or practices of US higher education accreditation, and regional accreditors in particular, have the potential to impact the educational experiences and outcomes for the majority of college-going students in the US, as well as the public's confidence in the higher education system.

In March 2015, Lamar Alexander, the chairman of the United States Senate Committee of Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, released a white paper titled *Higher Education Accreditation Concepts and Proposals*. The paper acknowledged that institutions and the federal government have different interests in the accreditation process, with higher education institutions approaching the accreditation process as a tool for self-improvement and the federal government using accreditation as a tool for quality control (Alexander, 2015). It went on to suggest that accreditation has not consistently yielded quality results and to describe ways that the existing accreditation process inhibits innovation in higher education. Alexander then

suggested a new structure and purpose for accreditation in the US, with seven proposed changes. Of these seven, two could be considered the most drastic shifts from the current model: "delink accreditation from institutional eligibility for federal financial aid" (Alexander, 2015, p. 13) and "eliminate the geographic-based structure of regional accrediting agencies" (Alexander, 2015, p. 15).

If approved, changes such as these could create a new environment of competition between regional accrediting agencies by enabling these agencies to compete with each other for business across regional lines. American colleges and universities would then be able to pursue accreditation from any of the regional agencies, raising questions regarding the extent to which regional differences in accreditation are valuable or necessary. Should these changes occur, regional accrediting agencies, in a new spirit of competition, may also considerably increase their interest in expanding their accreditation activities into the international market. This increased participation in international accreditation activities may impact accreditation standards, with significant implications for American institutions and their students.

Problem Statement

Changes in accreditation standards that are influenced by international accreditation activities have the potential to impact how higher education quality is defined by US regional accreditors. This is a problem because the high-stakes nature of higher education in the US means that students, governmental agencies, and higher education institutions themselves have a vested interest in understanding, and maintaining some control over, the standards used to ensure quality in American higher education.

There has, however, been no empirical research on the influence of international activity on the standards of regional accreditation agencies. The purpose of this exploratory study was to

investigate how changes in accreditation standards are related to an accreditation agency's involvement in international accreditation. Using American regional accreditation agencies as subjects for the study, this qualitative content analysis identified patterns in accreditation standards that may be related to regional accreditation agencies' international activity.

Significance of the Problem

For much of its history, the accreditation system in the US was the only institutionalized approach used to judge the quality of institutions (Eaton, 2013). With the rise of ranking systems such as *U.S. News & World Report* and the US Department of Education's *College Navigator* website, and numerous newspaper and magazine articles on accreditation, students and their families now have more tools at their disposal when making decisions about college selection. In this new environment, accreditation is not well understood, while simultaneously it is "becoming more visible, inviting additional public scrutiny and attention" (Eaton, 2013, p. n.p.). The lack of understanding about the accreditation process, its purposes, and its outcomes is problematic, given its significant role in the economic stability of US higher education. Continued misunderstanding of the accreditation process by students and policy-makers also jeopardizes the stability of the current system, increasing the likelihood that proposals like Mr. Alexander's may one day come to pass.

The economic value of accreditation activities is significant for both students and institutions. Both rely heavily on access to federal financial aid, which forms the foundation of the US higher education economic model, with nearly 75% of first-time full-time college students receiving federal grants or loans in the 2014-2015 academic year ("Sources of Financial Aid," 2017). The US Department of Education awards approximately $150 billion USD in federal financial aid to 15 million students each year in the form of loans, grants, or work study

awards ("Types of Aid," n.d.). Colleges and universities must be accredited by a federally recognized accreditation agency to access such federal funds, including those issued to students as financial aid. If regional accreditation were to change in ways that jeopardize its legitimacy and connection to federal aid awards, both higher education institutions and students may lose access to significant funding sources.

While higher education institutions gain access to financial resources by participating in the accreditation process, doing so comes at a cost. Woolston, cited in Wheelan and Elgart (2015), estimated that the average cost to institutions for accreditation ranged from $32,000 USD to $41,000 USD annually. Extrapolating this estimate to the nearly 8,000 institutions that are accredited in the US suggests that accreditation may have an annual cost of nearly $328 million USD. Accreditation agencies reported in 2010 that they spent more than $114 million USD; in the same year, accrediting agencies employed over 850 staff and utilized over 20,000 volunteers (Eaton, 2012). Accreditation is an expensive endeavor, and the institutions and people involved have a right to know whether international accreditation is impacting the standards of this uniquely American system that requires significant investment on both sides.

The American accreditation system also has economic value due to its role in attracting international students to study in the US. International students contributed more than $35 billion to the American economy in 2015 ("Open Doors 2016 Executive Summary," 2017). International students who choose to travel to the US for college often do so because of the prestige associated with the American higher education system. Over 90% of students from South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East indicate that the reputation of degrees and academic qualifications from the US was an important factor in their decision to study in the US (Obst & Forster, n.d.). A decline in the level of quality, real or perceived, associated with

American degrees and compared to the quality of universities in other parts of the world, could have a cooling effect on students' decisions to study in the US, with significant economic consequences.

Any change in accreditation standards that could impact an institution's ability to award financial aid also has significant financial implications for American students, potentially preventing them from receiving financial aid at their desired institution. Students also depend on accreditation to ease the transfer of educational credits and credentials between institutions. As the number of students who transfer between institutions continues to climb, with nearly 40% of students transferring at least once during their college career (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015), assurances that students are able to transfer both credentials and knowledge between institutions accredited by different regional accreditors is a paramount concern. If international activity influences regional accreditation agencies to the point where institutions in different regions do not recognize each other's accreditation status, the mobility of students within the US could be greatly reduced.

Given the significant financial implications associated with the accreditation process, higher education institutions and their students should understand how accreditation works and what it measures. The accreditation system in the US was initially designed and developed by higher education institutions and their leaders. The system is primarily one of self-governance and protected from significant federal involvement. If international accreditation impacts the standards of US regional accreditors to the point where the standards of these agencies are substantially different, the federal government may be more inclined to intervene to ensure consistency. International impacts on accreditation standards may also be an indicator that US institutions are losing their influence on this system.

Finally, if the market-driven accreditation model proposed by Alexander (2015) ever comes to fruition, higher education leaders would need to fully understand the differences between the regional accreditors, and why these differences exist, in order to responsibly select the most appropriate agency for their institutions. For example, would an institution seeking to expand its recruitment of international students be inclined to seek accreditation from an accreditor that has retained more American standards, knowing that international students pursue higher education in the US because it offers something unique? Or, would an institution interested in opening new branch campuses in other countries seek accreditation from an accreditor that uses a set of standards more readily applicable to a variety of cultural contexts? This research fills a gap in understanding and provides information that can be helpful to accreditors, policy-makers, and higher education institutions as they negotiate future changes to the American accreditation system.

Research Question

This research explored the relationship between international activity and changes in accreditation standards over a 17-year period. Its methodology and analysis were designed to investigate the following research question:

How is involvement in international accreditation related to the content of the standards of US regional accreditation agencies?

To address this research question, this study collected and analyzed information about the content of accreditation standards, comparing how the content of accreditation standards has changed since 2000, relative to regional accrediting agencies' increasing level of involvement in international accreditation activity.

Comparative and International Context

Research in comparative and international education serves many purposes, ranging from the development of scientific theories about the workings of education to the promotion of peace and goodwill (Arnove, 2003; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). As a field, comparative and international education often finds itself tasked with determining what works in one context and how it can be applied to another context (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). As a result, questions of educational quality and how quality is measured across contexts are inherently embedded in the field of comparative and international education. Higher education—as an institution, process, and outcome—has not been immune to examination by both scholars and practitioners in the field. Questions related to the rate of return for higher education compared to that of primary, secondary, and vocational education, as well as those pertaining to the role of higher education in to economic development in the knowledge society, have led to a large body of research regarding quality assessment and assurance in higher education. Divergent perspectives abound in both practice and research, and while many countries are moving towards a more centrally-controlled definition of quality, there are calls to re-energize and re-emphasize the role of self-regulation in higher education (de Weert, 1990; Dill, Massy, Williams, & Cook, 1996). This may be contributing to the reported increase in interest in American accreditation from international higher education institutions (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002; Morse, 2007).

There is little doubt that globalization and the internationalization of higher education have impacted the processes and policies defining and documenting quality in higher education. Among other phenomena, it has led to the rise of accreditation activities that cross national boundaries. Many institutional and programmatic accreditation agencies now accredit institutions

in countries or regions other than those in which they were originally founded. For example, by 2009 the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), a regional accrediting agency based in Philadelphia, PA, accredited institutions in 12 countries other than the US, and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), a program-level accreditation agency based in Baltimore, MD accredited engineering programs in over 20 countries (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumley, 2009).

Another effect of the increasing interest in international accreditation is the development of international organizations of accrediting agencies. The goals of these organizations are to develop common policies and procedures, determine shared criteria for accreditation, and aid in the transferability of higher education programs and credentials across national borders (Altbach et al., 2009; Blackmur, 2008). An example of these organizations is the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Established in 1991, INQAAHE is a voluntary association whose aims, among others, are the improvement of higher education quality worldwide and the international transferability of educational qualifications (Blackmur, 2008).

Some have proposed that the rise of international organizations such as these, and the increasing involvement of institutional and programmatic accreditation agencies in international accreditation activities have resulted in increasing similarity among the standards of these agencies. For example, there now appears to be a common emphasis on the assessment of student learning outcomes and the expectation that institutions and programs have clear and defined outcomes-based assessment practices (Altbach et al., 2009; A. Y.-C. Hou, 2011; Liu, 2011). While such similarities have been observed, it is unclear what impact they have on the institutions they accredit. Some suggest that similarities in accreditation standards will result in

increasingly similar policies and practices at higher education institutions across contexts (Altbach et al., 2009). Others suggest that differences in language and terminology, as well as differences in national education structures, will limit the extent to which institutions and programs will adapt themselves to the standards of externally-based accreditation agencies (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002).

The relationships between accrediting agency standards and how they are influenced by international activities serve as examples of what Arnove describes as the "dialectic of the global and the local" (2003, p. 1), a now common refrain in comparative and international education literature. This research study sought to understand how the relatively locally oriented process of regional accreditation in the US is impacted by the agencies' interactions with international institutions. As an embodiment of this dialectic, research on the impact of international activities on accreditation standards is expected to yield new ways of understanding how global, national, and local actors interact and influence each other (Arnove, 2003).

Key Factors

New research on accreditation must consider what is already known about the nature of accreditation standards and practices. Both editorial and empirical literatures on accreditation have documented the ways that American accreditation has developed in its over 100-year history. They have also provided insight into the reasons that international institutions seek US accreditation, and have begun to investigate the international experiences of US regional accreditors.

The standards used by regional accrediting agencies have changed since their creation in the late 1800's in response to political changes, public pressure, and the needs of higher education institutions and their leaders. The nature of these changes is a popular topic in

accreditation literature, receiving much editorial attention. Moving from quantitative to qualitative assessments, more recent iterations of regional accreditation standards take a mission-specific approach to assessing institutional quality that emphasizes institutional improvement. With increasing focus on the process of learning rather than the product of learning, accreditation standards are now more likely to consider institutional assessment and renewal practices and the use of learning outcomes to guide institutional decisions. This is a sharp contrast to the accreditation standards of the early to middle 1900s, where inputs such as funding levels, faculty credentials, and library holdings were assumed to be positively associated with educational outputs.

As early as 1950, the regional accreditors began accrediting institutions located outside of the US, with the largest increase in international activity occurring after 2000. Researchers have studied the reasons why colleges and universities pursue accreditation by a foreign agency, and the impact this action has on these institutions. Challenges posed by applying foreign accreditation standards to new cultural contexts have been documented in research that examines both the institutional experience and the experience of regional accreditation agencies and their leaders (Abou-Warda, 2015; Blanco Ramírez, 2015a; Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2016). Finally, recent research has begun to examine the reasons that regional accreditors choose to operate internationally and how this activity impacts their accreditation processes (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b). There has, however, been no published research to date on the impact of international accreditation on accreditation standards themselves; this study seeks to fill that gap in literature.

Institutional theory proposes that organizations change through a process called isomorphism, which constrains organizations in ways that result in similarities between them (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). While isomorphism is evident in the gradual shared patterns of

change already documented by research on regional accreditation, international activity represents a previously unexplored factor in understanding changes in accreditation standards. Through international accreditation, the regional accreditors come into contact with new cultures and institutional practices, compete with each other in new markets, and interact with regulations that are different than those they encounter in the US. The types of isomorphism -- coercive, mimetic, and normative -- each suggest different ways that regional accreditors may change their standards as a result of international accreditation and why these changes may be more evident among those with higher levels of international activity.

Definitions

The language used to describe accreditation and its processes varies between agencies and across accreditation literature. The definitions below are provided to offer clarity in the terminology used within the context of this research study.

Accreditation in the US is a system of self-governance maintained by higher education institutions and non-profit organizations. It is an "extralegal operation conducted by educational organizations and professional organizations...whose decisions and lists of approved institutions are generally accepted by legal bodies in lieu of lists which some of the legal bodies, such as state licensure boards, are empowered to prepare" (Selden, 1964, p. 312). *Accreditation* is used broadly to refer to the cycle of self-study, peer review, site visit, and judgement by an accrediting agency, and periodic review that forms the basis of quality assurance in higher education in the US (Eaton, 2012). It is also being used to refer to the status conferred on an institution after successful participation in this cycle (Eaton, 2001).

Accreditation agencies are the non-profit organizations that award accredited status to institutions and programs and manage the review cycle of already-accredited institutions and

programs. These agencies are also referred to as *accreditation bodies, accrediting agencies, accrediting bodies,* or *accreditors*.

Accredited or **accredited status** is used to describe the status awarded to institutions or programs by accreditation agencies after successful completion of a self-study, peer review, site visit, and judgement.

American-style institutions are colleges or universities established outside of the U.S using the basic structures and principles of American higher education. These structures and principles include expectations for shared governance, academic freedom, and student engagement, as well as admissions processes and curriculum design (Noori & Anderson, 2013).

Content refers to the subjects, topics, or ideas expressed through accreditation standards as well as the ways that these are described in the standards.

Emphasis is used in this study to describe the level of attention paid to particular subjects, topics, or ideas in the text of accreditation standards relative to other subjects, topics, or ideas.

International accreditation occurs when an accreditor awards accredited status to an institution or academic program located in a country other than that in which the accrediting agency is based.

Non-US institutions are those that operate in a country other than the US without the oversight of an American college or university. Non-US institutions may be American-style, in the style of their home country, or a combination of the two. Non-US institutions are distinguished from US institutions or programs operating outside the US, which include branch campuses of American institutions, as well as programs that are run by US institutions but located at a foreign site.

Regional accreditors are agencies or organizations that accredit schools within a specific geographic region of the US.

Standards refers to the criteria each agency uses to determine an institution's or program's eligibility for initial and ongoing accreditation. Standards provide the framework used to make the decision to award, deny, or withdraw accreditation from institutions or programs (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Describing expectations in areas such as student achievement, financial viability and sustainability, and educational effectiveness, accreditation standards are a way of defining quality in higher education (Hämäläinen, 2003).

Summary

The current model of higher education accreditation forms the basis for quality control in the US. It also maintains the economic model on which the American higher education system is based, in which students may only access federal financial aid by attending an institution that is accredited by a recognized accrediting agency. Activity by accreditation agencies that occurs outside of this system, such as international accreditation, has the potential to impact this equilibrium. Investigating the ways in which international accreditation is related to the standards used by US regional accrediting agencies can provide valuable information of interest to accreditation agencies, policy-makers, and higher education institutions and their leaders.

Chapter II: Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Higher education accreditation in the US is a reflection of the decentralized nature of the American educational system. Based on American values such as self-governance and self-improvement, the standards of the regional accreditors have changed over time to reflect changes in the American political environment and respond to public pressure. Financially supported by their member institutions, the regional accreditors are bound to specific geographic regions in the US. As a result, those that wish to interact with new colleges or universities, or grow in size or influence, may currently only turn to international accreditation for expansion.

International accreditation offers both rewards and risks to the accreditors and institutions involved. Research has documented, in particular, the challenges of applying accreditation standards rooted in American values to institutions in other cultural or regulatory environments. For this reason, regional accreditors with higher levels of international activity may develop accreditation standards that are more easily applied to institutions in other countries. Through isomorphism, this may result in common themes or shared patterns of change, which may be more prominent in accreditors with higher levels of international activity.

Historical Background

Higher education accreditation in the US is a system of non-governmental, external quality review that serves to protect public interests in higher education while promoting quality improvement (Eaton, 2012). Four types of accreditation agencies operate in the US: regional accreditors, national faith-based accreditors, national career-related accreditors, and programmatic accreditors. Based on the American values of self-governance, volunteerism, and self-improvement (Brittingham, 2009), the US accreditation system is a “trust-based, standards-based, evidence-based, judgement-based, peer-based process” (Eaton, 2012, p. 5). Considered a

cornerstone of the American higher education system, accreditation relies on a cyclical five-step system to monitor institutional quality (Blanco Ramírez, 2015a). Across all types, accreditation follows a common process that begins with a self-study, followed by peer review, site visit(s), judgement by the agency, and periodic external reviews (Eaton, 2012). These practices, implemented first by the regional accrediting agencies, have served as the model for many other quality assurance agencies in the US and, increasingly, around the globe (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002).

Federal control over higher education in the US is relatively low. Developed by colleges and universities as a response to the increasing diversity of institutions, the system of regional accreditation in the US has prevented strong government intervention in quality assurance (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). The system of regional accreditation, which is currently managed by distinct and privately-run regional accreditation agencies, recognizes regional differences in the United States (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). While there are general similarities in the accreditation model across these agencies, they do differ in procedures and policies, language and terminology, and in the standards that they use to define quality for the institutions that they accredit (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b; Petersen, 1979; Troutt, 1979).

The decentralized nature of the American accreditation system reflects the decentralized nature of higher education in the US, though both the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the US Department of Education provide “recognition” status to accreditation agencies. This recognition status serves to ensure that accrediting agencies have established standards for academic quality, accountability, assessment, and fair practices, essentially serving to accredit the accreditors (Eaton, 2012).

US regional accreditors are financially supported by the schools that they accredit, primarily through annual dues and fees associated with the accreditation review process (Eaton, 2012). The market for accreditation in the US is restricted within six regions, a system that was designed to, among other purposes, promote self-regulation and member involvement in accreditation (Brittingham, 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), which accredits colleges and universities in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands, cannot, for example, accredit schools in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, or Vermont, which are accredited by the New England Association of Colleges and Schools (NEASC). Therefore, the only market available to them for expansion is the international market. As such, accreditors who are able to effectively and substantially expand into the international market may enjoy economic benefits not available to agencies that limit their activity to US institutions.

Beginning in the 1950s, American regional accreditation agencies began exporting accreditation services by accrediting higher education institutions based in other countries. The earliest to expand internationally was the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS) in 1950 (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b). SACS was followed by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) in 1979 and other regional accreditors followed suit. As of 2013, US regional accreditors accredited 41 non-US institutions across 27 different countries ("CHEA Almanac Online," 2016). Though this number continues to increase, the level of involvement in international accreditation varies across the agencies.

Patterns of change in accreditation. Each of the American regional accreditors has its own unique history, philosophy, and set of standards and accreditation requirements. Being

subject to the same federal regulations and nationwide shifts in discourse pertaining to quality assurance in higher education, however, they have changed in similar fashion over time. Prior to an investigation of the relationship between international activity and the content of accreditation standards, it is first necessary to understand the shared history of regional accreditation in the US and the already documented reasons that regional accreditation standards have changed over time. This inquiry will allow for the isolation of the impacts of international accreditation from the impacts of other social and political factors that have influenced accreditation.

Changes in US accreditation since its formation in the late 1800's have occurred in response to demands made by the public, federal and state governments, and the higher education sector itself (Eaton, 2001). US accreditation standards have changed to reflect these demands, moving "from quantitative to qualitative, from prescriptive to mission centered, and from minimal to aspirational" (Brittingham, 2009, p. 15). A historical review of external quality review in the US conducted by Ewell (2007) organized its evolution into four periods, which provide a helpful framework for examining these changes, their causes, and their impacts on accreditation standards and practices.

Pre-Quality (1965-1982). The first phase, which Ewell described as the *Pre-Quality* period, was ushered in by the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which established accreditation's role as the gatekeeper for institutional access to federal student aid. Prior to 1965, accreditation was seen primarily as a means of self-governance for higher education. The possibility of improvement in accreditation prior to 1965 was hindered by apathetic or resistant faculty and college administrators and wide differences in definitions and benchmarks of quality (Selden, 1964). As a result of increasing diversity among higher education institutions and the post-war enrollment boom of the 1950s, the federal government needed a system for ensuring

that taxpayer dollars were directed only to legitimate institutions. Rather than establish its own system for recognizing worthy institutions, the federal government agreed to use the already-established system of accreditation to designate higher education institutions of sufficient quality to receive federal aid (Brittingham, 2009).

The *Pre-Quality* period also saw the rise of state-level higher education governing boards. Policies enacted at the state and federal levels generally approached higher education as a public good. The standards used by regional accreditors during this period implied a connection between institutional quality and institutional structures (such as programs, financial resources, faculty), and were based on three assumptions: (a) judgements about institutional quality could be made through inferences rather than direct measurement; (b) an absence of established benchmarks for assessing quality; and (c) the nature of higher education as a production process (Troutt, 1979). Accreditation standards measured inputs, such as the number of books in university libraries, and emphasized faculty qualifications and research (Angelo, 2002). Accountability measures during this period were confined to the reporting of enrollment and cost factors, and questions regarding educational performance or the quality of student learning were not raised (Ewell, 2007).

In the face of a rapidly changing landscape in higher education and spurred on by the federal government's development of a process for recognizing accreditors in 1968, accreditation agencies developed detailed processes for training evaluation teams and otherwise responded to the increasing administrative complexity of higher education (Brittingham, 2009). Accommodations were made in accreditation standards for branch campuses, contractual relationships, and for-profit education. Despite its broadening scope, however, accreditation failed to meet the public's demand for information comparing the relative quality of institutions

against each other (Selden, 1964), and as enrollment and public investment in higher education increased, the public started to demand more information about institutional performance.

Quality I (1983-1991). Public reports issued in the mid-1980s prompted a new phase in accreditation focused on the assessment of higher education outcomes. *A Nation at Risk* prompted calls to increase the quality of higher education in the US as a response to declining student performance in primary and secondary education (Ewell, 2007). *Involvement in Learning*, issued in 1984 by the National Institute of Education, suggested judging institutions on the basis of their educational effectiveness (Brittingham, 2009), while *Integrity in the College Curriculum* argued for a central role of student learning assessment in the development of college curricula (Ewell, 2007).

States responded quickly, with the majority adopting state-level assessment requirements by 1990. These requirements compelled public higher education institutions to (a) develop statements for student learning outcomes and methods for assessing these outcomes; (b) create processes for the use of these assessments in institutional improvement; and (c) prepare and provide reports on these activities to the public. Accreditation agencies responded accordingly. In 1984, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) set new expectations for the systematic use of outcomes assessment data in the accreditation process. It was quickly followed by the North Central and New England regional accreditors, who began to "explicitly require [institutions] to systematically collect and use data necessary to support... planning efforts and enhance institutional effectiveness" (Bogue & Hall, 2003, p. 36).

As a result of these events, the *Quality I* period was defined by two patterns of behavior in higher education quality assessment within colleges and universities (Ewell, 2007). Most institutions responded administratively by developing formal assessment operations designed to

be visible and operate at the institutional level. These operations isolated assessments from the academic core and failed to qualitatively change the general approach to the use of assessment to improve teaching and learning at the practical level. However, there was uneven development of assessment practices across institutions, and some resisted outright.

Performance Measures (1992-1999). Perceived resistance to accountability measures initiated during the *Quality I* period, especially by high prestige institutions, eroded public trust in institutional ability to self-regulate and served as the impetus for the *Performance Measures* period. In the early 1990s, higher education began to be viewed as a public enterprise which had to be "disciplined and 'steered' by state authorities consistent with public purposes" (Ewell, 2007, p. 128). States began experimenting with tying funding to performance on pre-determined measures. These efforts largely failed to significantly change institutional approaches to quality assessment because they could be tracked with little institutional involvement using state-level databases, the financial stakes were low, and the statistics could be easily manipulated (Ewell, 2007).

At the federal level, frustration with the state of quality assurance through accreditation led to propositions to rescind accreditation's role in qualifying institutions to receive federal financial aid (Brittingham, 2009). Legislative action in the early 1990's indicated Congressional interest in the standardization of the accreditation process and required accreditation agencies to evaluate institutions in 12 specific areas (Bogue & Hall, 2003). State postsecondary review agencies (SPREs) were authorized in 1992 to review institutions with high student loan default rates, and though these agencies were defunct by 1994, their creation was seen as a direct accusation that accreditation was not sufficiently monitoring institutional quality (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Brittingham, 2009).

