Faculty Perceptions of a Seven-Year Accreditation Process

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the context, purpose, methodology, findings, and recommendations from a survey conducted over a seven-year period to identify faculty perceptions of an accreditation process. The survey using both closed and open-ended responses was administered annually to the same population in the Sanford College of Education. Findings show that faculty saw the accreditation process as good professional development, that it improved programs, and that it strengthened collaboration. Based on our findings, we offer recommendations to overcome barriers in the accreditation process and thus maximize the benefits of the process to faculty, programs and schools involved in the accreditation work. Keywords: Accreditation, faculty, assessment, perceptions, buy-in

Accreditation is a long-time imperative of institutions of higher education (IHEs) throughout the United States. Recently, however, an increase in expectations of IHEs on the part of the federal government and stakeholders has led to greater scrutiny of costs of higher education and student success, and demands for greater accountability (Alexander 2000; Hawkins 2015; Kallison and Cohen 2010; Kuh and Ikenberry 2009; Leveille 2006; Levine 2006). As Hawkins (2015, para. 15) has noted, "The pressure for greater accountability has been coming from both Republicans and Democrats,

from corporate America, from accreditors, from trustees, and from other stakeholders. This is not a partisan issue, and it will not be going away."

Accreditation, a process based in principles of continuous improvement and external peer review, is one way IHEs can build trust with stakeholders and demonstrate accountability (Banta, Jones, and Black 2010; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation 2013; Kuh and Ikenberry 2009; Western Association of Schools and Colleges 2014). A full review of the topic of accreditation is beyond the purview of this article, but a simple search of the Boolean phrase, "accreditation," in an academic search produces over 10,000 citations for articles published within the last 10 years, showing the prevalence of the topic.

Scholars have begun to deliberately examine the impact of accreditation on institutions and faculty as a result of the self-study and change process driven by accreditation (Tagg 2012). This article describes the context, purpose, methodology, findings, and recommendations from a longitudinal study of faculty perceptions of a self-study during an accreditation process. Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011) have noted that the self-study can be the most important phase of an accreditation process because it has the potential to lead to important insights that would not otherwise be discovered. All full-time faculty in the College of Education at National University, a private, not-for-profit university in California, were invited to complete a survey administered annually over a seven-year period. The findings from this study will inform others who embark on an initial accreditation process and contribute to a better experience with fewer barriers to overcome.

Accreditation

Accreditation as a process is an action research study in which evidence of preparation of candidates within a profession is gathered and organized, then evaluated by peers in light of standards of a profession. Ewell (2013) describes the purpose of evidence gathered for accreditation as "less to establish 'truth' than to discern an appropriate course of action directed at program improvement" (p. 1). The accreditation process requires a self-study of "the way we do things" so that relevant evidence can be gathered to demonstrate institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. Gathering evidence of educational effectiveness and using the findings to inform practice requires active involvement of administrators and faculty, including the commitment of time, effort, resources, and openness to

change. Banta et al. (1996) have stated a key principle of accreditation: that it should not be an end in itself, but should be an expression of the value placed on continuous improvement.

Ewell and Jones (2006) outlined the development of our current model of accountability for IHEs. They suggested that state-level accountability began with requirements of compliance reporting. It then moved to assessment mandates and included outcome assessments for greater transparency to the public. In the early 1990s the expectation for accountability expanded to include focus on continuous improvement (Ewell 2008; Volkwein 2010). Thus, the development of two parallel purposes of assessment—one for continuous improvement and one for accountability—provides new challenges for faculty embarking on this task of accreditation.

In California the Commission for Teacher Credentialing (CTC) accredits all teacher preparation programs. Teacher preparation units may also choose to be accredited by a national accreditation body, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The state and national accrediting agencies have an agreement to work with one another when an institution requests dual accreditation. The teacher preparation unit at the university where this research was conducted, in consultation with university administrators, chose the path of dual accreditation.

Why Do Accreditation?

In addition to the legal requirement for professional educator preparation units in California to be accredited by CTC, the literature suggests at least six additional reasons to pursue accreditation.

1. *To enhance the learning of the students whom program graduates serve.*
   Data used for improvement efforts and accreditation should ultimately aim to enhance preparation performance outputs related to P-12 student learning (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation 2015; Levine 2006). Stated another way, part of establishing the credibility of a program that prepares professional educators is to provide evidence that program completers have a positive impact on their own students' learning and development (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation 2013). At the end of the day, the most telling evidence of the impact of the efforts of a professional educator preparation unit is the quality of the work its graduates do with the children they teach (Levine).