This period also saw changes in the self-governance of accreditation itself, with the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) dissolving in 1993. During its 20 years serving as coordinating body for higher education accreditation, COPA had established process expectations for accreditation agencies and sought to ensure that new accreditors met pre-determined standards of behavior in the accreditation market (Brittingham, 2009). Founded in 1996, The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) took on the role of recognizing accreditors, but in doing so, shifted the balance of power in accreditation from the public to higher education leaders. Instead of establishing a common set of rigorous standards (Amaraal, 1998; Brittingham, 2009) that might have better met public demands for performance-based decisions in higher education, CHEA required that all regional accreditors use the same set of minimal standards (Ewell, 2007).

Quality II. The Quality II period, beginning in 2000, was ushered in against a backdrop of decreasing public support for higher education, increased competition among higher education institutions, and diminishing distinctions between the quality associated with public and private institutions. It was during this period that significant changes to accreditation occurred, including the decoupling of accreditation's twin roles of compliance and institutional improvement, a greater emphasis on the process of teaching and student learning outcomes, and a trend towards the public disclosure of accreditation results (Ewell, 2007). Eaton (2001) attributed these changes to the influence of the higher education community. As the establishment of new colleges and universities slowed, it became less important in the higher education community to have minimal standards and more important to have aspirational standards to promote institutional growth (Brittingham, 2009). Higher education began to approach accreditation as a means for building capacity to enhance educational effectiveness, and it became less important to them that

accreditation repeatedly reaffirm an institutions' position relative to the same set of minimum standards. In response, reforms across the regional accreditors began to emphasize ongoing quality improvement and institutional renewal.

Changes during this period served dual purposes "to enhance the role of accreditation while expanding its capacity to meet current institutional needs" (Eaton, 2001, p. 41). While the ways that these changes are evident in the policies and practices of regional accreditors varies, there have been common patterns (Eaton, 2001). Some were operational in nature, such as the use of regional accreditation to respond to national demands, the pursuit of greater efficiency through interagency collaboration, and the expansion of international accreditation activity. Other reforms impacted the standards used by regional accreditors, including the revision of standards to be more focused on quality improvement, defining quality in distance education, and increased attention to teaching and learning.

Recent developments. Emboldened by the 2008 Higher Education Act, which prohibited the federal government from regulating the ways that accreditors assess student learning (Brittingham, 2009), contemporary discussions of quality in higher education replaced concern with the quality of the education *product* with concern about the quality of the educational *process*, seeking to measure the extent to which institutions meet their own internally-defined criteria (Nagy & Robinson, 2013). This shift from a compliance model, which was prescriptive and focused on an institution's compliance with standards, to an aspirational model that prioritizes institutional engagement and adding value to the institution, was thought to better recognize diversity among institutions (Cheng, 2015). This model may be more accommodating to the varied structures of higher education found in other countries, allowing US accreditors in increase their involvement in the accreditation of non-US institutions.

The Internationalization of Accreditation. It has been suggested that "the adoption of US accreditation by non-US universities is one of the most salient manifestations of the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education" (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2016, p. 1). Quality assurance is the "prime regulatory lever for transnational education" (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007, p. 4). Globalization and the liberalization of the educational market has placed more higher education institutions in direct competition with each other. Barriers that favor domestic institutions are being replaced with mechanisms to allow foreign providers to meet educational needs unsatisfied by local supply, and international trade agreements encourage the mobility of professionals, and thus, educational credentials, across borders. By framing education services as a category of service, the General Agreement on Trades and Services (GATS) raised important questions about the role of governmental versus private mechanisms in monitoring educational quality (Knight, 2002).

The development of international standards for higher education accreditation could facilitate mutual recognition of educational credentials and promote professional mobility. However, proposals for systematic higher education quality assurance able to operate at the international level have resulted in questions regarding the extent to which they will result in the standardization of higher education institutions. Standardization can be seen "both as being caused by, and arising in response to, increased competition in a global market for higher education" (Nagy & Robinson, 2013, p. 82). The lack of confidence in the accreditation process in one country may result in unbalanced networks that prioritize workers from one country over another (Mirone, 1999). This suggests a dilemma or incompatibility between the "the need to establish a certain level of quality as a response to deregulation...and the wish to preserve the uniqueness and diversity of higher education" (Prøitz, Stensaker, & Harvey, 2004, p. 736).

International Organizations. In the global education marketplace, where students and higher education institutions are increasing mobile and diverse, "higher education is too precious to be left to particular institutions of accreditation pursuing their own interests" (Lowrie, 2008, p. 362). Globalization has given rise to a complicated network of international, multinational, and regional organizations that deal with internationalization in higher education. These include such organizations as the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions for Higher Learning (ASAIHL) (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). A variety of documents issued by UNESCO, OECD, and others between 2001 and 2005 reflected a range of political perspectives on cross-border higher education initiatives. Guidelines, principles of good practice, and other recommendations issued by multinational organizations called for the assessment and mutual recognition of qualifications, respect for local cultures and practices, and an emphasis on increasing access to higher education (Middlehurst, 2011).

The relative impact of these documents on the practices of individual accreditation agencies is still undetermined. For example, INQAAHE's *Guidelines of Good Practice for Higher Education*, first published in 2003, are expressed so generally that specific standards may continue to be established at the national level (Blackmur, 2008), and it is unclear the extent to which national-level accrediting agencies will change their standards in alignment with those set by INQAAHE and other international organizations, or if they will retain more culturally-specific standards. Regional accrediting agencies that accredit international institutions may be more likely to be attentive to international guidelines or accreditation than those which do not.

Summary. Private, non-governmental accreditation is a long-standing and relatively unique feature of the American higher education landscape. It was designed and implemented

with American higher education in mind and has been shaped over time by both higher education institutions and the cultural and political landscapes of the United States. Though accreditation is becoming an international activity, it is still unclear how US regional accreditation agencies will be impacted by this increasingly complex global environment.

Review of Empirical Literature

Though it is a popular topic in higher education literature, accreditation is not often the subject of empirical work published in peer-reviewed journals (Fester, Gasman, & Nguyen, 2012). Rather, the majority of publications on accreditation are historical reviews, opinion or commentary on the state of accreditation, or predictions about the future of accreditation. What empirical research exists on accreditation often uses accreditation as basis for sampling or as an organizing factor, or seeks to connect accreditation to outcomes at the student or institutional level. These studies rarely study the accreditors or their processes. Though limited, studies which compare the standards or practices of accreditation agencies provide some empirical information on the nature of accreditation, while others provide insights into the motivation behind, and impacts of, international accreditation by American accreditation agencies.

Accreditation status is a frequent sampling technique used in empirical studies in higher education. These studies cover a wide range of topics that include the impact of accreditation on curriculum, faculty behavior, and student outcomes, as well as the differences or similarities between accredited and non-accredited programs. Evans, Treviño, and Weaver (2006), for example, collected data on the state of ethics in the curricula of Master of Business Administration programs that were identified as being a) among the 100 largest programs in the US; b) highest ranked programs in *BusinessWeek* or *U.S. News and World Report*; or c) from a random sample of 100 schools accredited by AACSB (formerly the American Association of

Collegiate Business Schools, now the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business). Newman, Dannennfelser and Benishek (2002), in their study examining the attitudes of students entering social work and counseling programs, drew their sample from students admitted to social work programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP).

Similarly, research designed to identify significant aspects of engineering students' in- and out-of-class experiences surveyed nearly 5,000 students nearing graduation from 40 engineering schools accredited by the Accrediting Board from Engineering and Technology (ABET) (Strauss & Terenzini, 2007). Mahmoud and Frampton (1975) used questionnaire data from a survey sent to 75 schools with business programs accredited by AACSB to assess the state of management in business school curricula. AACSB-accredited status was also used in a study of students' perceptions of cheating, which found significant differences in the likelihood of cheating and perceptions of cheating between students enrolled in AACSB Tier 1 schools and those enrolled in Tier 2 schools (Premeaux, 2005).

Other studies of accreditation have investigated the extent to which schools or programs have aligned their curriculum with accreditation standards (Albritton, McMullen, & Gardiner, 2003; Eldredge & Galloway, 1983; Thanopoulos & Vernon, 1987), the extent to which accreditation motivates curricular changes (Schoenfeldt, McDonald, & Youngblood, 1991), and the relationship between accreditation standards and student outcomes (Cabrera, Colbeck, & Terenzini, 2001; Lambert, Terenzini, & Lattuca, 2007; Volkwein, Lattuca, Harper, & Domingo, 2007). Studies like these can be useful in describing the relationships between accreditation and

educational quality. However, they provide little insight into the processes of accreditation at the organizational level.

Comparing Accreditors. Though they are few, research studies that compare accreditation processes or standards offer some empirical insight into the nature of accreditation itself. Text and content analyses in the 1970s suggested that regional accreditation agencies have historically been concerned with eight common dimensions: institutional purposes and objectives, organization and administration, financial resources, physical resources, libraries, students and student services, faculty, and education programs (Petersen, 1979; Troutt, 1979). Further examination of the standards of regional accreditation agencies revealed an assumed relationship between institutional quality (defined as students' academic performance or intellectual achievement) and five of these dimensions: institutional purposes and objectives, educational programs, financial resources, faculty, and libraries (Troutt, 1979).

Comparing the standards of specialized accrediting bodies, Hagerty and Stark (1989) built on Petersen's (1979) framework to examine both the content of accreditation standards and the perceptions of these standards. Across ten program accreditors in ten different professional fields, substantial emphasis was placed on all dimensions in the study except student outcomes, despite survey data suggesting that faculty in these fields believed student outcomes are important. More recently, comparisons of the regional accrediting agencies revealed an increasing emphasis on outcomes assessment, as well as information literacy, distance education, and teaching and learning (Gratch-Lindauer, 2002).

A comparison of the regional accreditors' approaches to outcomes assessment demonstrated that the differences in accreditation standards across the regional accreditors translates directly into geographic patterns in institutional approaches to assessment. An early

study found that institutions in the Southern and North Central regions were more likely to have stated policies on outcomes assessment (McCoy, Chamberlain, & Seay, 1994). Plans for future assessment activities also appeared to be related to region, with as many as 77% of Southern institutions and as few as 50% New England institutions reporting plans to enhance assessment activities.

These patterns appear to bear out over time. Quantitative analyses conducted using data collected through a survey from over 1,300 higher education institutions nationwide found that differences across regional accreditors are evident at the institutional level, and "accrediting regions appear to make a substantial difference in terms of the approaches to student assessment that institutions emphasize" (Peterson & Augustine, 2000, p. 464). Institutions in the North Central and Southern regions were more likely to collect assessment data of students' cognitive competencies. Institutions in the Middle States, New England, and Western regions were the least likely to collect assessment data on cognitive competencies. Those in the Southern region were more likely to assess students' affective competencies and, along with Middle States, to collect data of former students. Together, institutions in these regions were also more likely to include reference to assessment in their mission statements.

Regional accreditors and international accreditation. Published works on the experiences of regional accreditors and their accreditation of international institutions have been primarily commentaries on the topic or reports from accreditation agencies themselves (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b; Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002; Morse, 2007). These reports suggest that while regional accreditors can learn from their experiences accrediting internationally, this activity also places considerable administrative burden on the agencies and can be a challenging and complex task. Only recently has empirical research on how

international accreditation impacts regional accreditors have been published. Viewed collectively, they provide empirical support for the sentiments expressed in these anecdotal reports.

Approaches to international accreditation. A comprehensive study by Blanco Ramírez (2015b) used document analysis and semi-structured interviews to capture information on the approaches taken by the regional accreditors that accredit non-US institutions. This study found that the regional accreditors had not developed a unified approach to international accreditation. Some required different steps or requirements for international institutions, while others used previously established procedures also used for accrediting US institutions. Not all regional accreditors required that instruction be conducted in English or that the institutions be American-style, and unlike in the US, where the geographic boundaries for the regional accreditors are clearly defined, there were no geographic boundaries regulating regional accreditation internationally.

Concerns about cultural imposition. Regional accreditors have expressed reluctance to impose American values on institutions from other cultures. Simultaneously, they voiced concerns about finding a balance between having enough flexibility in standards to be applied across cultures while still maintaining a certain level of minimum standards, and a desire to help develop capacity for quality assurance in the developing world. In order to meet these goals, they reported a need to build internal capacity for cultural understanding and effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b).

When asked about their experiences accrediting internationally, senior administrators of the regional accreditors described their role in international accreditation as one of a "gate-keeper." They felt a responsibility to help prevent diploma mills, respond to the rise of for-profit

education, and help promote accountability in higher education (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b). They also described increasing international activity from regional accreditors as a response to globalization. More international institutions want US accreditation, and US regional accreditors need to be more familiar with international contexts in order to accredit study abroad, branch campuses, and other international partnerships (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b). In this way, international accreditation can be a legitimizing force for both the regional accreditor and the international institution, with both sides enjoying considerable benefits (Blanco Ramírez, 2015a; Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002).

While these studies shed light on a subject that has been otherwise empirically ignored, they fail to adequately capture the impact of international accreditation on regional accreditors themselves. Blanco Ramírez (2015b) identified desired outcomes for regional accreditors, namely learning about other educational contexts to improve their own accreditation practices, but made no attempt to determine whether or not this learning has occurred. There has also been no discussion of how the accreditors' engagement in international accreditation may have impacted their standards for assessing education quality.

International accreditation and international institutions. Though also a small canon, the research literature about international accreditation suggests that while there continues to be demand for US accreditation from international institutions, the practice presents challenges to both accreditors and institutions. Some researchers have sought to identify reasons why institutions seek accreditation from a foreign agency, others have attempted to capture the impact of international accreditation on individual institutions.

Reasons for pursuing international accreditation. There has been considerable interest in receiving accreditation from internationally-based or internationally-recognized accrediting

agencies (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002; Morse, 2007). As of 2001, US accreditors were actively engaged in the accreditation of over 461 institutions or programs in 65 countries. All national accreditors, all regional accreditors, and 42.8% of specialized accreditors who responded to a survey by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation reported operating internationally (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002). Respondents indicated that they were increasingly called upon by international institutions for accreditation, and that US accreditors are simultaneously interested in conducting accreditation activity internationally.

Earning accredited status is seen as a status symbol and as a tool for increasing an institution's or program's reputation and marketability, especially among institutions seeking an international presence. Institutions and programs that display high levels of entrepreneurship appear to be more willing to exploit new opportunities for advancement, including engaging in accreditation as a means for improving their marketability (Abou-Warda, 2015).

In what appears to be the first of its kind, an ethnographic case study captured the experiences of a Mexican university's experience with US regional accreditation. Analyzing interviews with personnel of the university as well as with staff of the regional accreditor involved, Blanco Ramírez (2015a) found that the primary motivation behind this university's pursuit of US accreditation was reputational value. By achieving accredited status, this university sought to gain access to a network of other internationally recognized institutions and benefit from the perception of being in their league.

Another study, this time drawing on data collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, investigated the experiences of three Canadian universities seeking accreditation by a US regional accreditor (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2016). Three common themes across the universities were identified as influencing the accreditation plan. First, the pursuit of

US accreditation was someone else's idea. In each of the interviews conducted for this study, "the decision to pursue accreditation was attributed to somebody else, to a different group or to a predecessor" (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2016, p. 8). Second, the opportunity to pursue US accreditation was enabled by another change at the institution, such as joining the NCAA (National College Athletic Association) or becoming a university. Finally, the pursuit of US accreditation was described as a way to respond to institutional problems, including the desire to attract more international students and become more focused on student success.

Impact of international accreditation. Research suggests that international accreditation offers both positive and negative impacts for institutions and their programs. Business schools and programs appear to be the most frequent sites of research on this topic. In a quantitative study designed to measure the extent to which international accreditation helps business schools improve their research performance, researchers found a statistically significant and positive relationship between a program's accreditation status and its ranking in the *Social Science Research Network's Top 1000 Business Schools* (Nigsch & Schenker-Wicki, 2013). Acquiring international accreditation was significantly related to a program's ranking, while a program's acquisition of national accreditation had no effect, suggesting that international accreditation had an impact on both the production and the reputation of business programs. A study of Taiwanese universities that achieved AACSB accreditation yield similar findings (Y.-C. Hou et al., 2015). AACSB accreditation resulted in improvements in the quality of education, closer partnerships between faculty and staff, curriculum reform, student learning outcomes, faculty efficiency, and internationalization.

Not all impacts of international accreditation are positive. Taiwanese universities also reported that AASCB accreditation resulted in increased workloads, that it was costly and time

consuming, and that it placed high demands on teaching and assessment of learning (Y.-C. Hou et al., 2015). Another study of AACSB accreditation, in Bahrain, found that AACSB accreditation was unable to universally shift institutional perspectives away from thinking of quality as conformance to minimum standards and towards an approach to quality and a process of continuous improvement (Al Khalifa, 2016). In this case study, it was found that student learning outcomes assessment was perceived by faculty as a bureaucratic mechanism rather than a tool for improving teaching and learning, despite contrary messaging from AACSB.

Cultural conflict. Despite interest in international accreditation, there are concerns about the application of accreditation standards outside of their initial context. Pursuit of foreign accreditation can pose a number of structural constraints on institutions. Noori and Anderson (2013) suggest:

> [o]n its surface, the notion that a university in a sovereign state would seek validation from an external agency in a foreign country would at best appear to be an unwelcome and unnecessary usurpation of state autonomy. It is undoubtedly true that seeking accreditation entails the adoption of a sizable set of structural requirements. For example, universities that apply for accreditation are required to have the following structures and mechanisms in place prior to applying for accreditation. They are required to adopt a mission statement, they must have an independent board of trustees, they are required to implement a liberal arts curriculum, and they must provide channels for both students and faculty to participate in the governance of the institution. (2013, p. 163)

In addition, accreditation requirements that set requirements for the admissions process and make-up of the student body, like those in the US and UK, are irrelevant in contexts where student selection and placement is conducted through nationalized systems. Differences in

funding and governance structures between countries pose similar challenges, as do accreditation requirements for post-graduation job placement data in contexts where the job market is controlled by non-liberal mechanisms (Öz, 2005).

Despite evidence that accreditation agencies engage international institutions in a "decentralized, pragmatic, and participatory fashion" (Noori & Anderson, 2013, p. 163) that mitigate some of these challenges, research reveals a variety of difficulties experienced by international universities seeking US regional accreditation. Turkish universities reported significant challenges in the process of seeking accreditation by non-Turkish accreditation agencies (Öz, 2005). In a case study of a Mexican university's pursuit of US regional accreditation, Blanco Ramírez found that the US accreditation process "triggered a set of intra-organizational dynamics and promoted the establishment of a complex division of labor in which members of the academic staff, while absolutely necessary for the process of accreditation, were distanced from decision-making" (2015a, p. 365).

Canadian universities also experienced difficulties resulting primarily from contextual differences between the US and Canadian academic environments, which Blanco Ramirez and Luu (2016) organized into external problems and internal problems. External problems included differing approaches to student learning outcomes, the absence of general education curricula in Canada, and the accreditor's failure to adequately prepare the accreditation team for the international experience. Internal problems stemmed primarily from the level of independence enjoyed by faculty in Canadian universities, which resulted in resistance to the additional assessment responsibilities that come with accreditation.

Finally, a critical discourse analysis of documents published by multinational organizations such as UNESCO and OECD, international organizations such as INQAAHE, and

national organizations such as the American Council of Education, revealed privileging of Northern approaches to higher education quality (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). This research questioned whether or not it is possible to coordinate efforts for quality assurance across national boundaries "without imposing universal assumptions and practices" (Blanco Ramírez, 2014, p. 131).

Taking the research on international accreditation into account, it is clear that the application of US accreditation standards poses challenges for international institutions as well as to the accreditors themselves. In response, accreditors that are active in international accreditation may develop standards that are more flexible or more easily transferred to contexts with different cultural or social backgrounds. As a result, the standards of accreditors that are active in international accreditation may begin to look more like each other's, retaining less of their regional uniqueness.

Theoretical Framework

This research sought to understand the relationship between international accreditation activity and the content of accreditation standards. As a reflection of the values held by accreditation agencies, changes in standards are understood here to be evidence of organizational or institutional change. Institutional perspectives on organizations and organizational change provide a helpful lens through which the phenomenon of international accreditation can be examined. In particular, institutional theories provided a theoretical framework for two central assumptions on which this research was based: a) that accreditation agencies and their standards will be impacted by international accreditation activity; and b) that these impacts will be more evident across accreditation agencies with higher levels of international accreditation.

International impact on accreditation standards. Institutionalism is generally divided into two schools: institutional theories and new (or neo-) institutional theories. Both are based on a desire to answer questions about "how social choices are shaped, mediated, and channeled by institutional arrangements" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 2). "Old" institutionalism embeds organizations in local culture, while new institutionalism considers organizations in broader nonlocal environments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This research followed the new institutionalist view of the interaction between an organization and its environment. Environments, in the new institutional view, are not "co-opted by organizations"; instead, "they penetrate the organization, creating the lenses through which actors view the world and the very categories of structure, action, and thought" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 13). From this perspective, accrediting agencies are impacted by their actions on the international stage, with the global education environment serving not as an overt force for change but rather a new lens or change in perspective. This new perspective may influence accreditation practices in ways that result in changes in accreditation standards as agencies become more embedded in the global market.

Institutional theories have been previously used to frame research on the development of accreditation organizations at the national level (Bloland, 1999) and help describe a key role played by accreditation in the global higher education environment. From this perspective, institutions provide reliable frameworks for economic exchange by reducing uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In the global higher education economy, accreditation does this by validating the movement of credentials and academic credits across higher education institutions, and from higher education institutions to the economy. In addition, institutional theories help frame the ways that accreditation, and by extension accrediting agencies, interact with the local

and global environment. Institutional theories view institutionalization as a state-centered process that ultimately limits the institution (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In the US, regional accreditation is a relatively private enterprise, but it has become increasingly shaped by government regulation, most notably in the 1980s when state boards and legislatures began to link assessment in higher education to public accountability (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002).

Institutionalism's attention to legitimacy, which is strongly tied to the success and survival of organizations, is especially relevant to the study of higher education accreditation agencies (Bloland, 1999). While higher education institutions seek accreditation as a method for communicating their legitimacy to the public, accreditation agencies may only serve this purpose if they, too, are trusted and considered legitimate in the public eye. National accreditation systems may find their trustworthiness questioned if they appear self-serving and only concerned with their own country's needs, perhaps "miss[ing] their very purpose if they are not trusted outside of the country where they are established" (Haug, 2003, p. 231). To maintain legitimacy in the rapidly expanding global higher education environment, nationally-based accreditation agencies thus have reason to ensure their definitions of quality and quality assurance practices align with international trends and expectations.

Shared patterns of change. This research was framed by a key feature of institutional theories, isomorphism. Isomorphism is the theoretical assumption that organizations that have similar experiences will begin to resemble each other. Applying this theoretical assumption to the research questions proposed here yielded an expectation that regional accreditors that engage in higher levels of international accreditation would display similar changes in their standards that were distinct from regional accreditation agencies with less or no involvement in international accreditation.

Isomorphism is “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000, p. 146). Boli & Thomas (1999) suggested that structural isomorphism in the world polity “operates increasingly via ‘top-down’ rather than ‘bottom-up’ processes” (p. 5). Isomorphism in higher education may be the result of globalization and increased competition between higher education institutions, but it can also be mitigated by public and national authorities who ensure that the field remains differentiated enough to meet the needs of diverse students and nations (Altbach et al., 2009). In their landmark work, DiMaggio and Powell (2000) described three types of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Each type of isomorphism plays a role in influencing the standards of regional accreditation agencies.

Coercive isomorphism results from pressure exerted on organizations by other organizations, government regulation, and the expectations of the cultural environment in which they function (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). Many of the changes that have occurred in accreditation in the US may be described as coercive isomorphism. Federal regulations have required accreditation agencies to include particular compliance areas in their standards, as have cultural expectations from the general public. Similarly, political pressures from both outside and within the higher education sector have influenced accreditation standards. In the context of international accreditation, coercive isomorphism likely occurs when accreditation agencies interact with new governments and cultural practices, which may exert formal or informal pressures on the agencies to adjust their standards or practices.

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when uncertainty encourages imitation (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). When organizations are uncertain or face a problem with an unclear solution, they are likely to turn to models or imitate other organizations that have successfully overcome

similar challenges. In the context of international accreditation, it would follow that accreditors interested in expanding their international activity would seek to model their practices and standards on other accreditors that had previously been successful in international accreditation.

Finally, normative isomorphism recognizes the role of the individual in contributing to organizational isomorphism by describing the ways in which professional networks and the exchange of personnel lead to organizational change (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). The accreditation model practiced by the regional accreditors is highly dependent on the movement of people and the flow of ideas between institutions. Recent emphases on accreditation as institutional renewal capitalizes on this perspective by discouraging accreditation teams from the technical application of standards and promoting dialogue with institutional personnel. As a result, individuals who participate on international accreditation projects are likely to bring ideas developed during these dialogues back to the regional accreditors, where they may be incorporated into new standards or approaches to accreditation.

Alternately, other researchers have advanced a colonialist theory of international accreditation practices. International accreditation by US regional accreditors has been likened to academic imperialism or modern-day colonialism (Altbach, 2003). Examined through a colonialist or postcolonialist lens, globalization is seen as a form of colonization, exploitation, and domination (Morley, 2003). When globalization is framed as a continued or new form of colonization, quality and quality assurance in higher education is put forth as a reflection of power and domination flowing from the Global North to the Global South, exacerbating existing power differentials (Blanco Ramírez, 2014; Lemaitre, 2002) between nations and cultures.

Colonialist readings of international discourse have provided a legitimate framework for examining flows of power and ideology according to colonial structures (Blanco Ramírez,

2015b). The unequal levels of representation in policy creation between organizations and institutions from the Global North and the Global South, and the presentation of higher education in the Global South as undeveloped can both be linked to historical patterns of imperialism and colonization. Further, the international quality discourse legitimates and maintains this status quo, and the question remains: "how then can collaboration between the Global North and the Global South take place if power asymmetries are not acknowledged?" (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b, p. 130).

Postcolonialist investigations recognize that "definitions of quality are never neutral or innocent. They are about balances of power" (Lemaitre, 2002, p. 34). Postcolonialist studies of quality in higher education are fundamentally grounded in the premise that "dominant understandings of quality are written largely by Western writers working within a Western episteme" (Tikly, 2011, p. 4). Postcolonialism sees such similarities as evidence of the dominance of Western thought over indigenous definitions of quality and systems of quality assurance. When countries in the Global South adopt Northern quality practices with little to no modification, the flow of ideas and approaches to quality can be traced along global patterns that are perpetuated by ongoing colonial discourse (Blanco Ramírez, 2014; Lemaitre, 2002).

Theoretical selection. Postcolonialism offers a perspective that fails to account for the involvement of US regional accreditors in accreditation in other Northern countries. As of 2013, US regional accreditors accredited 41 institutions or programs in 26 different countries ("CHEA Almanac Online," 2016). Eleven of the countries in which the US regional accreditors were active in 2013 are considered part of the Global North, while 15 are considered part of the Global South. This reveals that while the US regional accreditors were more active in the Global South, the difference is slight, with 42% of their international activity occurring in the Global North.

This near-parity of activity in the Global North and the Global South suggests that while colonial and postcolonial approaches to examining the international activity of US regional accreditors may provide helpful in understanding a portion of this phenomenon, it yields an incomplete picture.

Despite the potential benefits of using postcolonial perspectives to understand questions of power and domination in higher education quality, it remained a less relevant framework for this research than the institutional approach. Old trends and patterns in higher education that were driven by colonial mechanisms have been rapidly broken down by new information and communication technologies (Altbach et al., 2009). Nations of the Global South understand that they must redefine Northern approaches to quality assurance to design definitions of quality that fit both the local and global culture (Lemaitre, 2002). Accreditation agencies engaged in international accreditation acknowledge their own hesitation to apply American standards wholeheartedly in international contexts (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002). Given the increased interest from international universities for US accreditation, the regional accreditation agencies that respond to these requests can be seen as responding to a market need rather than overtly exerting power. While this research recognizes that accreditation agencies could be viewed as agents of power, enforcing standards across national boundaries, it chose an alternate view, where accreditation agencies are primarily subject to the power of global forces and isomorphic tendencies. Furthermore, postcolonialist examinations of US accreditation were insufficient for examining the question posed in this research because they do not recognize the possibility that US agencies may be impacted themselves as a result of their involvement with other countries.

Conceptual Model

Though qualitative research does not require a hypothesis, the theoretical grounding of this research in institutional theory and the mechanisms of isomorphism lead to certain assumptions. Most notably, it was assumed that qualitative content analysis would be able to empirically capture data that describes changes in accreditation standards over time. While the methodology described in the following chapter was not designed to test specific hypotheses about the nature of these changes, it did assume that changes would occur in accreditation standards over time, and that these changes may have been related to accreditors' involvement in international accreditation.

Figure 1 provides a visual model of isomorphism in accreditation standards and its possible relationship to the content of accreditation standards. The vertical axis represents the level of emphasis given to particular elements in the accreditation standards. The elements may be specific patterns, themes, or requirements, e.g.: faculty development, program assessment, or particular financial practices. In this case, the example used is *learning outcomes*. The horizontal axis represents time. The dotted lines, A, B, and C, represent regional accreditors with higher levels of international activity, while the solid lines D, E, F, and G represent regional accreditors with lower levels of international accreditation activity.

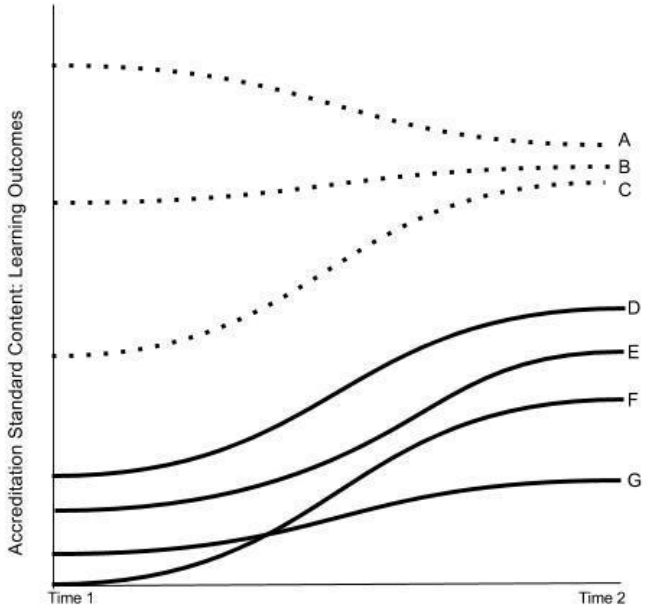

Figure 1. Conceptual model of isomorphism in standard content.

As previously described, the standards of the regional accreditors have changed in similar ways over time, becoming more qualitative and aspirational in nature (Brittingham, 2009). Figure 1 demonstrates that shared patterns of change are expected to continue among the regional accreditors. This research sought to determine whether these patterns of change were shaped or mitigated by international accreditation activity. Lines F-G representing agencies with lower levels of international activity, demonstrate that while these agencies have each increased emphasis on learning outcomes in their standards, they have done so to varying degrees. Alternatively, lines A-C, the agencies with higher level of international activity, have become increasingly similar in their emphasis on learning outcomes.

Summary

For nearly 150 years, American regional higher education standards have been shaped by the political, social, and cultural environment of the US. As US accreditation has become

increasingly internationalized, researchers have documented the reasons for, and impact of, this expansion. Among other findings, research conducted both at universities and regional accreditors acknowledges concerns on both sides about the application of US standards to colleges and universities in other contexts. However, there has been no research conducted to examine whether regional accreditors that are more active internationally have made changes to their accreditation standards to reduce this concern. If so, the standards of the agencies most active in international accreditation may display shared patterns of change, becoming more similar to each other and distinct from those that are less active internationally.

Chapter III: Methodology

Institutional theories of organizational change, coupled with previous research on the ways that accreditation standards have changed over time, suggest that regional accrediting agencies that operate internationally may become increasingly similar to each other over time. This isomorphism, or shared patterns of change, may be revealed by examining the content of accreditation standards at different points in time. Using methodologies drawn from qualitative content analysis (QCA), this research will collect data on the content of regional accreditation standards in 2000 and 2017. Comparing changes from 2000 to 2017 across agencies with higher levels of international activity to those with little to no international activity was expected to provide insight into the ways that international accreditation may have influenced the content of US regional accrediting agencies.

Cases

The cases used for this research were seven US regional accreditation agencies. Regional accreditation agencies were purposefully selected as the subjects for this study because they provided the best opportunity for isolating patterns that may be related to international activity in accreditation standards. While each regional agency writes and formats its own standards, they are subject to the same federal legislation and similar public pressures. These forces have resulted in common patterns of change over time across the regional accrediting agencies. Because the agencies differ in their levels of international activity, comparing them according to their international activity offered an opportunity to isolate the effects of international activity from the effects of other factors that may impact accreditation standards.

National faith-based accrediting agencies, national career-related accrediting agencies, and programmatic accrediting agencies also accredit internationally ("CHEA Almanac Online,"

2016). These agencies vary widely in scope and purpose. In addition to the public and policy influences that may impact both specialized and regional accrediting agencies, these specialized agencies are subject to pressures from professions and external organizations that influence their standards in different ways. The diversity of standards in these agencies and the wide variety of external influences to which they are subject would have made it difficult to identify shared patterns of change and their relationship to international activity. Therefore, the seven regional accreditation agencies were the most consistent and appropriate subjects for an investigation of the impact of international accreditation on accreditation agency standards.

Six of the regional accrediting agencies are recognized by CHEA and the US Department of Education. However, affiliation with CHEA is not required for regional accrediting agencies. The seventh regional accreditation agency, Northwest Commission on Colleges and University (NWCCU) ended its affiliation with CHEA in 2012, though it remains approved by the US Department of Education. The names and scope of the regional accrediting agencies, as described on the websites of CHEA, the US Department of Education, and the agencies themselves, are provided below:

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) - *Western Association of Schools and Colleges*. ACCJC accredits associate degree-granting institutions in California, Hawaii, the Territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (WSCUC) - *Western Association of Schools and Colleges*. WSCUC accredits institutions awarding degrees of bachelor or higher in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Basin. It is also approved by CHEA to

accredit institutions outside the US that are capable of being effectively reviewed by its processes.

Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accredits institutions that award associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees and are incorporated in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) accredits degree-granting institutions that offer one or more postsecondary educational programs of at least one academic year in length in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and internationally.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC) accredits institutions that award associate, baccalaureate, master's and doctoral degrees that include in their offerings at least one program in liberal studies or another area of study widely available at the baccalaureate level in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and internationally.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS) accredits degree-granting institutions of higher education in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Latin America, and other Commission-approved international sites.

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) accredits institutions in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, and internationally.

Measures

This research gathered data on the content of accreditation standards and the international activity of regional accrediting agencies. By the nature of using a coding scheme for data collection, much of the data is presented quantitatively using frequency counts, proportions, and chi-square statistics. The use of these values to describe the content of accreditation standards does not negate the qualitative nature of this study (Schreier, 2012). QCA draws its qualitative nature from the ways in which the data is collected, rather than the ways in which the data is presented. The presentation of descriptive data such as frequency counts in QCA shifts the focus of the research from cases to categories, and it is rare to find QCA research that does not include this kind of quantitative data.

Content of standards. The first step in content analysis is the development of a coding or classification scheme (Patton, 2002). To ensure the reliability of results in content analysis, it is necessary to establish criteria that are "sufficiently exhaustive to account to each variation of message content and must be rigidly and consistently applied so that other researchers or readers...would obtain the same or comparable results" (Berg, 2009, p. 342). Using criteria for classifying and comparing accreditation standards that are based on previously published empirical research helped ensure that the measures used in this research sufficiently capture accurate and comprehensive data.

This research was based on a framework for comparing the content of accreditation standards developed by Petersen (1979) and later refined by Hagerty and Stark (1989). This framework proposed comparing accreditation standards according to the way that each expresses the following dimensions:

- Purposes of accreditation (Petersen, 1979); and

- The standards and guidelines for accreditation: mission, goals and objectives; governance, administration, and organization; instructional staff; educational programs; students and student services; facilities and equipment; financial resources; catalogs and publications (Hagerty & Stark, 1989; Petersen, 1979).

Using rubrics adapted from Petersen's and Hagerty and Stark's dimensions, with factors added to the rubric by the researcher in response to patterns observed in the literature (see Ewell, 2007) and pilot-tested in conjunction with an external coder, each sentence or statement in the selected segments of the documents was assigned one content code. Following Hagerty and Stark's analytical approach, each sentence or statement was also assigned an explicitness score. The two rubrics used for data collection, the *content rubric* and the *explicitness rubric*, include guidance for classification as well as the assignment of explicitness scores and are available in the appendices.

Data on international accreditation activity. The regional accreditation agencies are involved in international accreditation activity at varying levels. To determine each agency's level of international activity, data on how many non-US institutions or programs each agency accredits was gathered from each regional accrediting agency's website or published directory of accredited institutions. Figure 2 provides the total number of non-US institutions accredited by the regional accrediting agencies since 1950. Tables 1 and 2 provide agency-specific information about each agency's international accreditation activity in 2000 and as of December 2017.

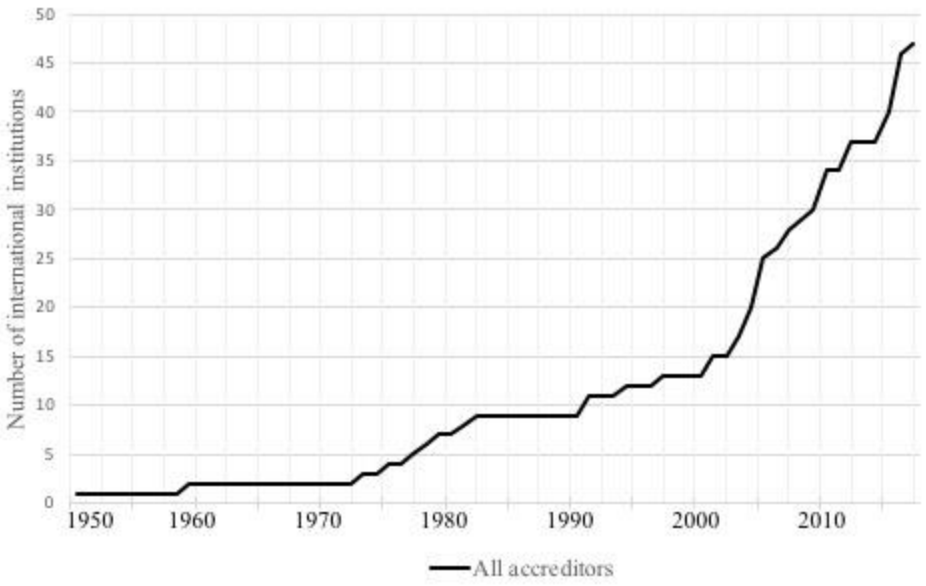

Figure 2. Total number of international institutions accredited by year by US regional accrediting agencies.

The year 2000 was selected as the beginning time point for this research for several reasons. First, as of the year 2000, four of the seven regional accrediting agencies (ACCJC, NEASC, MSCHE, and SACS) were engaged in international accreditation, while three (HLC, WSCUC, and NWCCU) were not. Two of the three agencies that were not operating internationally in 2000 were operating internationally as of December 2017 (WSCUC and NWCCU). The use of accreditation standards in 2000 and 2017 therefore allowed for the development of multiple points of comparison among and between the research sample. Second, data available from the accreditor websites demonstrated that there was a visible, cumulative increase in international accreditation activity across the regional accreditors after 2000 (Figure 2). This data suggests that something happened in or around the year 2000 to spur interest in international accreditation, creating an environment in which regional accrediting agencies may have been more open to incorporating international influences into their standards. Finally, when

the regional agencies are organized according to their level of growth in international accreditation, the year 2000 appears to be the year in which those with strong growth in international accreditation diverge from those with lower levels of growth in international accreditation (Figure 3).

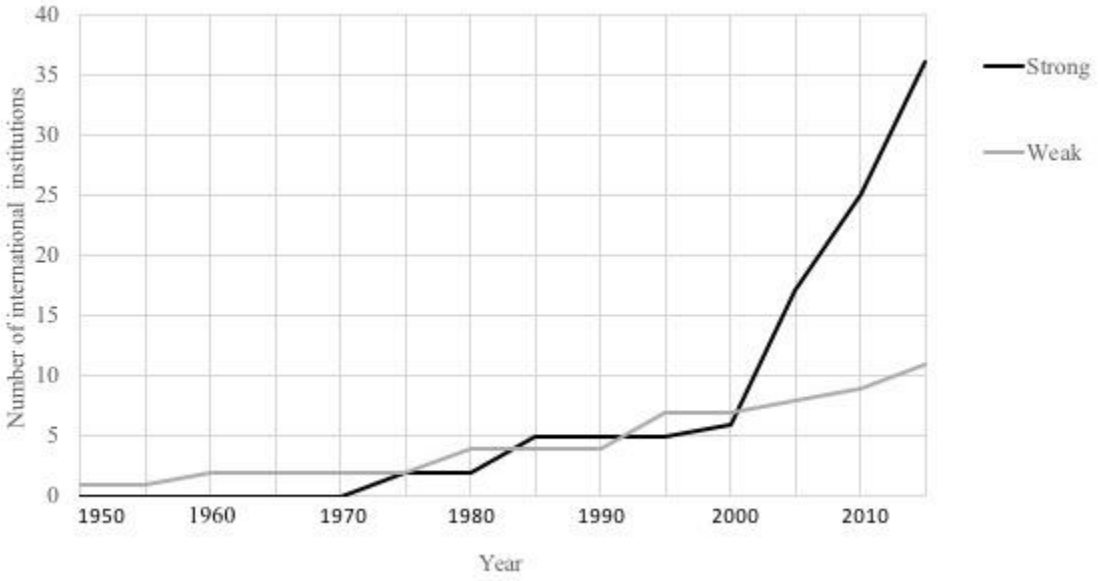

Figure 3. Number of international institutions accredited by level of growth.

Finally, between 2000 and 2017, a number of potentially influential documents were issued. These include the 2001 *CHEA Principles for United States Accreditors Working Internationally: Accreditation of Non-United States Institutions*; the 2005 UNESCO-OECD *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education*; the 2007 INQAAHE *Guidelines of Good Practice for Quality Assurance*; the 2008 *Chiba Principles: Higher Education Quality Assurance for the Asia Pacific Region* developed by APQN; the 2015 *Revised European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance*; and the 2015 CHEA *International Quality Group International Quality Principles.* The issuance of these documents may have encouraged the regional accreditors to engage in international accreditation activity, and

potentially contributed to isomorphism between the regional accreditation agencies that are more active on the international stage.

Table 1

Growth in International Institutions Accredited by US Regional Accrediting Agencies, 2000 to 2017

Agency	International Institutions in 2000	International Institutions in 2017	Percent growth, 2000 to 2017
NEASC	2	10	400%
MSCHE	4	17	325%
WSCUC	0	9	900%
ACCJC	3	3	0%
NWCCU	0	2	200%
SACS	4	6	50%
HLC	0	0	0%

Table 2

Growth in Foreign Countries Accredited by US Regional Accrediting Agencies, 2000 to 2017

Agency	Countries in 2000	Countries in 2017	Percent growth, 2000 to 2017
NEASC	1	6	500%
MSCHE	4	12	200%
WSCUC	0	8	800%
ACCJC	3	3	0%
NWCCU	0	1	100%
SACS	2	3	50%
HLC	0	0	0%

Institutions located in US territories or commonwealths, including Guam, American Samoa, the US Virgin Islands, Northern Mariana Islands and Puerto Rico were excluded from this research and data on international accreditation. These territories were excluded from this data because it is expected that their educational institutions are structured in alignment with US practices and expectations. In addition, these institutions are treated differently across regional accreditors. MSCHE, for example, includes institutions in Puerto Rico among their listing of US institutions, while ACCJC does not distinguish between institutions in US territories, such as Guam, from those in sovereign nations, such as Republic of Palau, in its institutional listing.

CHEA also gathers data on the number of US institutions or programs that are accredited by regional accrediting agencies but located outside of the US. This category includes branch campuses of American colleges and universities, as well as programs that are run by American institutions but located in another country. These "international" US institutions and programs were excluded from this study because they generally undergo accreditation in conjunction with the accreditation process of their associated US institution. As a result, any impact that accrediting these institutions or programs may have on accreditation standards was expected to be indirect or diluted.

Research Design

To investigate the research question, the researcher compared the content of accreditation standards in 2000 and 2017, across and between the regional accrediting agencies using qualitative content analysis (QCA). A multistep research design collected information about the content of accreditation standards from 14 individual documents (two from each regional accreditor). First, the researcher read the introductory sections that expressed each agency's philosophy or approach to accreditation, noting major themes. This step yielded information

about the nature of the accreditors' philosophies of accreditation. Second, the researcher read the accreditation standards, applying the criteria of the content rubric to each sentence or statement. This step yielded data that provided insight into the structure of accreditation standards. Finally, the researcher read each set of standards again, applying the criteria in the explicitness rubric to each sentence or statement. This step yielded data about the nature of the language used within the accreditation standards.

Qualitative content analysis. QCA is a specific type of content analysis that takes a systematic approach to coding qualitative content and materials (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). Broadly speaking, content analyses make inferences about the message of a text, its senders, or its audience (Weber, 1985) through the process of searching texts for recurring words or themes and using qualitative data reduction methods to identify and make sense of core meanings (Patton, 2002). Content analyses are not an effective methodology for testing causal relationships, but they can be particularly beneficial for research that is exploratory or descriptive in nature (Berg, 2009). Content analyses are also helpful in revealing the focus of institutional attention, trends in communication, or identifying the intentions of the sender (Weber, 1985). As this research sought to explore, document, and describe the relationship between accreditation standards and international accreditation, a form of content analysis was an appropriate methodological framework. While there are many approaches to content analysis, this research was conducted according to a type of content analysis known as qualitative content analysis (QCA).

QCA is "an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification" (Mayring, 2000). QCA involves three primary steps to content

analysis: the selection (or narrowing) of available materials to only the most relevant to the study; the use of an organized, methodical, step-by-step approach to analysis; and the use of coding categories as the primary unit of analysis (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012).

In contrast to other qualitative methodologies that examine all material in a study and attempt to create new data about these materials, QCA uses only the parts of the research material that are the most relevant to the research question (Schreier, 2012). QCA also differs from other content analysis methods in its emphasis on coding and categorizing information, which is usually reported quantitatively in form of frequency counts, percentages, or other descriptive statistics. Schreier suggests that this is a particular strength of QCA, as it permits the researcher to "analyse and describe the most important characteristics of large amounts of qualitative data" (2012, p. 30). In addition, QCA is unique among other qualitative approaches in its emphasis on the importance of both reliability and validity in the research design.

Reliability. Weber (1985) offered a summary of Krippendorff's discussion of reliability, which suggests that there are three types of reliability particularly relevant to content analysis: *accuracy, reproducibility, and stability*. Accuracy is seldom used for reliability testing in content analysis because there are rarely standardized coding schemes that can be applied to texts, and experts are not always available to assess accuracy (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Weber, 1985). Reproducibility, also referred to as intercoder reliability (Weber, 1985), is most readily assessed in studies with more than one coder, though it is not necessary that additional coders read all of the study materials (Schreier, 2012).

To improve the reliability of this research along the reproducibility dimension, an external coder was recruited. Before beginning data collection, both the researcher and the external coder read ten pages of one of the accreditation documents. The document selected was

a recent (2017) document from an agency with which neither the researcher nor the external coder was familiar. Each read the document, coding sentences and statements according to both the content and the explicitness rubrics. The coders compared their results and then discussed any discrepancies until general agreement was reached. However, as Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) argue, intercoder agreement does not necessarily yield reliable data. For this reason, this study will not rely solely on reproducibility as its measure of reliability.

Though stability is the weakest form of reliability, it was especially relevant to this research because it applies to studies with only one coder. Stability, or "the extent to which the results of content classification are invariant over time" (Weber, 1985, p. 17), can be assessed by having a single coder code the same document more than once. This can help ensure that data are not subject to inconsistencies that result from fatigue, ambiguities, or simple errors. In studies working with pattern content, coder fatigue is a particular concern (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

A two-phase approach was used to monitor the stability of the researcher's coding and reduce the impact of fatigue. First, the researcher read and coded the accreditation standards in each document twice. For each round of reading, the documents were read in a random order to reduce the likelihood that coder bias or fatigue would impact some documents more than others. The first reading involved coding sentences or statements according to the category codes described in the content rubric. No more than ten pages were coded without a break to reduce fatigue. The second reading assigned sentences or statements an explicitness score according to the criteria described in the explicitness rubric. During the second reading, the researcher re-coded items where errors or inconsistencies were discovered in the way that the content rubric

was applied to the documents. Again, no more than ten pages were coded without a break to reduce the impacts of coder fatigue.

Validity. In qualitative content analysis, validity checking is just as important as reliability checking (Schreier, 2012). Weber (1985) describes four types of external validity relevant to content analysis: construct validity, hypothesis validity, predictive validity, and semantic validity. Hypothesis and predictive validity testing were inappropriate for this research because it was not intended to test a specific hypothesis, nor would it produce the amount or types of quantitative data necessary for the inferential statistics needed to assess predictive validity.

Assessing the construct validity of the measures used in this study requires the comparison of a measure used in the research against other, previously used, external measures of the same construct (Weber, 1985). The limited amount of previous empirical research on accreditation standards makes this challenging. However, it is commonly understood that accreditation standards have changed over time. The data collected for this research was expected to reflect the changes already reported in the literature.

Semantic validity exists "when persons familiar with the language and texts examines lists of words (or other units) placed in the same category and agree these words have similar meanings or connotations" (Weber, 1985, p. 21). This should not be confused with attempts to achieve interrater reliability. While interrater reliability seeks to demonstrate the reliability of a study's methodology, semantic validity seeks to demonstrate the validity of a study's measures or instruments. Content analyses based on simple frequencies or word counts are particularly susceptible to threats of semantic validity. This research sought to mitigate this threat by

avoiding the use of word counts in data collection, focusing instead at the statement or sentence level.