The literature expresses mixed findings regarding the increase in learning from program completers of accredited programs. In a comprehensive study of engineering programs that had gone through accreditation, Volkwein et al. (2007) found gains in educational outcomes by program completers. They evaluated responses from faculty and program chairs in a mix of public and independently controlled IHEs, as well as in multiple levels of programs that award engineering degrees. They found significant gains in student learning outcomes (SLO) by comparing SLOs of students' pre- and post-program accreditation.

The Northwest Evaluation Association carried out a four-year study of teacher education program characteristics of over 2,000 teachers and measures of achievement of their students (as cited in Levine 2006, 79). Findings showed that P-12 students whose teachers were prepared in doctoral granting institutions experienced statistically significant greater growth in math and reading scores than did students whose teachers were from master's degree–granting universities.

2. *To accomplish a shared vision.* The heart of a vision shared by education faculty includes the expectation that program graduates are making a positive difference in the learning of their P-12 students (Gittell 2003). Such a vision also includes a genuine desire on the part of faculty to know if candidates are learning what we say we are teaching (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation 2013). An accreditation process is one way of providing evidence in a form that allows peers from other institutions to provide both formative and summative assessment of progress based on standards of the profession, and to confirm whether or not continuous progress toward the vision is occurring. Maki (2004) underscored the importance of vision in developing a culture of assessment, stating that leaders throughout an institution—from chancellors to faculty and staff—should communicate the value of assessing outcomes of student learning. Even departments that support academic functions within an IHE can share in the vision of assessment and accreditation by setting and measuring benchmarks of success.

3. *To build faculty capacity for continuous improvement.* Stringer (2013) defines "capacity building" as bringing together the collective power of faculty for the ultimate purpose of empowering student learning. Bringing the work we do into alignment with professional and accreditation standards expands our insights and our internal

and external accountability so that we provide evidence of informed change and continuous improvement (Fullan 2008; Steel and Boudett 2009). Volkwein et al. (2007) demonstrated one example of how a faculty engages in continuous improvement through involvement in accreditation. However, as Banta, Jones, and Black (2010) noted, building faculty capacity for assessment should not be left to chance. They suggested a needs assessment be carried out among faculty to identify areas of student and program assessment that would benefit faculty in targeted professional development.

4. *To strengthen a culture of continuous improvement.* A culture of continuous improvement is nurtured through ongoing reflection about what we do (Fullan, Hill, and Crevola 2006). Evidence-based practice is what we expect of candidates, and is what accreditors expect of us as in professional educator preparation programs. Evidence-based practice welcomes transparency, supports accountability, and contributes to the strengthening of a learning community (Blanchard 2001; Covey 1989). A culture of continuous improvement does not stop with assessment of program learning outcomes, but goes beyond to look for evidence of whether candidates who complete programs make a positive difference in their professional practice (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation 2013; Levine 2006).

5. *To enhance faculty collaboration.* The work of accreditation causes us to purposefully connect (Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker 2012). Knowledge is exchanged, insights are gained, and synergy is facilitated (Fullan 2008; Johnston 2013). Accreditation without collaboration would not be possible. Collaboration helps group members to see a bigger picture so that a panoramic view of assessment and continuous progress is possible (Isaacs 2013). Gerbic and Kranenburg (2010) demonstrated a clear increase in collaboration among faculty preparing for accreditation review.

6. *To meet the demand for accountability*. Concerns about accumulating student loan debt and default rates have led to questions about the affordability and financial sense of getting a university degree (Gage and Lorin 2014; Levine 2006). Some see mounting student debt as the next big threat to the US economy. To address this concern, legislation has been proposed in the US Senate—though not passed—to hold institutions of higher education "financially responsible for the outcomes of their students" (Stafford 2013; Student Loan Bill Tracker

[http://www.studentloanbilltracker.com]). The process and outcomes of meeting the demands of accreditation position institutions of higher education to provide evidence of the value of an earned degree.

Barriers to Accreditation

While there is theoretical and empirical support for the improvement of an educational unit through an accreditation preparation process, there are also hurdles each unit faces as part of this process. These hurdles often include gaining faculty involvement (Kuh and Ikenberry 2009) and resistance to change on the part of faculty (Tagg 2012).