Further, the previously published coding rubric used by Hagerty and Stark (1989), which formed the basis for the rubric that will be used in this research, was subjected to a multi-step process to assess the scheme's validity. Hagerty and Stark (1989) asked three raters, who were unfamiliar with Petersen's (1979) dimensions for comparing accreditation standards, to read accreditation standards and independently develop a scheme that could be used to represent the content and emphases in accreditation standards. These proposed dimensions were similar to Petersen's, with two exceptions: (1) Hagerty and Stark collapsed Petersen's library, facilities, and resources into one category; and (2) Hagerty and Stark added a dimension that measured evaluation activities.

The content rubric used in this study was based on a modified version of Hagerty and Stark's framework that used some of Petersen's terminology. After using the external coder to test the reliability of the rubric, the researcher and the external coder each read a second document, which was also a recent (2015) document and was from an agency with which neither was familiar. At the conclusion of this coding, discussion of discrepancies resulted in the addition of several new subcategories to the coding rubric.

Variables. This research collected and analyzed data on three variables. The operational definitions of these variables are provided below. Each variable was measured two ways, contributing to the validity of this study.

Content represents the terms, concepts, or ideas contained in regional accreditation standards. Content was measured in two ways, as (1) themes identified through an examination

of the purposes of accreditation (Petersen, 1979); and (2) the coded data collected using the content and explicitness rubrics.

International accreditation activity represents the level of international accreditation in which a regional accrediting agency is engaged. International accreditation activity was measured in two ways, by the numbers of (1) foreign institutions an agency accredits; and (2) foreign countries in which it accredits.

Emphasis represents the level of attention paid to a particular term, concept, or idea in the content of accreditation standards. Emphasis in content was measured in two ways: (1) explicitness scores assigned to statements, content categories and codes; and (2) the proportional level of content elements observed in the documents. Higher explicitness levels denoted stronger emphasis, as do proportionally higher levels of representation of content category or subcategory within or across standards.

Procedures

A hallmark of QCA is its organized approach that entails the selection of relevant materials, adherence to a step-by-step analysis, and the use of coding categories as the primary unit of analysis (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). The procedures for this research met each of these required components. The researcher first reviewed all collected accreditation documents and identified the sections pertaining specifically to accreditation standards. The researcher then conducted an organized, clearly defined process of analyzing these documents based on the categories developed and captured during data collection.

Document selection. This research began with the collection of accreditation standards from each of the seven regional accrediting agencies. Two sets of accreditation standards were collected from each regional accrediting agency: those in in effect in 2000 and those in effect in

2017. The documents used for this research are listed below. The researcher collected these documents from the agencies' websites, direct contact with agency representatives, libraries, and internet archives.

ACCJC

- Standards for Accreditation (2000).
- Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation Manual (August 2017).

HLC

- Commission Policies (June 22, 2000).
- Policy Book (September 2017).

MSCHE

- Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (1994).
- Standards for Accreditation and Requirements for Affiliation (13th Edition, 2015).

NEASC

- Standards for Accreditation (1992 [1998 reprint]).
- Standards (July 1, 2016).

NWCCU

- Accreditation Handbook (2003 Edition). *Note: though the edition used for this research was published in 2003, the researcher verified that the standards were the same as those used by institutions completing self-studies in 2000.*
- Accreditation Handbook (January 2017).

SACS

- Criteria for Accreditation (11th Edition, December 1997).
- Principles of Accreditation: Foundations of Quality Enhancement (5th Edition, 2011).

WSCUC

- Handbook of Accreditation (July 1997).
- Handbook of Accreditation, Revised (April 2015).

When possible, these documents were downloaded directly from the agencies' websites. When this was not possible, the researcher contacted the agencies directly to request electronic copies; when documents were provided to the researcher by an agency, they were provided in .PDF format. When accreditation standards were provided in full text on an agency website, the text was copied and saved as a Word document by the researcher. Finally, when the documents were accessed by the researcher through library loan, the appropriate sections were scanned and saved by the researcher in .PDF format.

A primary challenge in qualitative analyses "lies in making sense of massive amounts of data" (Patton, 2002, p. 432). Qualitative content analysis (QCA) reduces the amount of data by focusing only on relevant material and using well-defined categories and coding schemes (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). This results in a process that simultaneously limits the level of detail available at the case level while creating new information about how cases compare with each other. In keeping with the procedural requirements of QCA, this research analyzed only the parts of regional accreditation documents that introduce the agencies' accreditation standards, and the standards and their associated descriptions.

The regional accreditation agencies often publish their standards as a part of a package, handbook, or guide that includes requirements for affiliation, standards, and compliance, as well as procedural information. This study included any opening or introductory sections of these documents, when available, that expressed the agency's philosophy of accreditation or the values the agency held regarding the process of accreditation and its role in quality assurance. It also

included the accreditation standards themselves as well as any accompanying text intended to "elaborate, explain, reinforce, or interpret the standards" (Petersen, 1979, p. 6). As in Petersen's study, these supplemental statements were considered integral parts of the standards, and no distinction was made between "a statement contained in a standard and one contained in its accompanying guideline" (1979, p. 6).

Policies or statements described as being required by federal regulation were excluded from analysis, as these were expected to be the same across all regional accreditors and not subject to international influences that may impact other portions of the standards. Procedural content related to the processes of accreditation were also excluded. Examples of procedural content, which pertain more to the internal procedures of the regional accrediting agencies than to their standards or perspectives on quality, include descriptions of how accrediting agencies review applications for accreditation or the process for withdrawing accreditation from an institution.

Data collection. Once each document was narrowed down to only the desired sections, it was loaded electronically into MAXQDA, a software package designed for qualitative and document analyses. Qualitative analysis software like MAXQDA is especially useful for condensing and summarizing coded texts (Kuckartz, 2014). Having previously used MAXQDA for content analysis, the researcher was familiar with the software and its functionalities (Wiseman, Damaschke-Deitrick, Bruce, Davidson, & Stevens Taylor, 2016). Using MAXQDA allowed the researcher to assign codes to specific segments of text according to the content rubric, and scores according to the explicitness rubric. The researcher then conducted a three-step review of the content of each document. The first of these steps took an inductive approach to collecting information about the accreditation philosophy expressed by each agency. The

second and third steps took a deductive approach to collecting information about the content of accreditation standards.

Philosophy and values. First, the researcher randomly ordered the documents and read the introductory statements or components of the document that pertained to the agency's approach to accreditation. While reading these sections, the researcher noted the major values or themes expressed by each agency regarding its philosophy or approach to accreditation, as well as the role of the agency and accreditation in quality assurance.

Content. Next, the researcher randomly reordered the documents and read the accreditation standards, coding each statement or sentence in the standards according to the content rubric. Following the coding procedures of QCA, statements were only coded with one content code (Schreier, 2012). Boilerplate language, headings, and other repetitive terms or phrases was categorized separately and not included in the analysis. Any statement or sentence that did not fit into the classification scheme was coded as "other". Once all documents had been read and classified, all statements coded with each of the categories in the content rubric, as well as all statement coded "other", were reviewed to determine if there were additional dimensions not captured by the rubric. Upon this review, the researcher determined that some new codes needed to be added to the rubric and that other existing codes needed to be adjusted to better describe the content of the standards.

Finally, the documents were randomly reordered a third time and the standards were read again. This time, each statement that had been assigned a content code was awarded an explicitness score using the explicitness scoring rubric. In addition, each statement's content code was reviewed for accuracy, and if necessary, statements were re-coded to correct for error or assign the statement to a newly-created or edited code.

Data Analysis

The data collected on the content of accreditation standards and international activity was used to investigate the study's research question. The analysis was conducted in two phases. *Phase One* analyzed the ways that the contents of accreditation standards have changed since 2000 across all of seven accreditation agencies. *Phase Two* analyzed how the contents of accreditation standards have changed over time between the weak growth group and the strong growth group.

Phase one. This analysis examined the ways that the accreditation standards changed over time and across agencies (Figure 4). The primary purpose of this phase was to determine whether there was an association between individual agencies and changes in the content of accreditation agencies over time.

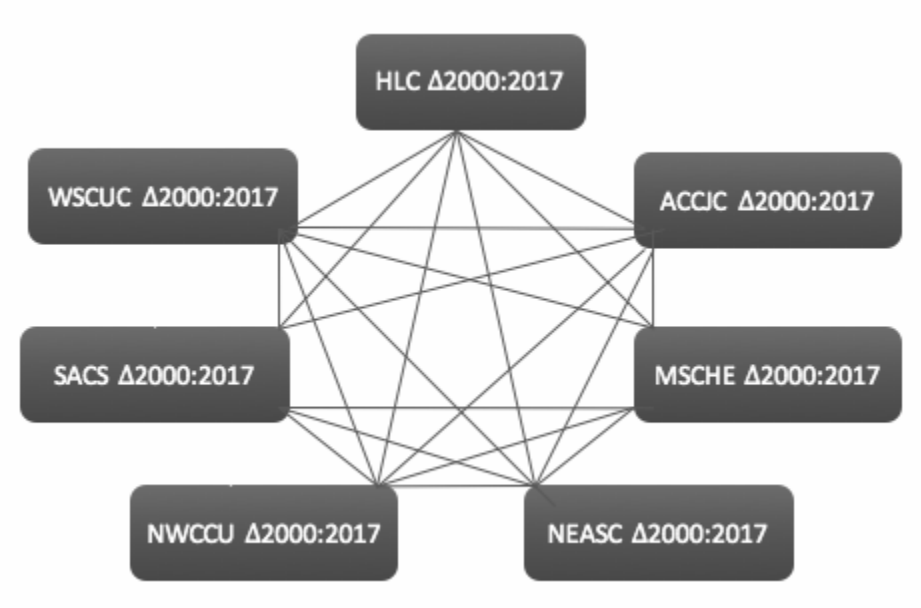

Figure 4. Diagram of phase one analysis.

The analysis for comparison one was conducted in three steps. Step one specifically examined the data collected from the standards' introductory materials. Steps two and three specifically examined the data collected using the content and explicitness rubrics.

Step one. The purpose of this first step was to describe the changes in each agency's philosophy of accreditation over time. Using Mayring's summarization technique (Schreier, 2012), the researcher identified themes that described each agency's philosophy and approach to accreditation. After identifying these themes, the researcher organized them into two categories - *accreditation-related* and *institution-related*- and compared the ways that these categories were represented across the agencies in 2000 and in 2017.

Step two. In this step, the analysis moved from the introductory material to the data collected using the content rubric. The researcher calculated the frequency of each content category for each agency in 2000 and 2017. Using the frequencies of the content codes from 2000 and 2017, Chi square tests of association (also known as the chi square test of independence) were conducted to assess whether there was an association between agency and change in the frequency of content categories over time. These, and all other Chi square tests in the research, were calculated IBM SPSS© Statistics, version 24. Chi square tests of association were also calculated comparing the frequency of each subcategory across the seven regional accrediting agencies in 2000 to the frequency of each subcategory across the seven regional accrediting agencies in 2017.

Step three. Using the explicitness scores as categorical variables (1 - Generally referenced, 2 - Implied by content, 3 - Explicitly stated), the researcher calculated the frequency of each explicitness level within each content category for each agency in 2000 and 2017. A Chi square test of association was conducted, comparing the frequency of each explicitness level for

each content category across the seven regional accrediting agencies in 2000 and in 2017. Chi square tests were also conducted to compare the explicitness level of each subcategory in 2000 to 2017.

Phase two. In phase two of the analysis, the researcher looked for patterns in the changes in accreditation standards between agencies with varying levels of international activity. This comparison was conducted over four steps designed to compare the accreditation standards on the *Strong Growth* group and the *Weak Growth* group. The agencies in the *Strong Growth* group were MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC. Each of these agencies experienced large increases from 2000 to 2017 in both the number of international institution accredited (see Table 1) as well as the number of foreign countries in which they are active (see Table 2). These agencies were selected to form the Strong Growth group because they represent the most significant gains in both number of institutions and number of countries. The Weak Growth group consisted of SACS and NWCCU, which each added just two international institutions and one foreign country from 2000 to 2017, and ACCJC, which added no international institutions or foreign countries to its roster. HLC was excluded from this phase of the analysis because it was not involved in international accreditation.

Step one. Utilizing the organizational structure used to identify categories in step one of Phase One - *accreditation-related* and *institution-related* - the researcher compared the ways that these categories were represented across the Strong Growth and Weak Growth agencies in 2000 and in 2017.

Step two. The researcher combined the frequency values for each content category for each group, yielding a total frequency count for the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group for each content category. Chi square tests for association were then conducted to assess

the association between level of international activity (indicated by growth group membership) and changes in the frequency of content categories over time.

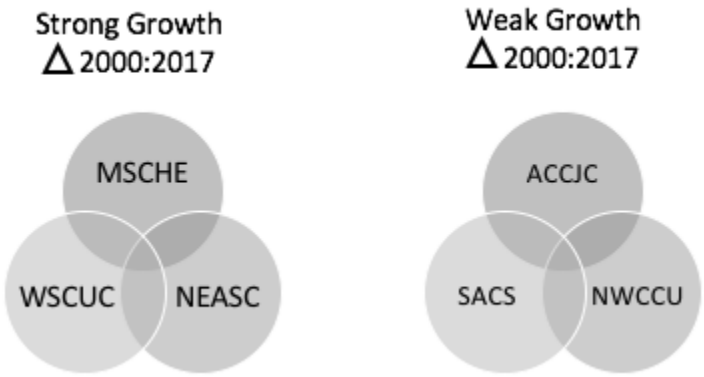

Figure 5. Diagram of phase two analysis.

Step three. The researcher combined the frequency values for each content subcategory for each group, yielding a total frequency count for the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group for each content subcategory. Chi square tests for association was then conducted to assess the association between level of international activity (indicated by growth group membership) and changes in the frequency of content subcategories over time.

Step four. The researcher combined the frequency values for each explicitness level for each group, yielding a total frequency count for the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group for each content category. Chi square tests for association was then conducted to assess the association between level of international activity (indicated by growth group membership) and changes in the explicitness of accreditation standards over time.

Summary

This qualitative content analysis systematically collected data on the content of accreditation standards across seven regional accreditation agencies over a span of nearly 20

years. Using QCA as the methodological framework, this research followed a rigorous set of procedures designed to focus on specific areas of accreditation texts, draw insight and information directly from the texts themselves, and promote both the reliability and the validity of the study. Taken together, the analyses conducted in this research were designed to aid understanding about the relationship between international accreditation and accreditation standards.

Phase one analyzed how accreditation standards have changed over time, and the nature of the relationship between accreditation agency and the content of accreditation standards. Phase two delved further into this relationship with the addition of the international accreditation dimension. In this phase, the standards of the agencies that experienced strong growth in their international accreditation activity were compared with the standards of the agencies with lower levels of international activity. Observed differences between the ways these groups have changed over time were considered evidence that there may be a relationship between international accreditation and accreditation standards.

Chapter IV: Results

Previous research on accreditation has described the ways that the standards of US regional accreditation agencies have changed over time (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Brittingham, 2009; Ewell, 2007). This research indicated that standards have changed in response to changing public expectations about higher education, federal and state legislation, and the needs of the American higher education sector. The relationship between the content of US regional accreditation standards and involvement in international accreditation, however, had not been previously studied. The methodology described in the previous chapter was designed to examine *how involvement in international accreditation is related to the standards of US regional accreditation agencies*.

This research consisted of two phases of analysis, and the results appear below according to each phase. In phase one, all seven regional accreditation agencies were compared to each other. This phase was designed to understand how the content of accreditation standards was associated with individual accreditation agencies. In other words, this phase investigated whether or not the differences observed in the content of accreditation standards between agencies were substantial enough to identify content within a particular agency as being distinct from the overall patterns observed across all seven agencies.

In phase two, the six accreditation agencies that engage in international accreditation were divided into two groups—the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group—and these groups were compared to each other. This phase was designed to investigate whether changes in the US regional accreditation agencies' standards observed over time were associated with how each agency changed its level of involvement in international accreditation.

Phase One

Philosophies and approaches to accreditation. The first step in phase one of this research was the identification of shared themes in the introductory materials of the seven regional accrediting agencies. First, each 2000 document was read and main ideas were noted by the researcher. Using Mayring's (Schreier, 2012) summarization technique, the main ideas present in 2000 were compared across the seven agencies to identify shared themes. This process was then repeated for the 2017 documents. At the conclusion of this process, the shared themes that represent the agencies' philosophies or approaches to accreditation were organized into two categories: accreditation-related and institution-related.

Accreditation-related. In 2000, the standards of multiple accreditation agencies included statements regarding the role of accreditation relative to the establishment of minimum standards in higher education (ACCJC, SACS, WSCUC, and NEASC), the role of accreditation agencies in the larger accreditation community (ACCJC, NEASC, WSCUC, and SACS), and the role of the agency in promoting self-regulation in higher education (MSCHE, SACS, and HLC).

In 2017, the standards of multiple accreditation agencies included statements describing accreditation as a public service (ACCJC, NEASC, and SACS) and its role in maintaining the values of higher education (ACCJC and SACS). Four agencies (MSCHE, SACS, WSCUC, and HLC) also included statements that described higher education as a public good.

Institution-related. In 2000, the standards of multiple accreditation agencies included statements addressing educational improvement (MSCHE, NEASC, SACS, WSCUC, and HLC), institutional outcomes and accomplishments (ACCJC, NEASC, SACS, and WSCUC), ensuring public confidence in higher education institutions (MSCHE, WSCUC, and HLC), and addressing the diversity among higher education institutions (ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, WSCUC).

In 2017, institution-related themes recognized the diversity across institutions (MSCHE, NEASC, SACS, and HLC) and included statements pertaining to the ethics and integrity of institutions (MSCHE, SACS, WSCUC, and HLC). Multiple accreditation agencies expected institutions to meet or exceed minimum standards (ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC), and seek to promote educational improvement (ACCJC and SACS) by encouraging innovation (NEASC and MSCHE) and building a culture of evidence (WSCUC, SACS, and HLC). Two agencies described the role of accreditation in demonstrating the ongoing viability of institutions (HLC and NEASC).

Content of accreditation standards. The next steps taken in phase one compared the content of accreditation standards across the seven regional accreditation agencies in 2000 and in 2017. In total, 3,601 statements were coded using the content and explicitness rubrics. Several of the 2000 documents were considerably longer than those in 2017; because of this, a higher percentage of the total coded statements in this study were in the 2000 documents (2,326 statements, or 64.59% of the total) than the 2017 documents (1,275 statements, or 35.41% of the total). From 2000 to 2017, the number of coded statements increased 45.06% for ACCJC (162 to 235), 70% for HLC (60 to 102), and 31.73% for NEASC (312 to 411). The number of coded statements decreased from 2000 to 2017 68.05% for MSCHE (362 to 114), 45.5% for NWCCU (378 to 206), 85.41% for SACS (576 to 84), and 74.15% for WSCUC (476 to 123).

Content categories. The frequency of each content code was calculated for each agency in 2000 and in 2017. These frequencies were converted to percentages. In 2000, *Resources and Facilities* was the most prevalent code (22.57% of coded statements), followed by *Curriculum and Education* (17.41%) *Administration and Governance* (15.39%), *Students* (12.08%), *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (9.11%), *Mission and Goals* (8.21%), *Ethics and Integrity* (6.88%),

Assessment and Evaluation (6.15%), and *Other* (2.19%). In 2017, *Administration and Governance* was the most frequently occurring category (17.64% of coded statements), followed by *Curriculum and Education* (16.15%), *Resources and Facilities* (13.72%), *Assessment and Evaluation* (13.33%), *Ethics and Integrity* (12.47%), *Students* (10.03%), *Mission and Goals* (8.07%), *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (5.56%), and *Other* (2.98%). A table containing the level of representation of each subcategory for each agency is available in Appendix C.

Table 3

Percent Change of Level of Representation of Each Content Category by Agency, 2000 to 2017

	ACCJC	HLC	MSCHE	NEASC	NWCCU	SACS	WSCUC	Standard Deviation
Administration and Governance	29.26	0.84	43.89	26.52	-21.79	56.24	-24.61	0.32
Assessment & Evaluation	85.60	76.47	30.27	27.85	256.80	77.78	364.39	1.28
Curriculum & Education	-42.09	5.88	27.02	-6.48	-10.80	-20.88	-9.70	0.21
Ethics & Integrity	8.33	-24.37	102.07	32.85	156.89	380.00	-12.93	1.43
Faculty & Inst-ructional Staff	141.28	47.06	-20.61	-33.35	-49.96	-47.92	-49.52	0.72
Mission & Goals	-24.80	42.86	-34.48	18.61	61.91	-48.57	88.27	0.52
Other	141.28	17.65	-9.27	-24.09	83.50	471.43	22.21	1.73
Resources & Facilities	-22.45	-65.69	-51.89	-22.68	-38.83	-39.36	-56.60	0.17
Students	-49.45	-7.56	-24.07	15.77	-50.24	-44.40	16.10	0.29

Within each agency, the frequency of each content category in 2000 was compared to the frequency of each content category in 2017. These frequencies were converted into the percentage of each agency's total coded statements at each time point. These values were then used to calculate the percent change between 2000 and 2017 for each category within each agency (Table 3).

A Chi-square test of association was then calculated to compare the representation of each content category in 2000 and in 2017 ($\chi^2 = 132.77$, $p < .001$) across all agencies. To further investigate the association between the agencies and the change in representation of each content category over time, additional Chi-square tests of association were calculated. The results of these tests, which compared the frequency of each content category across agencies in 2000 and in 2017, are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Chi Square Tests of Association Between Category and Agency over Time

Category	χ^2	*p*
Administration and governance	99.18	<.001
Assessment and evaluation	48.60	<.001
Curriculum and education	86.28	<.001
Ethics and integrity	32.68	<.001
Faculty and instructional staff	60.84	<.001
Mission and goals	56.31	<.001
Other	11.07	.086
Resources and facilities	118.59	<.001
Students	78.66	<.001

Chi-square tests of association were also calculated to compare the representation of each subcategory across the agencies at each time point. Of these 76 Chi-square calculations, the majority (72) yielded invalid results because they contained expected values of less than five in more than 20% of the cells. These calculations were excluded from analysis. Using the recommendation from Yates, Moore, and McCabe (1999) that expected counts less than five are acceptable if these comprise 20% or fewer of the expected values in a Chi-square calculations and no expected values are 0, four were found to be valid and significant: *resource planning and allocation* ($\chi^2 = 26.00$, $p < .001$), *educational program design or structure* ($\chi^2 = 15.86$, $p = .014$), *publications and public disclosure* ($\chi^2 = 13.25$, $p = .039$) and *governing board* ($\chi^2 = 35.87$, $p < .001$).

Explicitness. Each coded statement was also assigned an explicitness score of 1 (Implied or Vague), 2 (Moderately Descriptive), or 3 (Specific). Combining the explicitness codes across agencies, the documents in 2017 were found to be more explicit than the documents in 2000 (Table 5).

Table 5

Explicitness of Accreditation Standards in 2000 and 2017, All Agencies

Explicitness Level	2000	2017	Percent Change
Implied or Vague	30.18%	21.73%	-28.01%
Moderately Descriptive	52.11%	52.39%	+0.55%
Specific	17.71%	25.88%	+46.12%

Explicitness codes were also compared by agency over time. The frequency of each explicitness level was calculated for each agency at each time point. These frequencies were then

converted to percentages (Table 6), and the percent each explicitness level changed from 2000 to 2017 was calculated (Figure 6).

Table 6

Explicitness Levels by Agency Over Time

Agency	Explicitness Level	2000	2017
ACCJC	Implied or Vague	27.16%	12.34%
	Moderately Descriptive	55.56%	56.17%
	Specific	17.28%	31.49%
HLC	Implied or Vague	51.67%	43.14%
	Moderately Descriptive	43.33%	42.16%
	Specific	5.00%	14.71%
MSCHE	Implied or Vague	45.58%	21.93%
	Moderately Descriptive	41.99%	43.86%
	Specific	12.43%	34.21%
NEASC	Implied or Vague	21.15%	28.47%
	Moderately Descriptive	64.74%	53.04%
	Specific	14.10%	18.49%
NWCCU	Implied or Vague	30.42%	12.14%
	Moderately Descriptive	50.79%	56.31%
	Specific	18.78%	31.55%
SACS	Implied or Vague	27.60%	21.43%
	Moderately Descriptive	48.61%	46.43%
	Specific	23.78%	32.14%
WSCUC	Implied or Vague	25.63%	15.45%
	Moderately Descriptive	56.72%	56.91%
	Specific	17.65%	27.64%

By 2017, all agencies except HLC predominantly contained statements coded as *Moderately Descriptive*; ACCJC, MSCHE, NWCCU, SACS, and WSCUC were found to have higher proportions of *Specific* statements than *Implied or Vague* statements, while NEASC contained more *Implied or Vague* statements than *Specific*. HLC was the only agency found to contain more statements coded as *Implied or Vague* in 2017.