Resistance to change may be due to a variety of legitimate issues. For example, faculty may fear the long-term sustainability of specific changes, viewing them as a "flavor of the month" (Lueddeke 1999). Additionally, faculty may resist change because they do not perceive it as being aligned with their philosophical beliefs or professional goals (Boice 1990; Haas and Keeley 1998; Rice 2006). Perception of misalignment may occur when faculty do not understand the goals of accreditation or believe the goals undermine their academic freedom (Koslowski 2006).

Additional resistance to change may stem from lack of knowledge about the accreditation process, requirement of a new competence, or the time and effort involved in implementing a new and different process (Boice 1990; Eisen and Barlett 2006). The longitudinal nature of this study allowed an examination of the change process for one educational unit, and the findings are discussed later in the article.

Leadership

The majority of barriers to accreditation identified in the research cited above are influenced by the mindset of faculty. These barriers involve the perceptions of change and priorities by the involved faculty. Thus, perceptions of faculty are of critical importance in planning and facilitating successful change based on assessment. In order to better manage the accreditation process, leaders must not only have a clear grasp of the tasks required, but also employ empathy to recognize the perceptions of faculty involved in the process. This particular research project came about as a result of discussion by the researchers—both former school counselors—about faculty perceptions of an accreditation process: how the process

might influence the culture of the group, and how perceptions and culture might change over time (American School Counselor Association 2008). Perception-based barriers must be overcome to facilitate faculty "buy-in" and active engagement.

Research on the humanistic side of attitude, perception, and behavior is deeply rooted in the field of social psychology. The impact of these issues has been investigated in the field of organizational development. Kim, Lin, and Leung (2013) administered an extensive survey to 151 employees of different companies in Hong Kong to measure the relationship between perceptions of fairness and their organizational commitment and job satisfaction. They found a strong positive correlation between employees' change in perceptions of fairness toward their level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational fairness and justice are rather complex (Kim, Lin, and Leung 2013; Lind 2001) yet research consistently suggests that these perceptions impact employee behavior (Ambrose and Cropanzano 2003; Kim, Lin, and Leung 2013; Lind 2001). Additionally, changes in perceptions of fairness and justice are influenced by change in organizational leadership and by change in the tasks employees are required to complete. Both of these categories of change are likely to occur for faculty in the process of accreditation. New leadership positions are likely to be created to facilitate the accreditation process, and new or reorganized tasks may be implemented to meet accreditation standards. Thus, an investigation of perceptions over time has the potential to inform leaders and faculty, and thereby influence how the accreditation process can be better approached from the perspective of faculty, programs, and the university as a whole.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This present study took place at National University, a large, private, non-profit university with nine campuses throughout California. The university is the second-largest private nonprofit institution of higher learning in California and the 12th-largest in the United States. The professional education unit within the study is the Sanford College of Education, having three departments at the time of accreditation: Teacher Education;

Special Education; and Educational Administration, School Counseling, and School Psychology.

Over the course of the seven-year study the population of full-time faculty within the unit ranged from 84 to 94. Change in faculty numbers followed normal attrition and hiring. Leadership opportunities and appointments emerged throughout the process to reflect guidance of standards committees. Changes in leadership of standards committees and committee membership occurred to better accommodate faculty expertise and commitment to other service. For example, co-chairs were added to each standard committee to spread the workload, and committee membership evolved based on faculty members' interest and expertise in a particular standard.

Administrator changes also occurred during the accreditation process. A dean of the College of Education was hired in April 2013 to replace a dean who had served as interim dean for several years. A new chancellor of the university was appointed in September 2013. All administrators were supportive of the accreditation process because they saw the end result as adding value to the university.

Survey Process

In May 2008 the dean convened the faculty and presented a plan for pursuing National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation. NCATE accreditation was introduced to faculty as a learning process for the College of Education, a process of development and growth. Since the accreditation process would take place over the period of a few years, the authors planned a longitudinal study to discover perceptions of faculty about the accreditation process. A paper survey (see the appendix) was designed that included 10 multiple-choice questions and open-ended prompts. With the exception of question 5, participants were asked about the overall accreditation process rather than individual changes that may have occurred.

The survey (see the appendix) was administered to all full-time College of Education faculty each spring at a university-wide gathering over a period of seven years, from 2008 through 2013. Survey response rates ranged from highs of over 90% in the first and late years of the process, to a low of 64% in the middle year of the process.

The College of Education then hosted a visit by two distinct accrediting agencies in the spring of 2014: the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses, and qualitative analysis was used to search for themes in the open-ended responses. During the analysis, it became evident that responses fell into two groups: responses from faculty most closely working on the accreditation processes, known as the steering committee, and faculty who were not as closely involved. Thus, findings were reported in aggregated form to get an overall sense of faculty response and in disaggregated form for some questions to distinguish responses by the two groups. Responses to survey questions were transferred to a spreadsheet, then aggregated and summarized in graphs. Qualitative analysis was used to organize open-ended responses into themes, which in turn contributed to a deeper understanding of specific closed-question responses (Gay, Mills, and Airasian 2009).

Findings

Survey prompts shown in figures 1 and 2 were asked of standard committee members each year except 2014 because at the time of administration of the survey in 2014 the accreditation visit had already taken place. Aggregated responses for each year show a high level of agreement in all years.
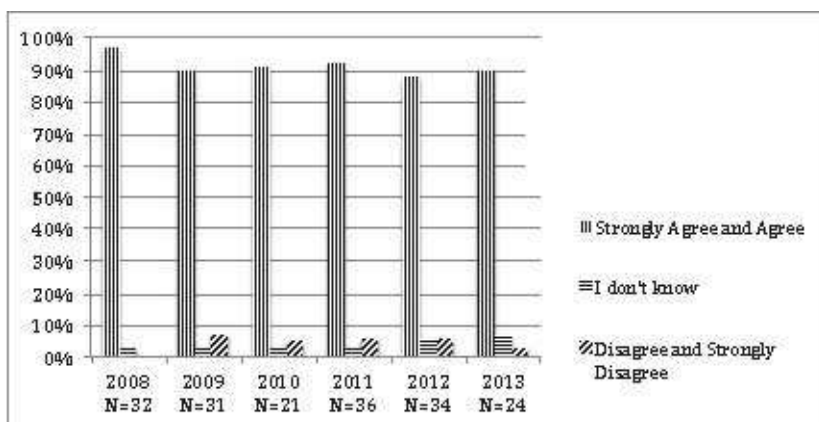

FIG. 1 Involvement as a Standard Committee member broadened my comprehension of the NCATE Standard I worked on.

While open-ended comments were not solicited for this prompt, themes identified from the open-ended comments in other responses give insights about why respondents answered as they did. For example, the high level of agreement shown in figure 1 reflects a theme found in the survey prompt shown in figure 3: that the accreditation process was one of ongoing learning. Examples of comments reflecting the theme included, "We as a committee have talked through issues and perceptions. We now have a unified understanding of the Standard," and "face-to-face meetings on our standard were productive, informative, and effective." These comments draw a parallel to literature emphasizing that this process builds faculty capacity for continuous learning (Fullan 2008; Steel and Boudett 2009).

Several comments from responses to other prompts contribute to an understanding of the negative responses shown in figure 1, such as: "I worked in isolation. We have had no time to meet as a group recently to discuss responses or get feedback." Another respondent stated, "It has been difficult to get committee members together in a face-to-face setting. When those face-to-face meetings occurred, the meetings were productive and reporting out in large group was informative." The responses quoted came from surveys administered near the start of the accreditation process (2008–2009) and point out respondents' perceptions of the need for face-to-face communication, particularly in the early stages of the work. This finding correlates with literature that notes the importance of collaboration in this process, and underscores the importance of collaboration to overcome faculty resistance barriers (Bird 2001).

Data in figure 2 show consensus that involvement with one standard increased understanding of other standards. Simply hearing reports from chairs of other standard committees during the many steering committee meetings no doubt helped facilitate such understanding.

Open-ended responses were not requested for the prompt shown in figure 2; however, open-ended responses to the prompt shown in figure 3 gave insight about how committee work broadened respondents' comprehension of other NCATE standards. Example comments included, "It helped me to understand the system better" and "the process has extended my knowledge and will be an asset in the future." Such statements contributed to a theme of the accreditation process serving as a springboard for professional development.
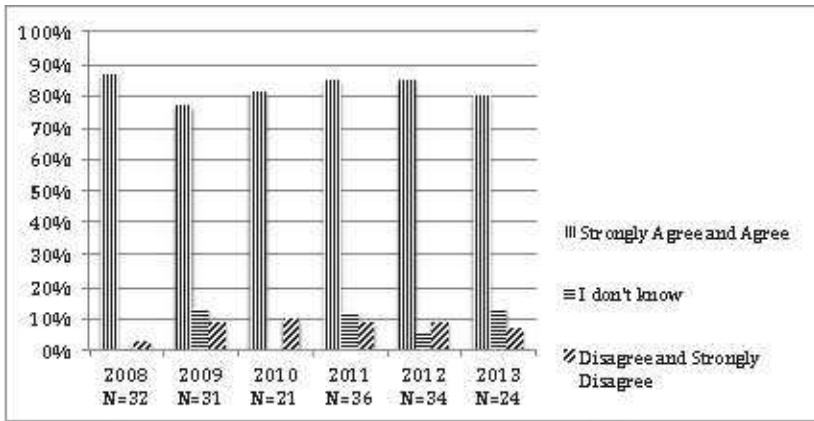
FIG. 2 Involvement as a Standard Committee member broadened my comprehension of other NCATE standards.