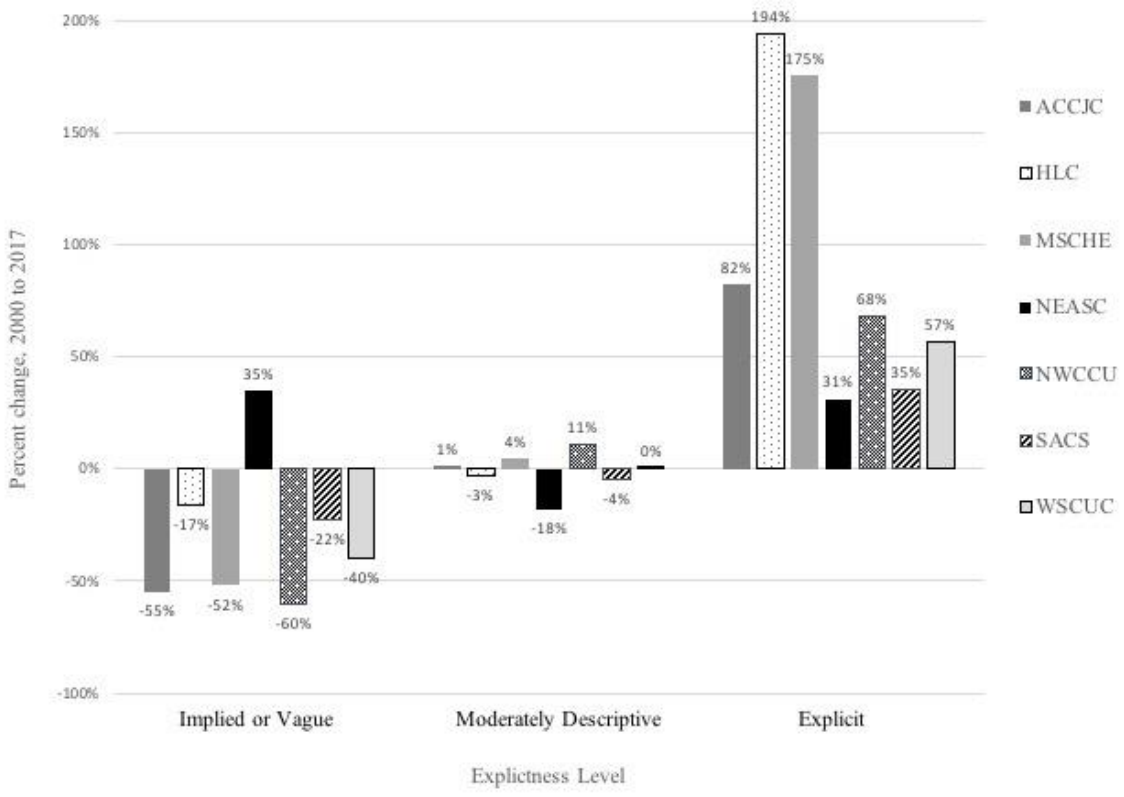

Figure 6. Percent change in explicitness by agency over time. *Note: totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.*

A Chi-square test of association was then calculated to determine the relationship between time and the explicitness of accreditation standards across all seven agencies. A significant relationship between explicitness and time was found (χ^2 =48.34, $p < .001$). To

investigate this relationship further, this test was repeated for each accreditation agency. The results of these tests are reported in Table 7.

Table 7

Chi Square Tests of Association of Explicitness Over Time, by Agency

Agency	χ^2	*p*
ACCJC	18.99	<.001
HLC	3.80	.149
MSCHE	35.52	<.001
NEASC	9.98	.007
NWCCU	27.70	<.001
SACS	3.17	.204
WSCUC	9.26	.01

To further investigate the association between the explicitness of accreditation and time, additional Chi-square tests of association were calculated. The results of these tests, which compared the explicitness of each content category across the agencies in 2000 and in 2017, are reported in Table 8.

Chi-square tests of association were also calculated comparing the explicitness of each subcategory across the agencies at each time point. Of these 76 Chi-square calculations, 73 were not significant or failed to meet the 20% guideline set by Yates, Moore, and McCabe (1999). Three indicated a significant association between explicitness and time: *educational program design or structure* ($\chi^2 = 10.45$, $p = .005$), *curriculum development and oversight* ($\chi^2 = 12.11$, $p = .002$), and *transparency/accuracy* ($\chi^2 = 14.26$, $p = .001$)

Table 8

Chi Square Tests of Association Between Explicitness and Category Over Time

Category	χ^2	P
Administration and governance	3.16	.205
Assessment and evaluation	25.64	<.001
Curriculum and education	14.48	.001
Ethics and integrity	9.64	.008
Faculty and instructional staff	2.91	.232
Mission and goals	3.38	.184
Other	3.33	.188
Resources and facilities	.705	.703
Students	.767	.681

Phase Two

In this phase of analysis, data collected from the accreditation standards of the Strong Growth group (MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC) were combined into one dataset, and compared against a combined dataset consisting of the data collected from the accreditation standards of the Weak Growth group (ACCJC, SACS, NWCCU). HLC was not included in this stage of analysis.

Philosophies and approaches to accreditation. The themes identified in phase one that were indicative of shared philosophies or approaches were also compared across the growth groups.

Accreditation-related. In 2000, the introductory materials of both groups included statements regarding the role of accreditation relative to the establishment of minimum standards in higher education (ACCJC, SACS, WSCUC, and NEASC), the role of accreditation agencies

in the larger accreditation community (ACCJC, NEASC, WSCUC, and SACS), and the role of the agency in promoting self-regulation in higher education (MSCHE and SACS).

In 2017, both groups included statements describing accreditation as a public service (ACCJC, NEASC, and SACS) and included statements that describe higher education as a public good (MSCHE, SACS, and WSCUC). Only agencies in the Weak Growth group included statements regarding accreditation's role in maintaining the values of higher education (ACCJC and SACS).

Institution-related. In 2000, both groups included statements addressing educational improvement (MSCHE, NEASC, SACS, and WSCUC), institutional outcomes and accomplishments (ACCJC, NEASC, SACS, and WSCUC), and the diversity between higher education institutions (ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC). The Strong Growth group included statements regarding the role of accreditation in ensuring public confidence in higher education institutions (MSCHE and WSCUC).

By 2017, agencies in both groups recognized the diversity across institutions (MSCHE, NEASC, and SACS) and included statements pertaining to the ethics and integrity of institutions (MSCHE, SACS, and WSCUC). Agencies in both groups expected institutions to meet or exceed minimum standards (ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC) and seek to build a culture of evidence (WSCUC and SACS). The introductory materials of the Weak Growth group sought to promote educational improvement (ACCJC and SACS), while those of the Strong Growth group encouraged innovation in higher education (MSCHE and NEASC).

Content of accreditation standards.

Content. In 2000, the most prevalent content category in the Strong Growth agencies was *Resources and Facilities* (19.74%), followed by *Curriculum and Education* (16.87%),

Administration and Governance (14.87%), *Students* (10.96%), *Mission and Goals* (10.09%), *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (9.3%), *Ethics and Integrity* (8.17%), *Assessment and Evaluation* (6.78%), and *Other* (3.22%). By 2017, the most prevalent category in the Strong Growth group was *Curriculum and Education* (18.51%), followed by *Administration and Governance* (14.5%), *Students* (12.96%), *Ethics and Integrity* (12.19%), *Resources and Facilities* (11.88%), *Assessment and Evaluation* (11.11%), *Mission and Goals* (8.64%), *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (7.25%), and *Other* (2.93%).

In 2000, the most prevalent content category in the Weak Growth agencies was *Resources and Facilities* (25.62%), followed by *Curriculum and Education* (18.01%), *Administration and Governance* (16.12%), *Students* (13.26%), *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (9.22%), *Mission and Goals* (6.09%), *Ethics and Integrity* (5.28%), *Assessment and Evaluation* (5.19%), and *Other* (1.16%). In 2017, the most prevalent category in the Weak Growth group was *Administration and Governance* (22.66%), *Resources and Facilities* (17.33%), *Assessment and Evaluation* (14.66%), *Ethics and Integrity* (13.52%), *Curriculum and Education* (12.95%), *Students* (6.28%), *Mission and Goals* (5.71%), *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (3.61%), and *Other* (3.23%).

Once calculated, the prevalence of each content category in the Strong Growth and Weak Growth groups in 2000 was ranked *most prevalent* to *least prevalent*. The same was done for the rank of each category in 2017. Figure 7 demonstrates the change in prevalence rank for each category over time for the Strong Growth group, the Weak Growth group, and HLC.

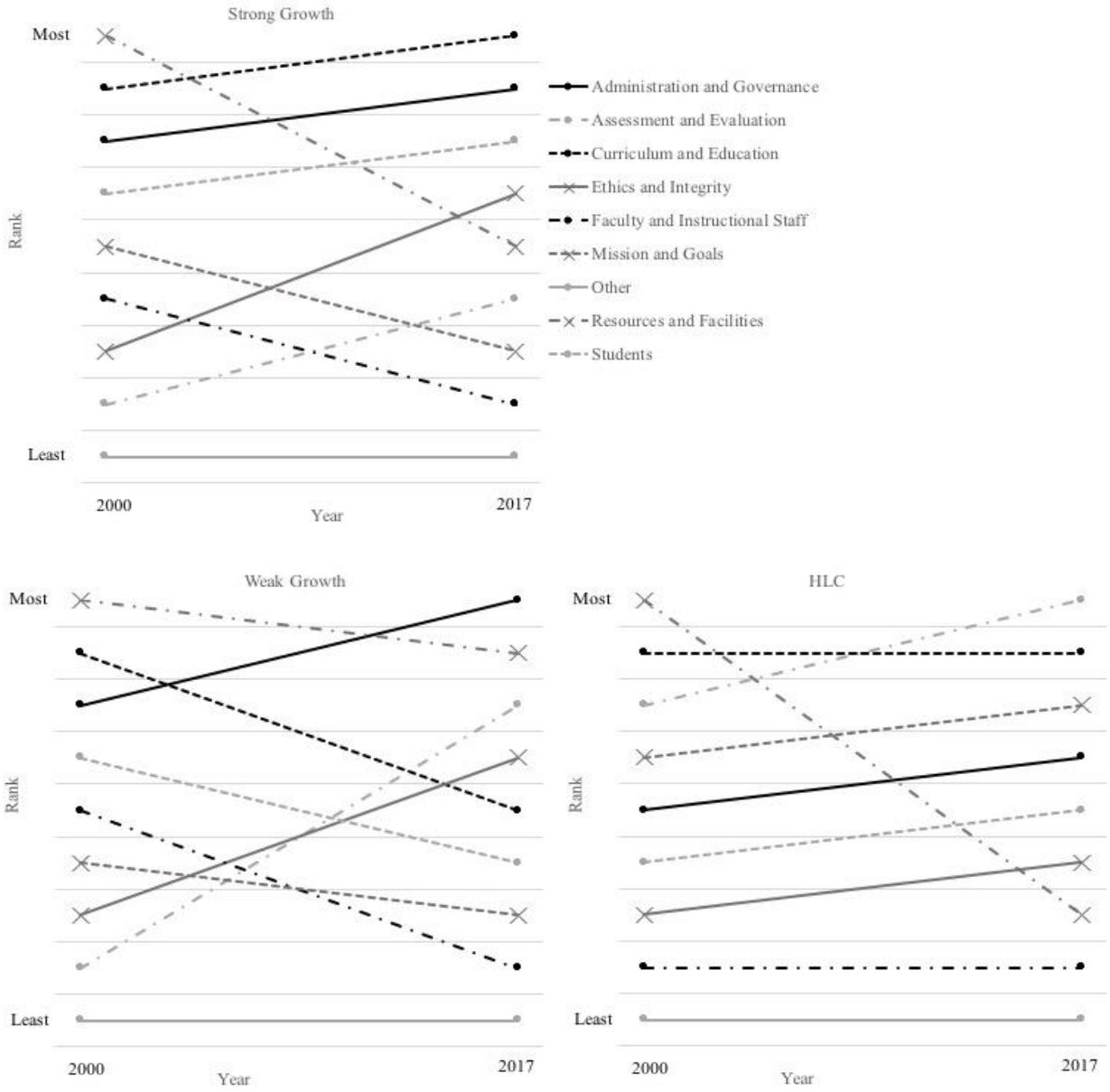

Figure 7. Changes in the prevalence of content categories over time, by rank (least prevalent to most prevalent).

Within each growth group, the frequency of each content category in 2000, represented by the percent of the total coded statements, was compared to the frequency of each content category in 2017. The frequency of each category in 2000 was subtracted from the frequency of

each category in 2017 to indicate the level of change over time for each content category (Table 9).

A significant association was found when a Chi-square test of association was calculated to compare the frequencies of the content categories across the growth groups in 2000 ($\chi^2 = 43.47$, $p < .001$) and in 2017 ($\chi^2 = 48.79$, $p < .001$). Chi-square tests of association were also calculated to assess the relationship between international activity and the explicitness of accreditation standards. A significant association was found between explicitness levels and growth group in 2000 ($\chi^2 = 14.26$ $p = .001$) and in 2017 ($\chi^2 = 26.46$, $p < .001$).

Table 9

Change in Level of Representation of Each Content Category by Growth Group, 2000 to 2017

	Percent Change	
Category	Strong Growth	Weak Growth
Administration and Governance	-2.44	+40.53
Assessment & Evaluation	+63.82	+182.21
Curriculum & Education	+9.77	-28.09
Ethics & Integrity	+49.15	+155.81
Faculty & Instructional Staff	-22.05	-60.79
Mission & Goals	-14.33	-6.22
Other	-8.87	+177.98
Resources & Facilities	-39.80	-32.36
Students	+18.31	-52.60

To further investigate the association between the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group and the change in representation of each content category over time, additional

Chi-square tests of association were calculated. The results of these tests, which compared the frequency of each content category by growth group in 2000 and in 2017, are reported in Table 10.

Chi-square tests of association were also calculated comparing the representation of each subcategory between the weak growth group and the strong growth group over time. Of these 76 Chi-square calculations, 70 did not yield significant results or failed to meet the 20% guideline established by Yates, Moore, and McCabe (1999). Six were found to be significant: *institutional planning* ($\chi^2 = 11.32$, $p = .001$), *curriculum development and oversight* ($\chi^2 = 5.94$, $p = .015$), *program evaluation or assessment* ($\chi^2 = 4.85$, $p = .028$), *financial management and planning* ($\chi^2 = 4.79$, $p = .029$), *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* ($\chi^2 = 4.76$, $p = .029$), and *student achievement, results, or outcomes* ($\chi^2 = 6.82$, $p = .009$). For each of these subcategories, the researcher calculated the percent each changed from 2000 to 2017 in each agency (Figure 8).

Table 10

Chi Square Tests of Association Between Category and Group Over Time

Category	χ^2	*p*
Administration and governance	1.11	.290
Assessment and evaluation	2.32	.127
Curriculum and education	11.1	.001
Ethics and integrity	2.37	.8123
Faculty and instructional staff	8.35	.004
Mission and goals	.10	.741
Other	4.15	.042
Resources and facilities	.128	.720
Students	21.96	<.001

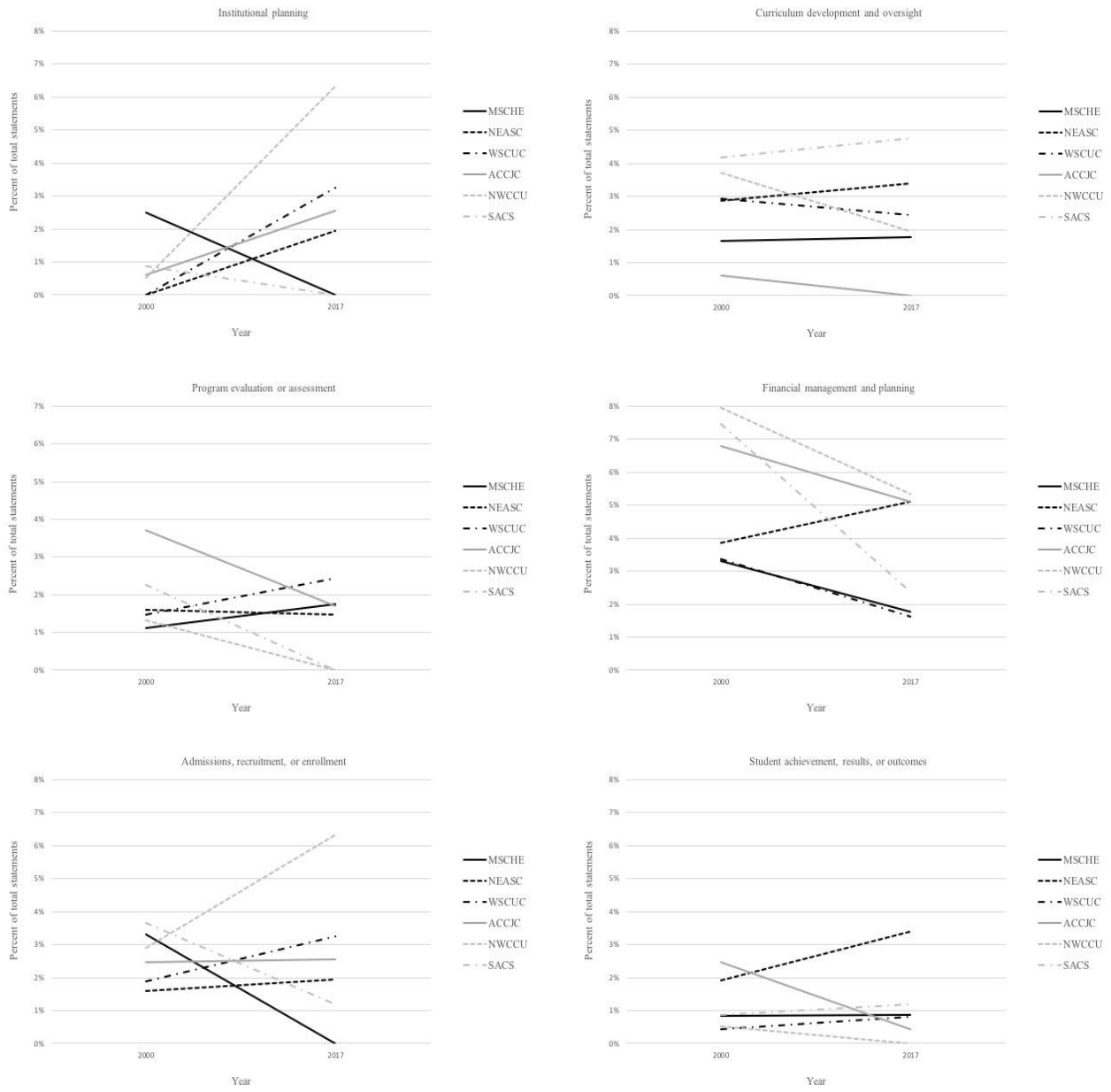

Figure 8. Change in the level of representation of significant subcategories over time, by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

Explicitness. Explicitness codes were also compared between groups over time (Table 11). Comparing the level of representation (indicated as the percent of each level within the total

number of coded statements) of each explicitness level from 2000 to 2017 indicated whether the accreditation standards of each group increased or decreased in explicitness over time (Figure 9).

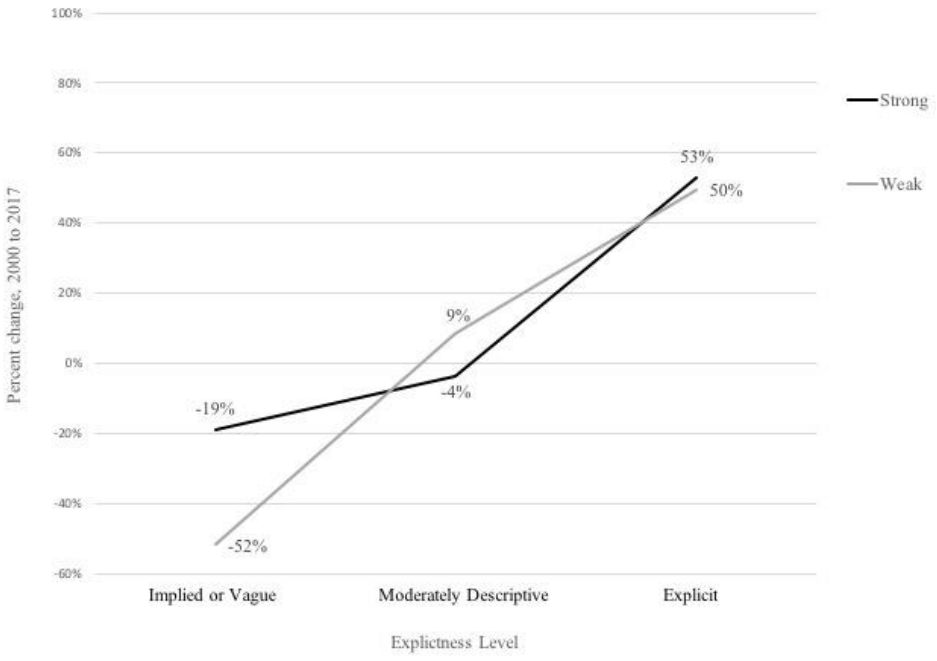

Figure 9. Percent change in explicitness by growth group over time.

Table 11

Total Representation of Each Explicitness Level by International Growth Group

	Strong Growth		Weak Growth	
Explicitness Level	2000	2017	2000	2017
Implied or Vague	30.70%	24.85%	28.49%	13.71%
Moderately Descriptive	54.26%	52.16%	50.36%	54.67%
Specific	15.04%	22.99%	21.15%	31.62%

Summary

This chapter presented the results of this study, organized according to the two-phase analysis presented in Chapter 3: Methodology. In phase one, the comparisons between all seven regional accrediting agencies described patterns observed among the agencies in their philosophies and approaches to accreditation. This phase then analyzed the relationship between the content of accreditation standards and individual accreditation agencies using Chi square tests of association. Significant results included the explicitness of accreditation standards, the content categories of *Administration and Governance*, *Assessment and Evaluation*, *Curriculum and Education*, *Ethics and Integrity*, *Faculty and Instructional Staff*, *Mission and Goals*, *Resources and Facilities*, and *Students*. Significant results also included the subcategories of *resource planning and allocation, assessment programs or procedures, educational program design or structure, publications and public disclosure,* and *governing board*.

The second phase of analysis combined the collected data from the six agencies involved in international accreditation into two groups. The Strong Growth group (MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC) included the three agencies with the highest level of international involvement since 2000, while the Weak Growth group (ACCJC, NWCCU, and SACS) included the three agencies with the lowest level of international involvement since 2000. After describing patterns in these groups' philosophies and approaches to accreditation, this chapter presented the results of Chi square tests of association comparing the content of accreditation standards between these groups. Significant results indicated a relationship between the groups and the content of accreditation standards in the overall explicitness of accreditation standards, as well as the categories of *Curriculum and Education*, *Faculty and Instructional Staff*, *Students*, and *Other*, and the subcategories of *curriculum development and oversight*; *program evaluation or*

assessment; *student achievement, results, or outcomes*; *institutional planning*; and *financial management and planning*. In the following chapter, these significant findings will be discussed in the context of this study's primary research question: *how is involvement in international accreditation related to the content of the accreditation standards of US regional accreditation agencies?*

Chapter V: Discussion

This research examined the relationship between international accreditation activity and the content of the standards of American regional accreditation agencies. Using qualitative content analysis, it tracked the ways that accreditation standards have changed over time. By comparing the changes that occurred in agencies with varying levels of international activity with changes across the regional accreditation sector, this research found that involvement in international accreditation may be related to the content of regional accreditation agency standards in specific areas of accreditation standards, each of which will be discussed further is this chapter.

The results from the first phase of analysis helped to answer the question: *is there an association between agency and change in content over time?* The value of this phase came from its ability to distinguish the patterns observed amongst all of the regional accreditation agencies from those that are related to individual agencies. There appeared to be a significant association between the content of accreditation standards and accreditation agency across seven content categories: *Administration and Governance*, *Assessment and Evaluation*, *Curriculum and Education*, *Ethics and Integrity*, *Mission and Goals*, *Resources and Facilities*, and *Students*; and three subcategories: *resource planning and allocation*, *assessment programs or procedures*, *educational program design or structure*, *publications and public disclosure*, and *governing board*. This suggested that much of the content of accreditation could be understood within the context of individual agencies.

Phase one of the analysis also helped answer the question: *is there an association between agency and explicitness of accreditation standards over time?* A significant association between agency and explicitness was found for ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, NWCCU, and

WSCUC. The change in explicitness level observed in the standards of HLC and SACS did not appear to be specifically related to these agencies. This suggested that the level and change in explicitness (Figure 6) observed in the accreditations standards could be understood within the context of the majority of individual agencies.

The analyses in phase two helped address the question: *how is involvement in international accreditation related to the content of accreditation standards?* There appeared to be a significant association between international activity and the content of accreditation standards in both content and explicitness. A comparison of the prevalence of each content category in 2000 and 2017 between the Strong Growth and the Weak Growth groups yielded evidence that involvement in international accreditation may be related to both the content and the explicitness of accreditation standards of US regional accreditation agencies.