The "I don't know" and "disagree/strongly disagree" responses to prompt "1d" were highest in years 2009, 2011, and 2013. Open-ended responses to other survey prompts during those particular years show that some respondents did not see clear connections between the evidence required in different standards. Respondents needed a better understanding of the big picture. Example comments included, "[I'm] still not sure of whole process. It has been presented in pieces; [I] need the whole picture" and "I need to see [how] the pieces fit together." Such responses point to the need for clear explanation of the big picture of accreditation, and how the details of the work of each standard fit into the larger picture.

Positive consensus on the prompt shown in figure 3 ("The time I have spent working on NCATE accreditation as a Standard Committee member is valuable to me") is stronger than for other survey prompts, with most standard committee members indicating the time and effort spent on accreditation was of value to them. Accreditation work prompted reflection by committee members on current practice and led to changes that contributed to a greater awareness of program strengths; a more robust attentiveness to aligning professional standards with institutional, program, and course learning outcomes, and with specific assignments; and overall strengthening of the College of Education.

Three themes were evident over the duration of the study in responses to the prompt shown in figure 3. A dominant theme was the perception
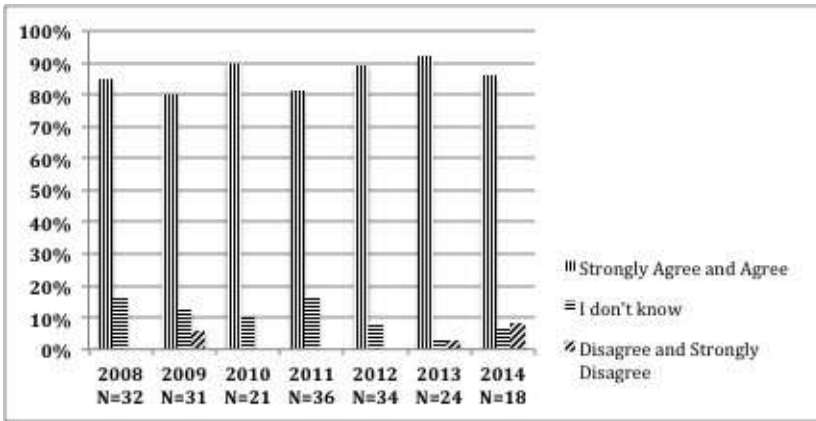
FIG. 3 The time I have spent working on NCATE accreditation as a Standard Committee member is valuable to me.

that programs improved. Two other themes that emerged were that professional development took place as an outcome of participation, and collaboration among faculty increased.

Theme 1: "The work of accreditation was applicable to improving my program." Open-ended responses to this prompt were invited. A dominant theme expressed by respondents was how accreditation work improved their program. This perception is an indicator of a culture of continuous improvement within the unit. Examples of responses included,

> I integrated NCATE standards and ideas into program and courses.
> Lots of improvements to our program as a result of this NCATE process.
> I learned more about our program and what we need to work on.
> Work on my standard broadened my perspective on assessment and how students make meaning.

Theme 2: "The work of accreditation was good professional development." A second theme expressed by respondents was that the work became professional development. Examples of open-ended comments included,

> The learning never stops.
> [The work gave me] a better understanding of the accreditation process.

It provided a comprehensive scope of the total school programs and
cross school involvement.

[It gave me a] better understanding of learning outcomes across various
levels of the [College of Education] organization.

I already knew the standards, but [the process of] thinking about our
stories—how we do things at the University—is very helpful.

I have thought more about the issue of diversity in a wide variety of the
work of our university and my department specifically.

Assessment is a key element that informs instruction. It has been
fascinating to see the strengths/challenges of programs.