Together, the questions above addressed elements necessary to respond to the research question that guided this study: *How is involvement in international accreditation related to the content of the standards of US regional accreditation agencies?* The results suggest that there may be a relationship between level of international activity and the content of accreditation standards. In some topic areas, international accreditation was found to be associated in increased attention or emphasis among accreditors, which may be evidence of isomorphism that resulted from international activity. In other topic areas, international activity appeared to be related to increased diversity between US regional accreditors.

International Activity and Accreditation Standards

Philosophies and approaches to accreditation. Comparing the introductory materials of the regional accrediting agencies involved in international accreditation demonstrated that, in general, the regional accreditation agencies involved in international accreditation have remained

relatively similar in their philosophies and approaches, despite varying levels of international activity. In 2000, they had the most agreement in their accreditation-related philosophies, with the primary difference being their statements regarding the role of accreditation in maintaining the values of higher education. ACCJC and SACS, both members of the Weak Growth group, described their role in this process, while none of the agencies in the Strong Growth group included this in their introductory materials in 2000. Though this study did not include information that could have allowed the researcher to investigate the reason for this discrepancy, previous literature has described concern among regional accrediting agency regarding cultural imposition (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b) and the challenges that arise from the application of US-based accreditation standards on international institutions (Noori & Anderson, 2013; Öz, 2005). It is possible that agencies with higher levels of international activity were more reticent to include references to particular values in their philosophies, knowing that a growing proportion of their client base was located in educational and cultural systems in which higher education is associated with values that differ from those in the US.

In 2017, the Strong Growth and Weak Growth agencies differed most significantly in their institution-related philosophies. In particular, only agencies in the Weak Growth group included statements describing accreditation's role in encouraging educational improvement, and only NEASC (a Strong Growth agency) indicated its intent to ensure the ongoing viability of institutions. These differences may be related to recognition among regional accreditors that international institutions seek accreditation from US accreditors to improve their reputation (Abou-Warda, 2015; Blanco Ramírez, 2015a), making them less interested in promoting educational development and more interested in supporting institutions' marketability.

Accreditation standards. From 2000 to 2017, lower levels of change were observed in the standards of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which was not engaged in international accreditation, than in the other six regional accrediting agencies, which were all engaged in some amount of international accreditation (Figure 8). This suggested that international activity may be associated with changes in accreditation standards over time. Comparing the standards of the agencies that experienced strong growth in their international activity (MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC) to those that experienced lower growth in international activity (ACCJC, NWCCU, and SACS) indicated that level of engagement in international accreditation may be related to the content of accreditation standards in specific topic areas. The nature of each of these associations is discussed below.

Curriculum and Education. In the area of *Curriculum and Education*, HLC's emphasis remained relatively steady over time, while the agencies engaged in international accreditation changed their emphasis on *Curriculum and Education* over time. The change in emphasis on *Curriculum and Education* appears to be associated with level of involvement in international accreditation. When the combined data of the Strong Growth group was compared to the combined data of the Weak Growth group, the results indicated that the prevalence of statements pertaining to *Curriculum and Education* increased from 2000 to 2017 in the Strong Growth Group and decreased in the Weak Growth group (Figure 7).

When the agencies within the Strong Growth and Weak Growth groups were compared to each other (Figure 10), the Strong Growth group agencies appeared to demonstrate isomorphism in a manner that aligned closely with the conceptual framework (Figure 1) of this study. As proposed in Figure 1, the agencies with higher levels of international activity became increasingly similar over time, while the agencies with lower levels of international activity did

not. This suggests that isomorphism has occurred in standards pertaining to *Curriculum and Education* among agencies with higher levels of international activity.

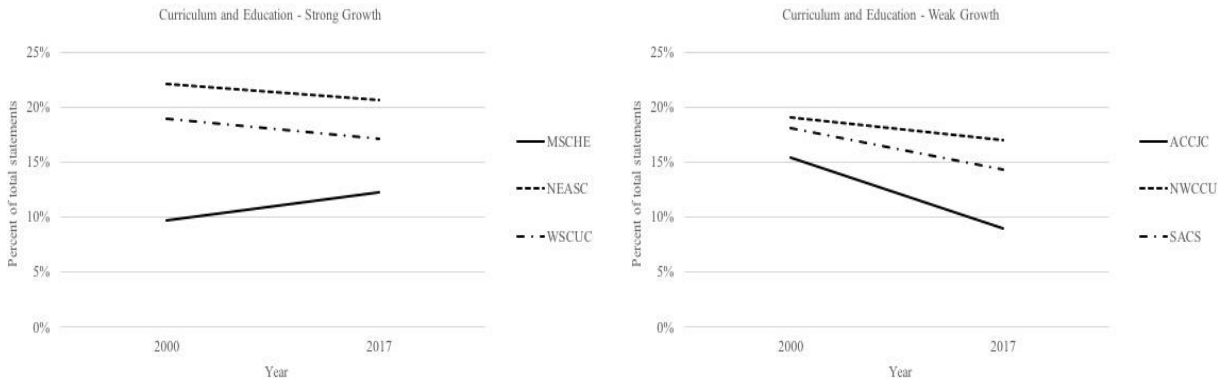

Figure 10. Changes in the representation of *Curriculum and Education* in accreditation standards by group and agency over time.

MSCHE was the only agency engaged in international accreditation that increased its emphasis on *Curriculum and Education*. The increase in attention to *Curriculum and Education* by MSCHE aligns with previous literature that reported regional accreditors' reasons for conducting international accreditation. Regional accreditation agencies have described their role in international accreditation as a gate-keeper (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b) to prevent diploma mills and control the rise of for-profit higher education. Increasing emphasis on *Curriculum and Education* in accreditation may be one way to promote effective, consistent, legitimate higher education and fulfill this role that the regional accreditation agencies have established for themselves. This might explain why MSCHE increased its attention on *Curriculum and Education*, since it was the agency that accredited the most international institutions in the widest variety of countries when this study was conducted. This does not, however, explain the decrease among the other agencies engaged in international accreditation.

From the perspective of institutional theory, the change observed in *Curriculum and Education* in MSCHE's standards could be interpreted as an indication that this agency increased its attention to this topic in order to be in closer alignment with the other agencies engaged in higher levels of international activity. As these other accreditors became more active in the international market, this "competition to attract candidate institutions from around the world" (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b, p. 12), and mimetic isomorphism, may be the mechanisms behind these changes.

Within *Curriculum and Education,* the subcategories of *curriculum development and oversight* and *program evaluation or assessment* were also found to have a significant association to international activity. From 2000 to 2017, the statements used by both groups became more explicit, though this shift was more prevalent among the agencies in the Weak Growth group, and there is wide variation in both emphasis and explicitness within these subcategories.

Curriculum development and oversight. The pattern of isomorphism proposed in Figure 1 was not apparent in standards pertaining to *curriculum development and* oversight. Instead, the agencies in both groups became more diverse over time in their level of emphasis on *curriculum development and oversight* (Figure 11). In both 2000 and 2017, the agencies in the Strong Growth group were more similar to each other than those in the Weak Growth group in the proportion of statements pertaining to *curriculum development and oversight* in their standards. The Strong Growth agencies diverged from each other over time to a lesser extent than the Weak Growth agencies. This may be an indication that involvement in international accreditation has controlled or otherwise reduced the level of change in *curriculum development and oversight* among agencies with higher levels of international activity.

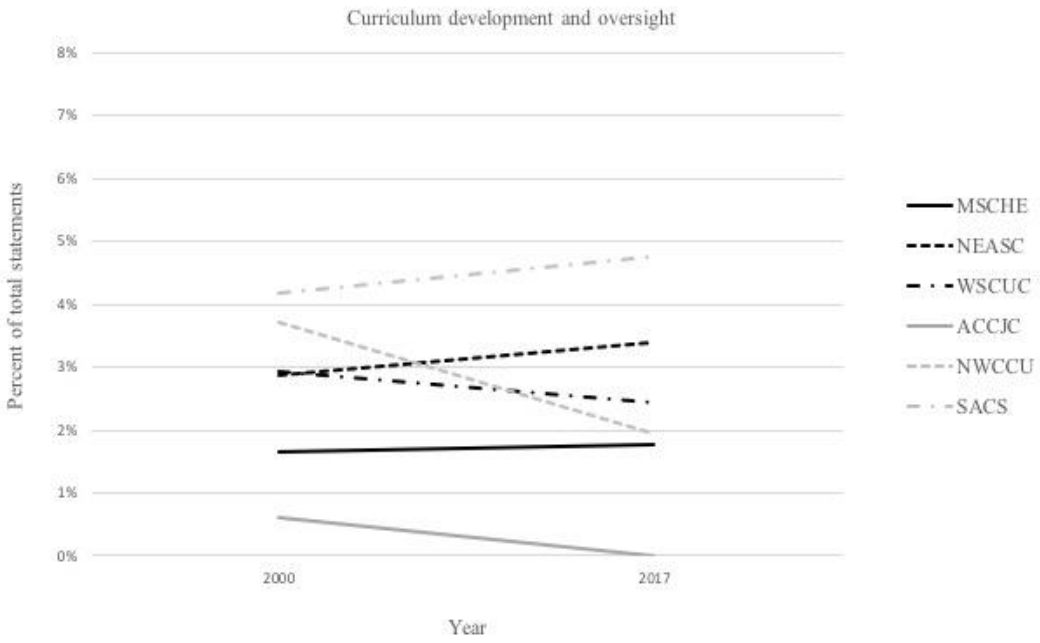

Figure 11. Changes in the prevalence of *curriculum development and oversight* over time by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

Though at first review, the changes observed in *curriculum development and oversight* do not directly support the idea that international accreditation would be associated with similar changes across agencies, there were some results that warrant further discussion. In the Strong Growth group, the agencies with the highest levels of international activity (MSCHE and NEASC) in 2017 both increased their attention to this topic, while WSCUC, which had the lowest level in the group in 2017 decreased its attention to *curriculum development and oversight*. In the Weak Growth group, the agency with the highest level of international activity in 2017, SACS, also increased its emphasis on *curriculum development and oversight*, while ACCJC and NWCCU decreased their emphasis. This may be another example of mimetic isomorphism, where SACS, as the most internationally active of the Weak Growth group, began

changing in ways that aligned it more with the two agencies with the strongest records in international accreditation than its peers in the Weak Growth group.

Both the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group became more explicit in their statements pertaining to *curriculum development and oversight*, though this increase was more pronounced among the agencies in the Weak Growth group. For example, in 2000, the Strong Growth agencies described the faculty's role in program oversight in similar fashion: "The faculty are responsible for devising and developing an institution's academic, professional, and service programs within the framework of its educational mission and goals" (Middle States Association of College and Schools Commission on Higher Education, 1994, p. 11); "The faculty ensures the academic integrity of the institution's academic programs" (New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 1998, p. 7); and "The faculty has the major role in design and implementation of the curriculum" (Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Schools, 1997, p. 36).

By 2017, though as a group they became more explicit, these agencies shifted their focus away from faculty oversight of the curriculum. Instead, MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC included multiple statements addressing the need for institutional oversight of the curriculum. NEASC, for example, expected an institution to "demonstrate its clear and ongoing authority and administrative oversight for the academic elements of all courses for which it awards credit or credentials" ("Standards," 2016, p. n.p.).

Conversely, the Weak Growth group retained an emphasis on faculty oversight of the curriculum over time, and the agencies became more explicit in their expectations for faculty oversight in the curriculum. In 2000, ACCJC discussed the processes "recognizing the central role of faculty in developing, implementing, and evaluating the educational programs"

("Standards for Accreditation," 1996, p. n.p.). NWCCU described "the central role" that faculty play in "planning and evaluating the educational programs" (2003, p. 29), while SACS stated that "primary responsibility for the quality of the educational program **must** reside with the faculty" (2000, p. 49).

In 2017, both NWCCU and SACS had become more specific in their attention to curriculum development or oversight. NWCCU, in particular, included additional detail in its description of the faculty role in the curriculum, stating that "faculty, through well-defined structures and processes with clearly defined authority and responsibilities, exercise a major role in the design, approval, implementation, and revision of the curriculum" (2017, p. 27). The differences in the way that the Strong Growth and Weak Growth agencies describe their expectations for *curriculum development and oversight* in 2017 may be an indication that higher levels of international activity was associated with increased flexibility in how institutions can fulfill these standards. More specifically, decreased emphasis on the role of faculty in *curriculum development and oversight* may result from the recognition that institutions in other countries may have different governance structures than those in the US, especially where requiring institutions to implement specific governance structures may be seen as a threat to state autonomy (Noori & Anderson, 2013).

Program evaluation or assessment. In the subcategory of *program evaluation or assessment*, there appeared to be less agreement among the agencies than in *curriculum development and oversight*, or *Curriculum and Education* overall. The agencies in the Strong Growth group became slightly more diverse in their level of attention to *program evaluation or assessment* over time, while the agencies in the Weak Growth group become slightly more similar to each other (Figure 12). These results suggest that, in terms of the level of prevalence of

statements in accreditation standards pertaining to *program evaluation or assessment*, international activity may not result in isomorphism. Further comparison of the statements used by the regional accreditors to describe *program evaluation or assessment*, however, offered additional insight into the nature of these changes and their possible relationship to international activity.

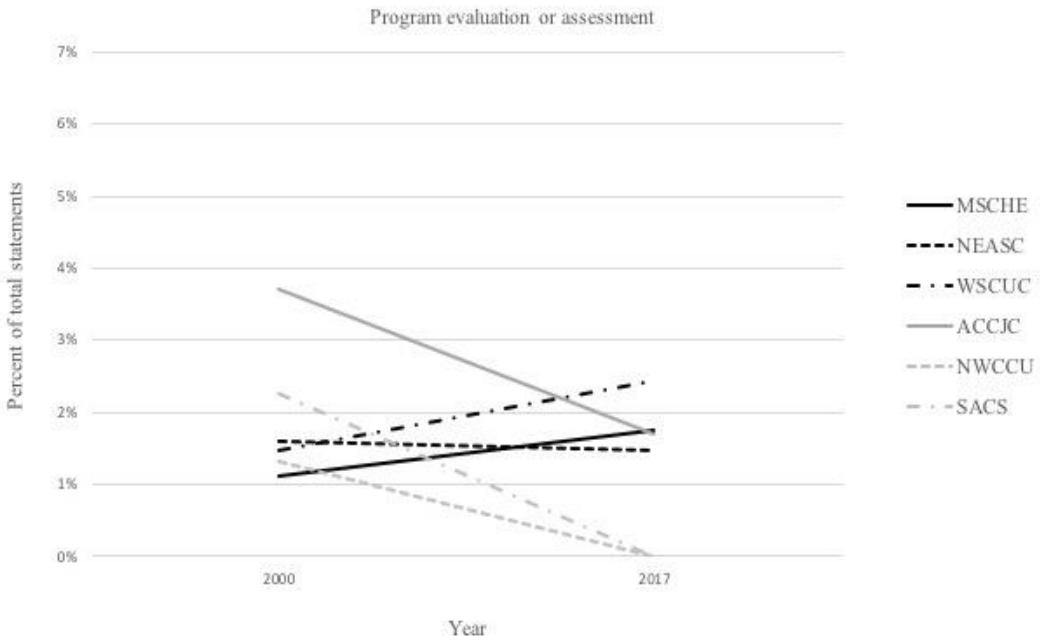

Figure 12. Changes in the prevalence *program evaluation or assessment* over time by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

From 2000 to 2017, both groups increased in the explicitness of their statements pertaining to *program evaluation or assessment*, and like *curriculum development and oversight*, this increase was more pronounced in the Weak Growth group. In 2000, the Strong Growth group emphasized policies, procedures, and measures for assessing academic programs, ranging from "The quality of the educational program in this broad sense is measured by the extent to

which the total range of curricula, activities, and academic and other support services fosters the achievement of institutional goals" (Middle States Association of College and Schools Commission on Higher Education, 1994, p. 12) to "Curriculum assessment and planning take into account the role of information technology and the use of computing resources" (Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Schools, 1997, p. 36).

Though statements pertaining to policy and procedure were still evident in 2017, new attention was paid by MSCHE and WSCUC to the student dimension of curriculum assessment. Both added new statements including student learning, with MSCHE calling for the "periodic assessment of the effectiveness of programs providing student learning opportunities" (2015, p. 8) and WSCUC calling on "faculty and other educators [to] take responsibility for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes and us[ing] the results for improvement of student learning and success" (2015, p. 21). NEASC added similar statements, expecting the review of academic programs to include "evidence of student success and program effectiveness" ("Standards," 2016, p. n.p.).

A similar emphasis on policy and procedure was found in the Weak Growth group in 2000. ACCJC called for "clearly defined processes for establishing and evaluating all...educational programs" ("Standards for Accreditation," 1996, p. n.p.). NWCCU expected institutions to have policies and procedures that were "clearly defined, encompass all of its offerings, are conducted on a regular basis, and are integrated into the overall planning and evaluation" (2017, p. 29), while SACS required that an institution "define its expected educational results and describe its methods for analyzing the results" (2000, p. 18).

While no statements in the 2017 standards from NWCCU and SACS were coded *program assessment or evaluation*, all of the coded statements in the ACCJC standards pertained

to procedures, and these were more explicit than the Weak Growth group's combined statements in 2000. These more explicit standards include statements such as "The institution ensures that processes are in place to reduce test bias and enhance reliability" and "The institution regularly evaluates and improves the quality and currency of all instructional programs offered in the name of the institution, including collegiate, pre-collegiate, career-technical, and continuing and community education courses and programs, regardless of delivery mode or location" (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges - Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2017, p. 26).

Two of the Strong Growth agencies—MSCHE and WSCUC—increased their emphasis on *program evaluation or assessment*, while NEASC decreased its attention to this topic. The approach used as a possible explanation for the discrepancy between the Strong Growth agencies in *curriculum development and oversight*—that higher numbers of international institutions accredited were related to changes in accreditation standards—was not applicable here. If that were the case, then MSCHE and NEASC should have changed in similar fashion and WSCUC should have been the outlier.

When the number of countries in which a regional accreditor was active was used as a comparative tool, however, a potential pattern did emerge. Within the Strong Growth group, MSCHE and WSCUC operated in the most number of foreign countries (twelve and eight, respectively). NEASC, which operated in six countries, decreased its level of emphasis on *program evaluation or assessment*, though to a lesser extent than any of the agencies in the Weak Growth group. If it was not the number of international institutions but rather the number of foreign countries that was related to the content of accreditation standards, this could explain why NEASC decreased its level of attention to *program evaluation or assessment*. These

findings suggest that the number of countries in which an accreditor operates may be related to changes in accreditation standards, though this was not assessed in this research. If future research finds that the association between international activity and accreditation standards is related to the number of countries in which an agency is active, this may be indicative of coercive isomorphism.

Faculty and instructional staff. From 2000 to 2017, the prevalence of statements pertaining to *Faculty and Instructional Staff* decreased in the standards of both the Strong Growth and Weak Growth groups, and remained steady in HLC's standards. Overall, the statements used to describe *Faculty and Instructional Staff* by the Strong Growth group became more vague over time, while the explicitness of statements in the Weak Growth group remained relatively steady. While a significant association was found between international accreditation and the content of standards pertaining to faculty and other instructional staff overall, there was no relationship found within any of the subcategories in *Faculty and Instructional Staff*.

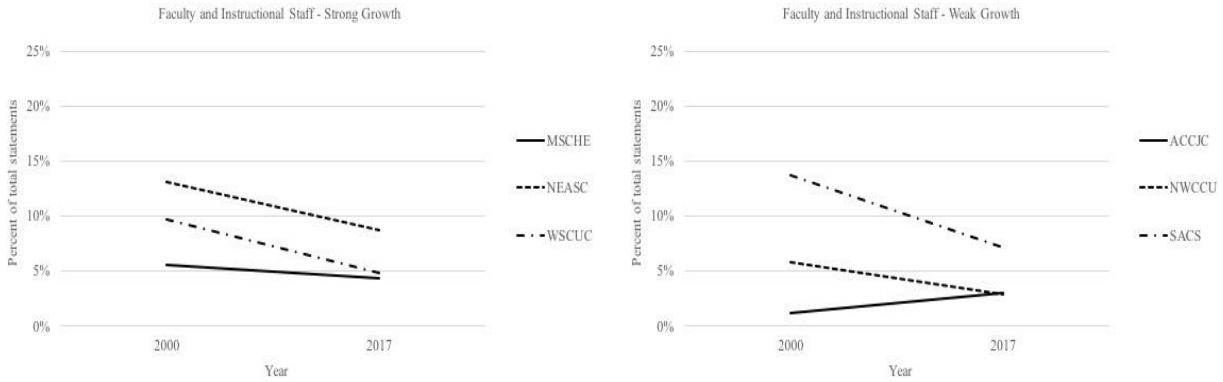

Figure 13. Changes in the representation of *Faculty and Instructional Staff* in accreditation standards by group and agency over time.

The changes observed in both groups support the supposition that international activity results in isomorphism in accreditation standards. Over time, the agencies in the Strong Growth

group became similar in the level of attention paid to *Faculty and Instructional Staff* (Figure 13); each decreased in the number of statements coded for this category from 2000 to 2017, and the variation between the agencies decreased over time. A stronger pattern of convergence was observed among the agencies in the Weak Growth group. The variation in level of attention to *Faculty and Instructional Staff* was greater among the Weak Growth agencies than the Strong Growth agencies in 2000, but by 2017, the variation among the Weak Growth agencies decreased and became similar to that of the Strong Growth agencies.

Plotted visually (Figure 13), standards pertaining to *Faculty and Instructional Staff* appeared to change isomorphically over time. Examining the differences between ACCJC and the other five agencies provided a possible explanation for this pattern. ACCJC was the only agency with more statements in this category in 2017 than 2000. It was also the only agency in either group that did not change its level of involvement in international accreditation over the study time period. It accredited the same number of international institutions in 2000 as it did in 2017, and was active in the same number of foreign countries in 2000 as in 2017. The rest of the agencies increased in both number of institutions and countries, and among these agencies (see Table 1), emphasis on *Faculty and Instructional Staff* decreased. This suggests that for accreditation standards pertaining to *Faculty and Instructional Staff*, increased international activity over a period of time may be associated with isomorphism in *Faculty and Instructional Staff* in the standards of regional accreditation agencies.

Though none of the subcategories in *Faculty and Instructional Staff* resulted in significant Chi square associations, a reading of the standards in this category identified one topic worth further discussion. As previous scholars have described, there has been an overall increase in attention to teaching in accreditation standards over time (Ewell, 2007; Gratch-

Lindauer, 2002). The data collected in this research suggested, however, that while attention to teaching has been higher in agencies with more international activity, the emphasis on teaching has decreased overall in the last two decades. All three agencies in the Strong Growth group contained statements pertaining to *instructional techniques or quality* in 2000. Both MSCHE and NEASC encouraged experimentation and the use of contemporary or innovative techniques to improve teaching effectiveness, while NEASC and WSCUC discussed the need for systems to evaluate and improve teaching effectiveness.

In 2000, only SACS in the Weak Growth group contained statements coded for *instructional techniques or quality*, and it emphasized the need for teaching to be appropriate to the audience. SACS also included statements pertaining to experimentation in instruction, though it took a more supportive stance than MSCHE and NEASC. Where MSCHE, for example, stated that "curricular experimentation should be encouraged" (1994, p. 13), SACS emphasized its support of innovation in teaching with the added statement that "experimentation with methods to improve instruction **must** be adequately supported and critically evaluated" (2000, p. 28). By 2017, however, only NEASC specifically discussed instructional techniques and shifted its focus considerably, expecting that "instructional techniques [be] compatible with and serve to further the mission and purposes on the institution as well as the learning goals of academic programs and objectives of individual courses" ("Standards," 2016, p. n.p.).

References to teaching were also found in statements pertaining to *competence in teaching or research*, *expectations*, and *assessment or evaluation* of faculty, to varying degrees across agencies. For example, in 2000, MSCHE expected faculty to "remain knowledgeable about advances in their disciplines and in pedagogy" (1994, p. 11), and NWCCU described "a faculty that excels in scholarship, teaching, and research "(2003, p. 31) as essential to graduate

education. In 2017, MSCHE expected faculty to be “rigorous and effective in teaching” (2015, p. 7), and NEASC expected faculty to remain “current in the theory knowledge, skills, and pedagogy of their discipline or profession” (“Standards,” 2016, p. n.p.).

Students. From 2000 to 2017, the prevalence of standards pertaining to students increased overall in the Strong Growth group and decreased overall in the Weak Growth group (Figure 14). This topic also received more attention in HLC’s standards in 2017 than in 2000 (see Figure 8), though the increase in *Students* over time in HLC was less than the increase over time in the Strong Growth agencies. While a significant association was found between international activity and accreditation standards for the category of *Students*, the nature of this association was less clear for standards pertaining to *Students* than the relationships observed between *Curriculum and Education* and *Faculty and Instructional Staff* and international activity.

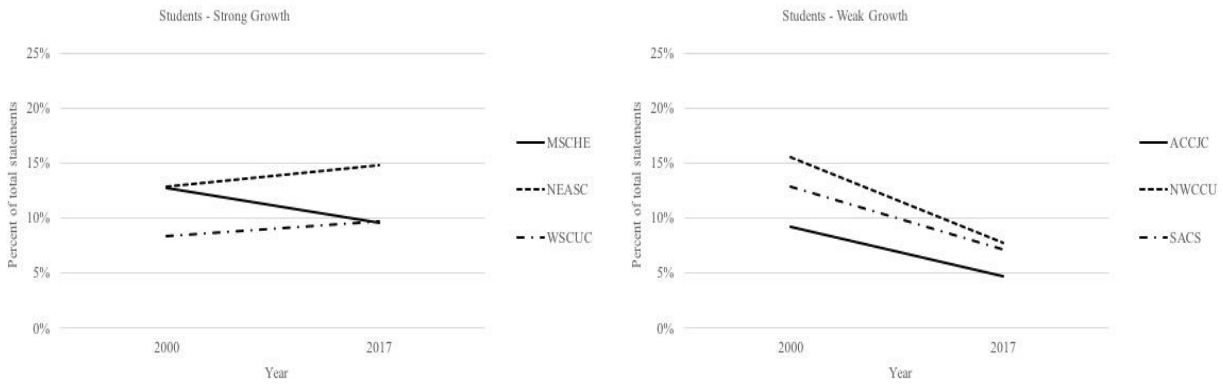

Figure 14. Changes in the representation of *Students* in accreditation standards by group and agency over time.

There appeared to be a closer relationship between international activity and the content of accreditation standards pertaining to students among the agencies in the Weak Growth group than the Strong Growth group. Isomorphism was observed among the agencies in the Weak

Group; statements pertaining to students decreased in prevalence over time in all three agencies in the Weak Growth group. This could be interpreted as an indication that agencies become similar in their standards pertaining to *Students* during their initial engagement with international activity, while the changes observed in the Strong Growth group suggest that standards diversify once agencies are more heavily involved in international accreditation.

Like the changes observed in *Curriculum and Education* and *Faculty and Instructional Staff*, the differences observed in *Students* between the Strong Growth agencies may be partially explained by comparing the agencies' level of international activity. In 2000, MSCHE and NEASC were already engaged in international activity and WSCUC was not. This might explain why MSCHE and NEASC were similar in their level of emphasis on *Students* in 2000. In 2017, MSCHE and WSCUC had become more similar in their level of emphasis on *Students*. In 2017, MSCHE and WSCUC each accredited international institutions in more countries than NEASC. As with the changes observed between the Strong Growth agencies in *program evaluation or assessment*, this may be an indication that the number of foreign countries in which an agency is active may be a factor in the relationship between accreditation standards and international activity.

Chi square tests also indicated that two subcategories, *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* and *student achievement, results, or outcomes* were associated with international activity. Examining these subcategories suggested that the changes in accreditors' standards in these subcategories were different than those observed in *Curriculum and Education* and *Faculty and Instructional Staff*. In both *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* and *student achievement, results or outcomes*, involvement in international accreditation appeared to be associated with increased variation over time.

Admissions, recruitment, or enrollment. In the subcategory of *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment*, changes were observed in both groups (Figure 15). Overall, all agencies were more similar in their attention to *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* in 2000 and less similar in 2017. This suggests that isomorphism has not occurred in standards pertaining to *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment;* instead, involvement in international accreditation may be related to wider diversity in standards pertaining to this topic. Within both the Strong Growth group and the Weak Growth group, two agencies increased in the number of statements coded for this subcategory over time (NEASC and WSCUC, and NWCCU and ACCJC, respectively), while the third decreased (MSCHE and SACS, respectively). During this time period, both groups decreased in explicitness slightly, and to nearly the same extent.

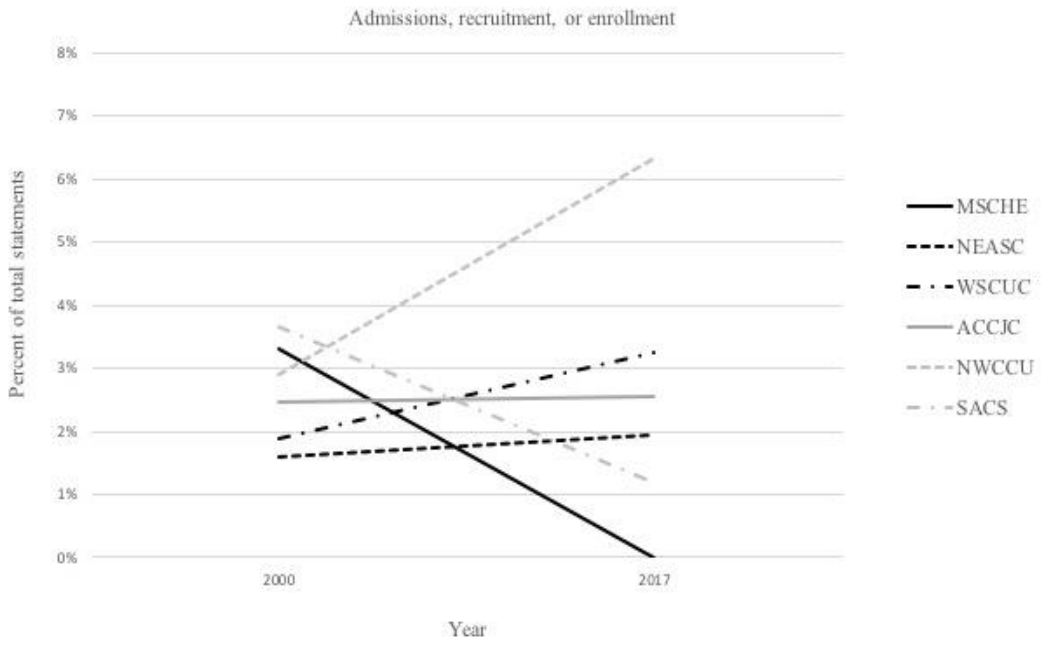

Figure 15. Changes in the prevalence of *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* over time by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

In countries other than the US, admissions policies vary widely. In some countries, institutions set their own admissions policies, while in others, admission and enrollment is controlled by a central governing body or other organization (Helms, 2008). Recognizing concerns about cultural imposition (Blanco Ramírez, 2015b) and the potential that corruption or other factors can impact the higher education admissions or enrollment process in other countries (Helms, 2008), accrediting agencies working internationally may have adjusted their level of attention to *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* to reflect the realities of other countries or regions in which they are active, or to allow for more flexibility in these standards. Though this research was not able to calculate the relationship between the number of international institutions accredited and the frequency of specific content categories, the pattern observed between the agencies in *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* suggests that this may be an area for future research.

Student achievement, results, or outcomes. When the standards of the Strong Growth group were combined and compared to the Weak Growth group's combined standards, it appeared that the prevalence of statements pertaining to *student achievement, results, or outcomes* increased in the Strong Growth group and decreased in the Weak Growth group (Figure 16). Like the changes observed in *program assessment or evaluation*, these changes do not support the conceptual framework proposed in Figure 1. Rather, the opposite was observed – agencies with lower levels of international activity become more similar to each other while agencies with higher levels of international activity became less similar to each other.

The variation between agencies in the level of emphasis on *student achievement, results, or outcomes* within the Strong Growth group was greater in 2017 than 2000, suggesting greater diversity over time (Figure 16).

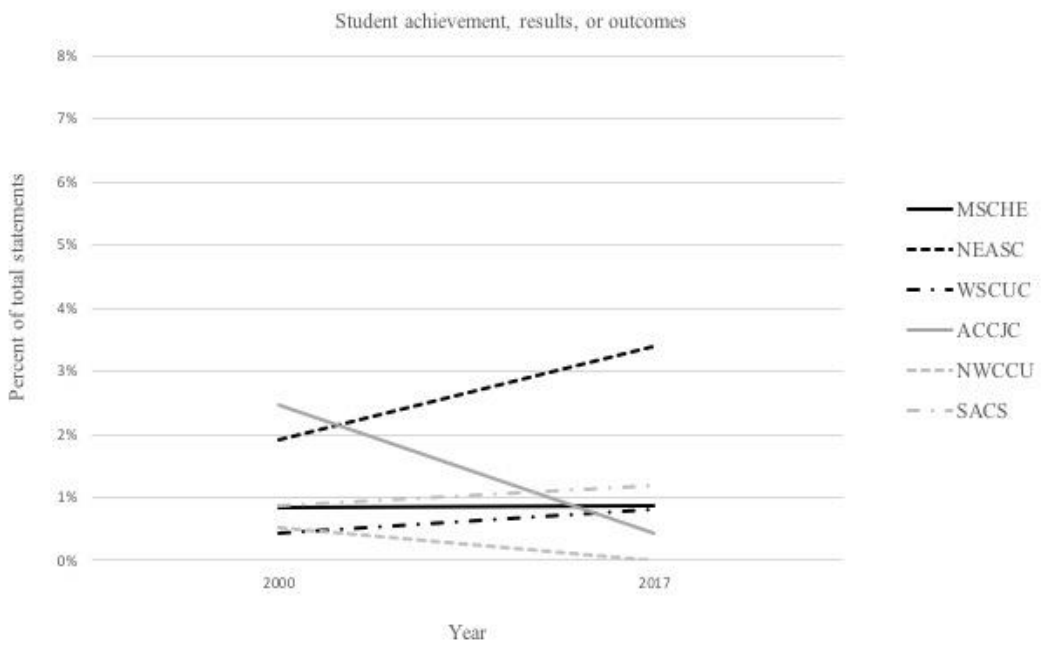

Figure 16. Changes in the prevalence of *student achievement, results, or outcomes* over time by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

This divergence was largely due to a sharp increase in the prevalence of *student achievement, results, or outcomes* in NEASC's standards over time. Within the Weak Growth agencies, less variation was observed in 2017 than 2000, suggesting that these agencies have gotten more similar in their emphasis on student outcomes. This convergence was primarily the result of a sharp decrease in the prevalence of statements pertaining to *student achievement, results, or outcomes* in ACCJC's standards over time. This may suggest that the increased emphasis on student outcomes observed by Ewell (2007) across accrediting agencies has slowed down, or in some cases, reversed.

Though comparing the prevalence of statements pertaining to student outcomes did not suggest a specific pattern, examining the ways that the regional accreditors described their

expectations in this area provided additional insight. In 2000, agencies in the Strong Growth group used a variety of approaches to describe their expectations for *student achievement, results, or outcomes*, though they each discussed expectations for student outcomes as they related to educational goals and objectives. MSCHE's statements were the most vague, noting simply that students may fulfill their educational goals in a variety of ways. WSCUC, which expected institutions to undertake "periodic analyses of retention data and graduation rates...to validate admissions criteria and academic standards" (1997, p. 38) was more moderately descriptive. NEASC contained the most explicit expectations in 2000, requiring that graduates of undergraduate programs

> demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English, the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continued learning. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind (1998, p. 12).

In 2017, both MSCHE and WSCUC expressed fewer expectations for student achievement less frequently than NEASC, and their statements were also less explicit that those in NEASC's standards. While MSCHE and WSCUC contained only one statement each coded for this subcategory in 2017, NEASC increased both in the number of statements and the explicitness of those statements. In addition to describing expected student outcomes, NEASC added statements pertaining to the outcomes of different student populations, such as "[t]he institution enrolling multiple student bodies, by degree levels, location, modality, or other variables, develops and uses the data, evidence, and information...for each student body" (2016, n.p.). NEASC also added statements indicating specific measures institutions were expected to

use in assessing student outcomes, including “rates of progression, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment” (2016, n.p.).

Like MSCHE and WSCUC, the agencies in the Weak Growth group became less explicit in their attention to *student achievement, results, or outcomes*. In 2000, all three agencies described specific expectations for student outcomes. ACCJC expected graduates to “demonstrate competence in oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, and critical analysis/logical thinking (“Standards for Accreditation,” 1996, p. n.p.). NWCCU required that institutions offering vocational programs “track State licensing examination pass rates...and job placement rates” (2003, p. 31), while SACS expected graduates to display competency in “reading, writing, oral communication, fundamental mathematical skills and the basic use of computers” (2000, p. 25). By 2017, NWCCU no longer contained any statements that were coded for this subcategory, and both ACCJC and SACS contained only one statement each. ACCJC’s expectations in 2017 were similar to its expectations in 2000, while SACS, which expected institutions to identify “college-level general education competencies and the extent to which students have attained them” (2011, p. 29) became more vague.

Of particular note in the subcategory of *student achievement, results, or outcomes* was the change in references to job placement rates as a measure of student achievement. In 2000, none of the Strong Growth agencies included job placement rates as an expected measure of student achievement. In the Weak Growth group, both SACS and NWCCU expected that, when appropriate to the discipline, institutions track job placement rates. By 2017, this expectation was no longer included in either agency's standards. As Öz (2005) noted, job placement rates may not be appropriate measures of student achievement in countries where the job market is controlled by non-liberal mechanisms. For this reason, regional accreditation agencies operating

internationally may have reduced or eliminated expectations that institutions use this type of data to assess student outcomes.

Other. A significant association was also found between the content of accreditation standards in the *Other* category and the level of international activity. The *Other* category contained statements that referred to topics not otherwise included in the other categories in the content rubric. Statements in this category included expectations about an institution's relationship with accreditation agencies (e.g.: "It notifies the Commission regarding adverse events" ("Standards," 2016, p. n.p.)); statements about research and scholarship (e.g.: "The institution establishes policies covering the treatment of animal subjects in research" (Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Schools, 1997, p. 34)); and references to non-US locations (e.g.: "Institutions operating in foreign locations operate in conformity with the Standards and applicable Commission policies for all students" (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges - Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2017, p. 24)). None of the subcategories in *Other* were found to have a significant association with level of international accreditation.

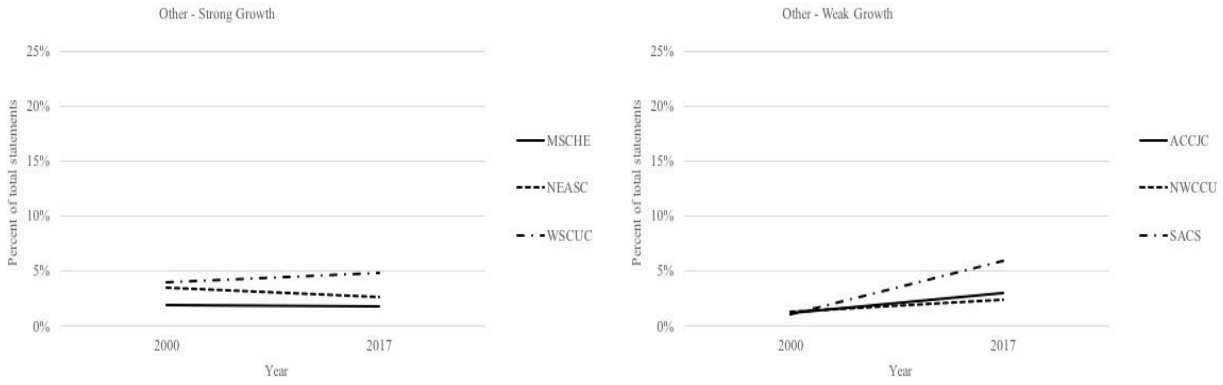

Figure 17. Changes in the prevalence of *Other* over time by agency.

In both groups, there were more statements coded in the *Other* category in 2000 than in 2017, and in both groups, the agencies within them diverged in their level of emphasis over time (Figure 17). Though this category represented only a small percentage of the coded statements (below 5% in five of the six agencies involved in international accreditation), this suggested that increases in international activity is associated with attention to topics not otherwise captured in this study's main content categories. This may be the result of exposure to new models and structures of higher education around the world that differ from those in the US. Though the changes described in Figure 17 do not appear to represent isomorphism among the agencies in this area, the diversification observed here may be the result of the normative flow of ideas and information described by DiMaggio and Powell (2000).

Additional subcategories. Significant associations were also found between international accreditation and the content of accreditation standards in the subcategories of *institutional planning* and *financial management and planning*, though there was no significant association with the larger categories in which these belong (*Assessment and Evaluation* and *Resources and Facilities*, respectively).

Institutional planning. All six agencies contained statements coded for *institutional planning* in 2000. By 2017, one agency in each group (MSCHE in the Strong Growth group and SACS in the Weak Growth group) no longer contained any statements coded for this subcategory (Figure 18). However, the agencies that retained specific attention to *institutional planning* increased in explicitness, which supports previous research that indicated increasing emphasis within accreditation standards on institutional improvement and growth (Brittingham, 2009; Ewell, 2007).

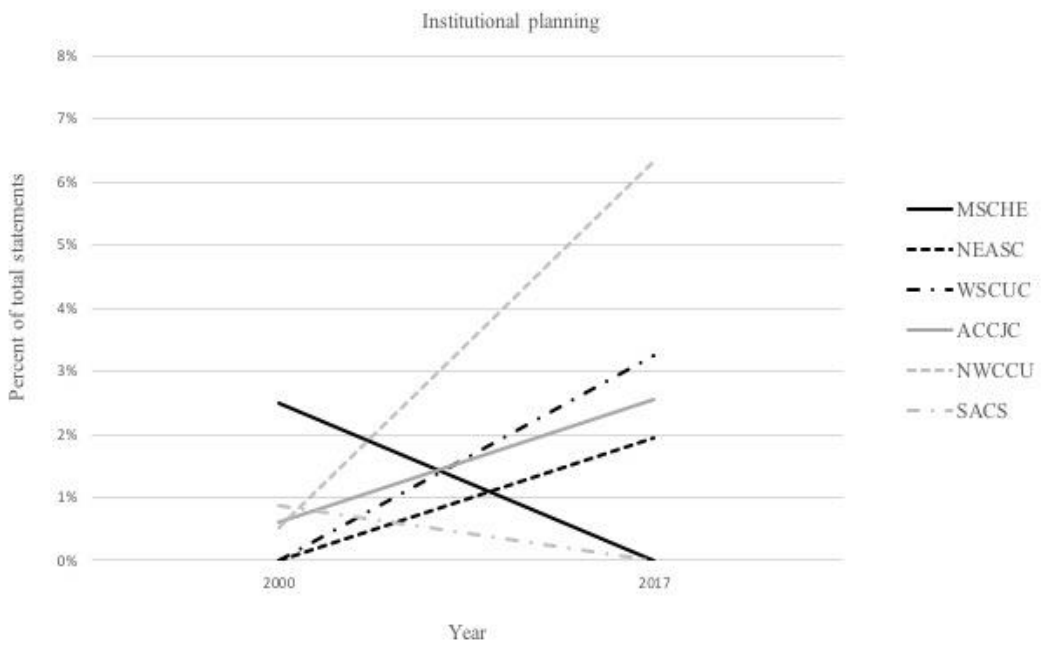

Figure 18. Changes in the prevalence of *institutional planning* over time by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

All three agencies in the Strong Growth group discussed institutional planning in 2000, with most statements pertaining to the processes and structures expected in institutional planning. In 2017, MSCHE no longer had statements coded for this subcategory, and NEASC and WSCUC became less similar in their level of emphasis on this topic. In the Weak Growth group, ACCJC and NWCCU increased their level of attention to *institutional planning* over time, while SACS no longer contained any statements in 2017 that were coded for *institutional planning*.

In standards pertaining to *institutional planning*, the pattern observed in *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment* was repeated. Again, in the standards of MSCHE and SACS, each the agency with the highest levels of international activity within their respective groups, the prevalence of *institutional planning* decreased, while it increased in all other agencies that were

involved in international accreditation. Though this research cannot explain why these two agencies have changed in this manner, a second occurrence of this pattern may suggest an area for future research.

Financial management and planning. Overall, the agencies in both groups changed in a similar fashion over time, becoming less similar in their attention to matters pertaining to *financial management and planning* from 2000 to 2017 (Figure 19). The agencies in the Strong Growth group decreased slightly in the explicitness of their statements pertaining to financial management from 2000 to 2017, but the level of attention paid to this topic varied between agencies over time. In 2000, MSCHE, NEASC, and WSCUC both addressed *financial management and planning.* In general, these agencies discussed a wide range of procedural matters, from the budgeting process to audit requirements, to the role of stakeholders in financial planning. By 2017, MSCHE and WSCUC had reduced their attention to this area, with only two statements each.

Conversely, NEASC emphasized *financial planning and management* strongly, with over 20 statements covering a wide range of topics. It was also the only agency engaged in international accreditation that included reference to accreditation's role in ensuring the ongoing viability of institutions, a consideration closely tied to financial well-being. Within the Strong Growth group, this was not the only significant category in which NEASC was the outlier. The changes observed in NEASC in *program evaluation or assessment* and *Other* were also different from those observed in the other Strong Growth agencies. This suggests that further study may be necessary to understand why NEASC changed in ways that differed from the other Strong Growth agencies during this time period.

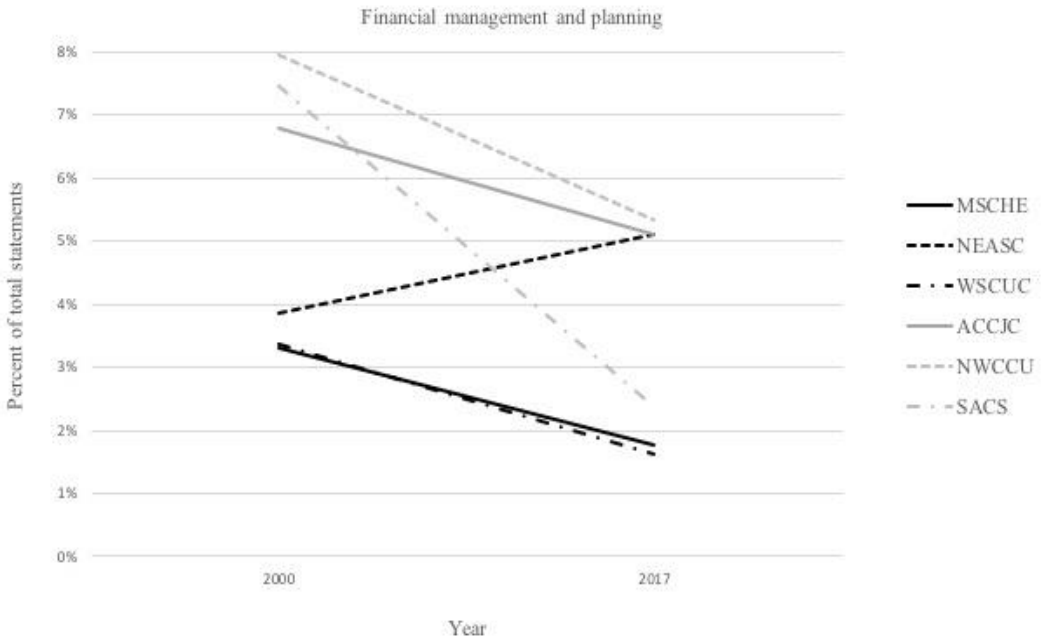

Figure 19. Changes in the prevalence of *financial management and planning* over time by agency. The Strong Growth agencies are indicated in black. The Weak Growth agencies are indicated in grey.

Overall, the Weak Growth group discussed financial planning in a manner that was more explicit than the Strong Growth group at both time points. In 2000, all three agencies addressed *financial management and planning*, covering topics such as budget development, management of capital sources, and auditing. Representing just over 50% of the statements coded for this subcategory, SACS had the largest emphasis on financial management in 2000. In 2017, SACS decreased to only two statements coded for this subcategory, both of which were more vague than the agency's overall approach in 2000: "The institution exercises appropriate control over all its financial resources" and "The institution maintains financial control over externally funded or sponsored research and programs" (2011, p. 32).

While ACCJC and NWCCU also decreased the number of statements pertaining to *financial management and planning* over time, they did so to a lesser extent than SACS, and both agencies increased the explicitness of their statements in this subcategory. In this subcategory, this suggested that ACCJ and NWCCU still valued *financial management and planning* in 2017, opting for more explicit statements that described their expectations rather than indicating their attention to this topic by the number of statements that addressed it.

Conclusions

Is there an association between level of involvement in international accreditation and the content of regional accreditation agencies' standards? The data collected in this research suggests that the answer to this question is yes, though the specific nature of this association still requires further investigation. Overall, the regional accreditation agencies engaged in international accreditation since 2000 (ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, NWCCU, SACS, and WSCUC) experienced more changes in their accreditation standards since 2000 than HLC, which was the only regional accreditation agency not engaged in international accreditation. In some content categories, international activity was associated with specific changes (e.g., declining prevalence of standards pertaining to *Faculty and Instructional Staff*), while in other categories, the relationship between international activity and the content of accreditation standards was less clear (e.g., more diversity in level of attention to *admissions, recruitment, or enrollment*).

More research is required to understand why international activity impacts accreditation standards in such a diverse manner. Do categories with clearer association to international activity align with notions of higher education quality proposed by international organizations such as INQAAHE? Do they reflect latent shared ideas about higher education that can be found worldwide? For content categories where emphasis among the regional accreditation agencies

has become increasingly different over time, is there a relationship between the category and the nature of an individual agency's international activity? The findings in *program assessment or evaluation* and *Students* suggest that this may be the case.

Though this research wasn't designed to capture the motivation behind these changes, they may be the result of exposure to different models of higher education in other countries, coupled with the desire for flexibility in accreditation standards that allows higher education institutions to tailor their self-studies to their unique needs and diverse missions. The regional accreditation model in the US has historically built a sense of member ownership by offering opportunities for involvement in the local higher education community (Brittingham, 2009). By not engaging in international accreditation, HLC has continued this tradition. By expanding their accreditation activity beyond regional borders and bringing people and ideas from diverse countries together through accreditation activities, ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, NWCCU, SACS, and WSCUC may be creating new international communities that make room in accreditation standards for diverse ideas.

Whether changes associated with international accreditation ultimately impact US institutions remains to be seen. Higher education institutions have "internalized the standards sufficiently, through policy and practice, to be able to regulate their behavior consistent with the standards" (Brittingham, 2009, p. 20). This institutionalization of accreditation standards in the daily practices of individual institutions may ultimately limit the extent to which these changes impact higher education in the US. Particularly in categories that receive less attention in current standards, or those where accreditation standards have become more vague, US institutions may find no reason to change their practices, thus preserving the influence of earlier accreditation standards in US institutions. It may then be possible for US regional accreditors to adjust their

standards to reflect the internationalization of higher education without losing their relevance to US educational institutions.

Isomorphism. Isomorphism, used first in this research to frame why agencies involved in international accreditation might change their standards, was observed most clearly in *Faculty and Instructional Staff*. In all agencies involved in international accreditation, the prevalence of statements pertaining to *Faculty and Instructional Staff* became more similar over time. ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, NWCCU, SACS, and WSCUC experienced a decline in the prevalence of statements pertaining to *Faculty and Instructional Staff* from 2000 and 2017, and the prevalence of this category was more similar across all six agencies in 2017 than it was in 2000. Future research on this topic would benefit from an investigation into the type of isomorphism (coercive, mimetic, or normative) that shaped this change.

Isomorphism was also used in this research to conceptualize why agencies with higher levels of international activity may experience similar changes in their standards over time (Figure 1). This anticipated association between international accreditation and the content of accreditation standards was observed most clearly in standards pertaining to *Curriculum and Education* (Figure 10). Agencies with higher levels of international activity became similar in their level of emphasis on curriculum from 2000 to 2017, while those with lower levels of international activity became less similar from 2000 to 2017.

The other associations between international activity and accreditation standards that were observed in this research, however, cannot be fully explained using either of these conceptualizations of isomorphism. For example, in standards pertaining to *Students* and *student achievement, results, or outcomes*, it appeared that agencies with lower levels of international activity have become more similar in their emphasis on these topics, while those with higher

levels of international activity have not. These changes, opposite to those proposed in Figure 1, suggests that more research is necessary to understand the relationship between international activity and the content of the standards of US regional accrediting agencies.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that while there is a relationship between international activity and the content of accreditation standards, this relationship is multifaceted and dynamic. More research is needed to understand why this relationship appears to be limited to particular content categories, and whether changes associated with international accreditation are impacting the ways that US institutions accredited by ACCJC, MSCHE, NEASC, NWCCU, SACS, and WSCUC approach accreditation themselves.

Limitations

As with all research, this study had limitations. These limit the generalizability of its findings and were primarily a result of its research design. As research conducted by one researcher, its reliability was subject to instability in coding (Weber, 1985). Though steps were taken to reduce the impact of this risk, it is likely that this had some effect on the reliability of data collection. Though intercoder agreement does not guarantee reliable data (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), future research would benefit from designs that include multiple coders to improve reliability.

In the majority of the rubric categories, a significant association was found between level of international activity and content. However, the small number of significant findings at the subcategory level suggested that the nature of accreditation standards may be too diverse to be accurately captured with the rubric used here. Though the researcher added new subcategories in an attempt to represent the content of accreditation standards more fully than previous studies,

the rubric should be subjected to additional tests for reliability and validity before being used again.

Finally, it must be recognized that this research was conducted with the documents from a small number of accreditation agencies with similar histories and motives. The findings of this research cannot be assumed to represent the association between international accreditation and accreditation standards for other US-based accrediting agencies, or accreditation organizations or systems based in other countries.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research has contributed new findings to the literature on international accreditation by US accrediting agencies. It also indicated several opportunities for future research. As standards continue to change, and the international accreditation market becomes more complex, a more fined-grained approach to documenting and understanding the changes occurring worldwide will be necessary.

Additional research should be conducted to determine if associations between accreditation standards and international activity can be better understood with clearer definitions of "international activity," or the use of more specific variables. While this research categorized agencies based on their level of growth in international accreditation over a period of time, it was unable to conduct statistical analyses between content and a number of potential factors that may be related to the relationship between international activity and accreditation standards. These additional variables could include those related to the nature of an accreditor's international activity (e.g., the number of foreign institutions accredited, or the number and nature of countries or geographic regions in which it operates), as well as those related to the foreign institutions accredited by US agencies (e.g., if they are American-style or not, if they are

public or private, or if they also participate in any other accreditation process, whether domestic or international). The findings presented here regarding standards categorized in *Students* and *program assessment or evaluation* in particular suggest that it may be important to consider not just the number of international institutions accredited by an agency, but also the countries or geographic regions in which these institutions are located. Doing so may help to respond to some of the questions framed by colonial or post-colonial perspectives regarding the relationship between higher education quality and North-South dynamics (Blanco Ramírez, 2014, 2015a).

Further, future studies investigating international accreditation and accreditation standards should be based on a larger sample of accreditation agencies and be designed to examine accreditation standards over a longer period of time. A larger sample size would permit more sophisticated statistical analyses, such as ANOVA, to be used to more clearly determine the relationship between international activity and accreditation standards. Studies of US accreditation on the global stage should be expanded to include US-based specialized and programmatic accreditors. Future research on the relationship between accreditation standards and international accreditation would also benefit from incorporating non-US accreditation agencies into the research design. This would allow for a broader assessment of the relationship between international activity and accreditation standards on a global stage. In turn, this type of design might increase the likelihood of identifying areas of isomorphism across geographic regions or within specific subject areas by providing a wider range of data that would reduce the impact of outliers on the observation of large-scale patterns.

The inclusion of a wider variety of organizations would also enable future research to better understand the "complex, contextualized, and interpretive nature" (Blanco Ramírez, 2015a, p. 372) of quality in higher education. This would include investigations of organizations

such as the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education and the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions for Higher Learning. In addition, documents from organizations that chose other mechanisms to indicate quality in higher education, such as ranking systems, are likely to become increasingly important in this discussion (Blanco Ramírez, 2015a). In addition to including documents from these organizations in future studies, it would also be beneficial to compare accreditation systems or agencies that have aligned with these organizations to those that have not. As "national bodies are compelled to be virtually isomorphic with each other as a prerequisite for membership in global bodies," this approach would provide an opportunity to understand another facet of the global environment that likely impacts quality assurance in higher education (Loya & Boli, 1999).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Final Content Rubric

Category	Code
Administration and Governance (A & G)	AG1: governance and decision-making AG2: stakeholder involvement AG3: administrative functions AG4: administration/staff qualifications AG5: employment policies or practices AG6: assessment of governance or administration AG7: institutional policy requirements AG8: policy assessment or evaluation AG9: privacy and security AG10: Chief Executive Officer (CEO) AG11: governing board
Assessment & Evaluation (A & E)	AE1: institutional effectiveness AE2: Institutional planning AE3: institutional assessment AE4: assessment programs or procedures AE5: effectiveness and improvement
Curriculum & Education (C & E)	CE1: curriculum content CE2: delivery modes/ instructional locations CE3: educational program design or structure CE4: developmental, non-credit, non-degree, or continuing education CE5: curriculum development and oversight CE6: program evaluation or assessment CE7: awarding of credit CE8: experiential or prior learning CE9: general education
Ethics & Integrity (E & I)	EI1: communication EI2: transparency/accuracy EI3: integrity/ethics EI4: grievance processes or procedures EI5: publications and public disclosure EI6: academic honesty/ethical use of information

Faculty & Instructional Staff (F & IS)	F1: qualifications F2: competence in teaching or research F3: composition (hiring, assignment, or organization) F4: workload F5: expectations F6: support, development or training F7: promotion and tenure F8: compensation F9: assessment or evaluation F10: instructional techniques & quality
Mission and Goals (M & G)	MG1: mission, philosophy, and purpose MG2: goals and objectives MG3: organizational structure MG4: academic freedom/pursuit of truth & knowledge MG5: institutional environment/community MG6: public service
Other (O)	O1: accreditation O2: other O3: research/scholarship O4: Non-US institutions/locations
Resources and Facilities (R & F)	RF1: library, information, and instructional resources RF2: physical facilities RF3: affiliated or related sites or resources RF4: field resources/contractual agreements RF6: financial resources RF7: equipment or technology RF8: personnel (as a resource) RF9: evaluation of resources RF10: advancement/fundraising RF11: evaluation of financial policies or processes RF12: resource planning and allocation RF13: access to resources and services RF14: financial management and planning RF15: auxiliary services RF16: personnel development/training
Students (S)	S1: admissions, recruitment, or enrollment S2: retention or progression S3: graduation requirements S4: student support resources or programs S5: equity or diversity S6: co-curricular programs

	S7: evaluation of student learning S8: student learning outcomes S9: student achievement, results, or outcomes S10: Financial aid programs

Note. Adapted from Petersen (1979) and Hagerty and Stark (1989).

Appendix B: Explicitness Scoring Rubric

Score	Description	Example (AG9: privacy and security)
3	Explicit	"They are protected by fire-proof and otherwise safe storage and are backed up by duplicate files." (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, 2003, p. 52)
2	Moderately Descriptive	"Access should be controlled by specific and carefully supervised policies." (Middle States Association of College and Schools Commission on Higher Education, 1994, p. 10)
1	Implied or Vague	"The management of information and record keeping services and the preservation of the integrity of student records are critically important." (Middle States Association of College and Schools Commission on Higher Education, 1994, p. 10)

Note. Adapted from Hagerty and Stark (1989).

Appendix C. Frequency of Subcategories by Agency and Year, by Percentage.

	ACCJC		HLC		MSCHE		NEASC		NWCCU		SACS		WSCUC	
Subcategory	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017
AG1	4.94	2.13	5.00	1.96	2.21	4.39	2.24	2.68	3.70	3.40	3.13	3.57	2.73	4.88
AG2	1.23	2.13	0.00	1.96	0.00	0.88	0.32	0.97	0.26	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.21	1.63
AG3	0.62	0.85	3.33	0.00	1.93	0.88	0.32	0.00	1.06	0.49	0.87	0.00	0.00	0.81
AG4	1.23	1.28	1.67	1.96	1.10	2.63	0.32	0.49	0.79	0.49	1.91	1.19	0.84	0.00
AG5	4.32	3.40	0.00	0.00	2.21	0.88	1.92	1.95	1.85	1.46	2.43	2.38	2.10	3.25
AG6	0.00	3.40	0.00	0.00	0.55	0.88	0.32	0.49	0.26	0.49	0.17	1.19	0.21	0.00
AG7	0.62	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.88	0.00	0.00	0.26	0.49	0.52	0.00	1.89	0.00
AG8	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.26	0.00	0.52	0.00	0.42	0.00
AG9	1.85	1.70	0.00	0.00	1.10	0.88	0.64	0.73	1.59	2.43	1.22	2.38	2.73	0.00
AG10	2.47	8.09	0.00	0.00	0.83	2.63	0.64	0.73	1.06	0.49	0.52	2.38	0.21	0.00
AG11	6.79	8.51	1.67	5.88	7.46	10.53	2.88	4.14	5.03	2.91	2.43	8.33	4.83	1.63
AE1	0.62	0.85	5.00	4.90	2.49	0.00	0.00	0.97	0.53	1.46	0.87	0.00	0.00	1.63
AE2	1.23	2.55	1.67	6.86	2.76	0.00	1.60	1.95	1.06	6.31	0.00	0.00	2.10	3.25
AE3	3.09	2.55	1.67	0.00	1.10	4.39	0.96	0.49	0.53	2.43	0.17	0.00	0.21	3.25
AE4	0.62	5.11	1.67	3.92	2.76	1.75	1.92	2.43	2.12	4.37	3.13	0.00	1.68	7.32

	ACCJC		HLC		MSCHE		NEASC		NWCCU		SACS		WSCUC	
Subcategory	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017
AE5	2.47	3.83	1.67	4.90	1.66	7.89	1.60	1.95	0.53	2.43	0.52	8.33	0.21	4.07
CE1	0.00	0.00	1.67	1.96	0.28	0.00	1.28	0.97	0.53	0.00	1.04	0.00	1.89	2.44
CE3	3.70	3.40	8.33	3.92	3.04	4.39	12.18	9.00	4.50	5.83	4.51	4.76	5.67	8.94
CE4	0.00	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.00	0.00	0.24	2.65	1.46	1.22	1.19	1.26	0.00
CE5	0.62	0.00	1.67	0.98	1.66	1.75	2.88	3.41	3.70	1.94	4.17	4.76	2.94	2.44
CE6	3.70	1.70	1.67	3.92	1.10	1.75	1.60	1.46	1.32	0.00	2.26	0.00	1.47	2.44
CE7	2.47	1.70	3.33	1.96	1.38	0.88	2.24	2.43	2.65	3.40	2.60	3.57	1.26	0.81
CE8	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.83	0.00	0.00	0.49	1.32	1.94	0.87	0.00	0.84	0.00
CE9	3.09	1.28	0.00	3.92	0.83	3.51	0.96	1.22	1.59	1.46	0.17	0.00	0.63	0.00
CE10	1.85	0.43	0.00	0.98	0.28	0.00	0.96	1.46	0.79	0.97	1.22	0.00	2.94	0.00
EI1	0.62	1.70	0.00	0.00	0.83	0.88	0.32	0.24	0.53	0.97	0.00	0.00	0.63	0.00
EI2	1.85	1.70	0.00	0.00	1.38	3.51	0.96	0.97	2.38	3.88	0.35	0.00	3.78	0.81
EI3	1.23	2.13	5.00	1.96	1.38	2.63	2.24	2.68	1.06	0.49	0.00	1.19	0.84	0.81
EI4	0.00	0.00	1.67	0.00	0.28	1.75	0.96	0.73	0.00	0.49	0.17	0.00	0.42	2.44
EI5	3.70	2.98	5.00	4.90	2.21	3.51	5.77	8.27	2.65	10.19	2.95	15.48	2.31	3.25

	ACCJC		HLC		MSCHE		NEASC		NWCCU		SACS		WSCUC	
Subcategory	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017
EI6	1.23	0.85	0.00	1.96	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.73	0.00	0.97	0.00	0.00	0.42	0.00
F1	0.62	0.85	1.67	0.98	0.28	0.88	1.60	0.97	0.53	0.00	7.47	3.57	0.84	0.00
F2	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.98	0.28	0.88	0.00	0.24	0.26	0.00	0.35	0.00	0.00	0.00
F3	0.00	0.43	0.00	0.98	0.83	0.88	2.56	1.46	1.85	0.49	1.39	1.19	3.57	3.25
F4	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.55	0.00	1.28	0.49	0.53	0.00	0.69	0.00	1.05	0.00
F5	0.00	1.70	0.00	0.98	1.38	0.00	2.24	1.70	1.32	0.97	0.17	0.00	1.47	0.00
F6	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.83	0.88	1.60	0.73	0.00	0.00	0.69	1.19	0.42	0.00
F7	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.35	0.00	0.42	0.81
F8	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.96	0.24	0.53	0.00	0.69	0.00	0.63	0.00
F9	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.98	0.28	0.88	1.28	1.70	0.79	1.46	0.69	1.19	0.84	0.81
F10	0.00	0.00	1.67	0.00	1.10	0.00	1.60	1.22	0.00	0.00	1.22	0.00	0.42	0.00
MG1	1.85	0.85	3.33	5.88	1.66	3.51	1.92	2.19	0.53	2.91	1.91	1.19	1.47	5.69
MG2	0.62	0.43	1.67	0.98	5.52	4.39	0.32	0.49	0.53	0.97	0.69	0.00	0.21	0.81
MG3	2.47	2.55	0.00	3.92	3.87	1.75	0.64	1.46	2.12	0.49	2.43	1.19	1.47	1.63
MG4	0.62	0.85	1.67	2.94	3.59	0.88	1.28	0.73	0.79	2.43	0.87	1.19	2.73	4.07
MG5	1.23	0.43	3.33	0.00	1.66	0.88	0.96	0.97	0.26	0.49	0.87	0.00	0.84	2.44

	ACCJC		HLC		MSCHE		NEASC		NWCCU		SACS		WSCUC	
Subcategory	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017
MG6	0.00	0.00	1.67	2.94	1.10	0.00	0.00	0.24	0.26	0.00	0.17	0.00	1.05	0.00
O1	0.62	1.70	0.00	0.98	0.00	0.00	0.64	0.49	1.06	0.49	1.04	3.57	2.73	0.81
O2	0.00	0.43	1.67	0.00	1.93	0.88	0.64	1.46	0.00	1.46	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.25
O3	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.98	0.00	0.00	2.24	0.73	0.26	0.49	0.00	2.38	1.26	0.81
O4	0.62	0.85	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.88	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
RF1	1.23	0.85	1.67	0.00	3.87	0.00	2.88	0.00	3.70	0.49	4.51	1.19	3.57	0.00
RF2	3.09	0.85	1.67	0.98	1.38	0.00	1.28	0.24	2.38	0.97	0.87	1.19	2.52	0.00
RF3	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.87	1.19	0.42	0.00
RF4	1.23	1.28	3.33	0.00	0.83	1.75	0.64	0.73	0.79	0.97	2.60	0.00	0.00	0.00
RF6	1.85	1.28	0.00	0.00	0.83	0.00	1.28	0.73	1.59	0.49	0.69	1.19	1.05	1.63
RF7	0.62	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.00	0.00	0.24	1.06	1.94	1.22	1.19	1.47	1.63
RF8	1.23	0.85	0.00	0.98	0.28	0.00	0.32	0.24	0.53	0.49	0.17	2.38	0.21	0.00
RF9	0.62	1.70	1.67	0.00	1.66	0.88	0.00	0.24	0.00	0.97	0.17	0.00	0.63	0.00
RF10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.96	0.73	1.59	0.97	1.22	1.19	0.84	0.00
RF11	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.88	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
RF12	3.70	4.26	10.00	3.92	2.76	3.51	4.81	4.14	3.97	0.97	3.30	1.19	3.99	3.25

	ACCJC		HLC		MSCHE		NEASC		NWCCU		SACS		WSCUC	
Subcategory	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017
RF13	1.85	1.70	0.00	0.00	2.76	0.00	0.64	0.73	0.79	0.49	1.74	2.38	2.31	0.00
RF14	6.79	5.11	0.00	0.98	3.31	1.75	3.85	5.11	7.94	5.34	7.47	2.38	3.36	1.63
RF15	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.32	0.00	1.59	1.46	0.35	0.00	1.47	0.00
RF16	1.23	0.85	1.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.32	0.24	0.26	0.49	0.35	0.00	0.63	1.63
S1	2.47	0.85	0.00	0.00	3.31	0.88	1.60	2.68	2.91	1.46	3.65	1.19	1.89	1.63
S2	1.23	0.43	0.00	3.92	1.38	0.00	0.64	0.97	0.79	0.97	0.69	0.00	0.42	0.81
S3	0.00	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.00	0.32	1.22	2.91	0.49	0.69	2.38	0.63	0.00
S4	1.23	1.28	3.33	4.90	3.31	3.51	3.53	2.68	3.44	0.97	3.13	1.19	2.10	0.81
S5	1.23	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.38	0.88	1.60	1.22	1.06	0.49	0.17	0.00	0.84	1.63
S6	0.62	0.85	1.67	0.98	0.83	0.88	1.28	0.49	1.85	0.97	1.56	0.00	0.63	0.81
S7	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.88	0.64	1.22	1.06	0.97	0.87	0.00	1.05	3.25
S8	0.00	0.43	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.32	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.17	0.00	0.00	0.00
S9	2.47	0.43	6.67	0.98	0.83	0.88	1.92	3.41	0.53	0.00	0.87	1.19	0.42	0.81
S10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.38	1.75	0.96	0.97	1.06	1.46	1.04	1.19	0.42	0.00

Note. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Author Biography

Calley Stevens Taylor earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in May 2003 from the University of North Carolina at Asheville. At UNCA, she majored in Psychology and completed a minor in Sociology, graduating with Distinction in Psychology and magna cum laude honors. She earned her Master of Science degree in College Student Personnel from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville in August 2005. Her master's thesis research was a study of the reasons that college students reached senior standing but failed to graduate.

She returned to Asheville, NC to serve as the Assistant Director for Special Programs in the Office of Advising and Registration Services at UNC Asheville in March 2005. In July 2006, Calley was promoted to Director of Advising and Learning Support, and she remained in this position until July 2010. From July 2010 to December 2013, Calley served as the Director of Advising and Enrollment Services at Reading Area Community Colleges in Reading, PA. She has served as the Director of Student Success and Retention at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, PA since December 2013.

Publications and Research

Since beginning her post-graduate studies, Calley has presented extensively at professional and academic conferences, including an international conference on the scientization of education in Tübingen, Germany in 2016. In addition, her publication and research activity has included the following:

Davidson, P. M., Stevens Taylor, C., Park, M., Dzotsenidze, N., & Wiseman, A.W. (2018). Reflecting on Trends in Comparative and International Education: A Three-Year Examination of Research Publications, in Alexander W. Wiseman (Ed.) *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education 2017 (International Perspectives on*

Education and Society, Volume 34) Emerald Publishing Limited, pp.1 – 27.

Wiseman, A., Davidson, P., & Stevens Taylor, C. (2017). A Synthesis of Published Comparative Education Research, 2014–2015: Further Data for Reflection in Comparative and International Education. In Alexander W. Wiseman (Ed.) *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education 2016 (International Perspectives on Education and Society, Volume 30).* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, p.1-23.

Wiseman, A., Damaschke-Deitrick, L., Bruce, E., Davidson, P., & Stevens Taylor, C. (2016). Transnational scientized education discourse: A cross-national comparison. In Schmid, J., Amos, K., Schrader, J. and Thiel, A. (Eds.): Internationalisierte Welten der Bildung – Bildung und Bildungspolitik im globalen Vergleich (Internationalized Worlds of Education: Education and Training Policies in a Global Comparison), p. 121-146. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Wiseman, A., Anderson, E., Davidson, P., & Stevens Taylor, C. (2016). Building a Foundation for Reflecting on Comparative and International Education: A Synthesis of Published Comparative Education Research, in Alexander W. Wiseman, Emily Anderson (Eds.) *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education 2015 (International Perspectives on Education and Society, Volume 28)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, p.3 - 24

Research Assistant, "Developing a monitoring and evaluation report for the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village." Lehigh University. 2014-2016.

Editorial Assistant, Annual Review of International and Comparative Education, International Perspectives on Education and Society. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. 2014-2017.

Taylor, C.S.; Pritt, A.B.; Ebert, M.S.; Cheng, A.O.Y; and Zhao, X. (2014). Collaborative Book Review: Baker, D. P. (2014). The Schooled Society: The Educational Transformation of Global Culture. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 1(2).

Teaching

Calley has developed curriculum for her own original courses as well as curricula for courses taught by other instructors as part of a coordinated program. Her direct teaching experience includes the following courses:

- FYS 129: Human Rights and You. *Cedar Crest College.* Fall 2017.
- CCC 102: Exploring Your Future (previously SPS 160). *Cedar Crest College***.** Spring 2015, Spring 2016, Spring 2018.
- CCC 101: College Life (previously SPS 120). *Cedar Crest College***.** Fall 2014, Fall 2015.
- LS 205: Peer Mentoring (previously IST 372). *The University of North Carolina at Asheville.* Fall 2006, Fall 2007, Spring 2008, Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Fall 2009, Spring 2010.
- LS 305: Leadership in Peer Mentoring. *The University of North Carolina at Asheville*. Fall 2009, Spring 2010.
- HWP 171: SELECT Your Journey. *The University of North Carolina at Asheville*. Fall 2009.
- BA 100: Approaches to the College of Business Administration. *The University of Tennessee-Knoxville.* Fall 2004.
- FYS 401: Peer Mentor Techniques. *The University of Tennessee-Knoxville.* Spring 2004.

Accreditation

Finally, Calley has participated in a variety of accreditation activities. The research conducted for this dissertation was, in part, inspired in the course of this service and associated activities:

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

- Visiting Team Member, Trinity Washington University, March 2016.
- Visiting Team Member, Allegany College of Maryland, April 2015.
- Visiting Team Member, Carroll Community College, April 2011.

Reading Area Community College

- Middle States Accreditation Steering Committee, 2010-2013

Cedar Crest College

- Middle States Monitoring Report Team, 2015