Theme 3: "The work of accreditation enhanced faculty collaboration."
A third theme expressed by respondents was about the increased collabora-
tion that took place. Examples of open-ended comments included, "Going
through the process caused faculty, staff members and administration
to reach a high degree of collaboration" and "Results! We're a team that
worked together."

Negative responses to the prompt shown in figure 3 were few, and cen-
tered on issues of time pressure. Examples included, "I don't think it is
worth the work for the university and faculty" and "I have not been invited
to join a committee." Time demands of the work is a theme captured by such
comments as "I am behind in many other tasks" and "the process is a bit
cumbersome and drug-out." Less-than-optimum functioning of standard
committees was also identified in comments such as "Committee times
were not productive," "our committee did not meet on a regular basis," and
"clear expectations for the committee members were sometimes unclear."

Such comments articulate reasons why some faculty did not see the
accreditation process as valuable, while the positive comments underscore
why most others saw it as valuable, even though the process was protracted.

Responses to survey prompt 2 are shown disaggregated by NCATE
standard committee members and nonmembers, and aggregated for all
respondents. Results are shown in figures 4a–c. Seven individual feelings
could be selected in the survey. Respondents were able to choose as many
feelings as applicable, and usually chose more than one feeling. However,
to communicate a better overall sense of respondents' feelings, data are
reported here by grouping feelings into three categories: positive feelings
("interested, hopeful, and excited"), negative feelings ("frustrated, over-
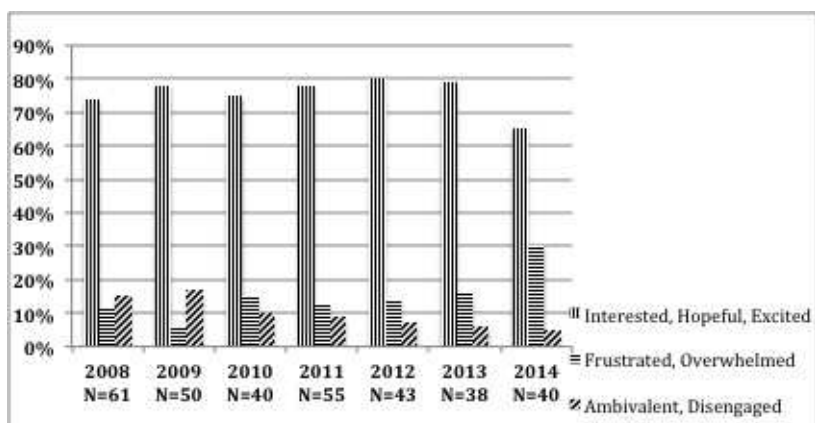whelmed"), and "ambivalent" and "disengaged" feelings.

FIG. 4A NCATE committee members only: My general feeling toward the NCATE process is...

Note: N reflects total number of choices in all categories. Respondents could choose as many categories as applicable.
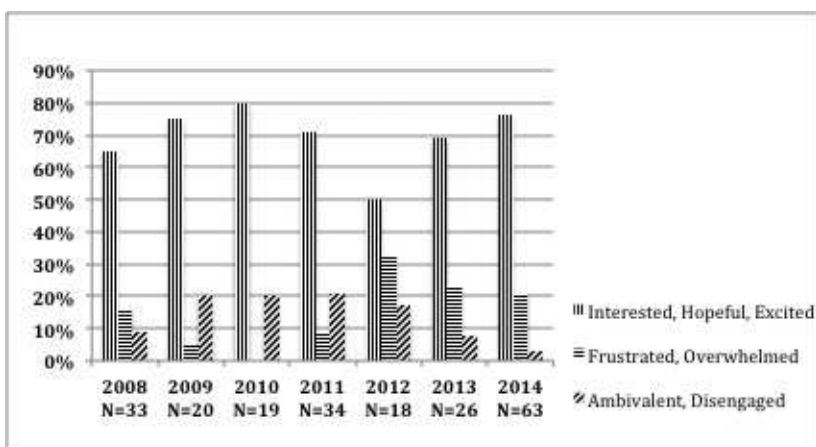

FIG. 4B Non–NCATE committee members only: My general feeling toward the NCATE process is . . .

Note: N reflects total number of choices in all categories. Respondents could choose as many categories as applicable.

While there was relative consistency in the "interested, hopeful, excited" category of positive responses in years 2008–2013, responses in 2014, the final year of the accreditation process, showed a lower percentage of positive responses—though no statistical difference t(40) = 1.011, *p* = .3179—and a doubling of "frustrated, overwhelmed" responses, again with no statistical
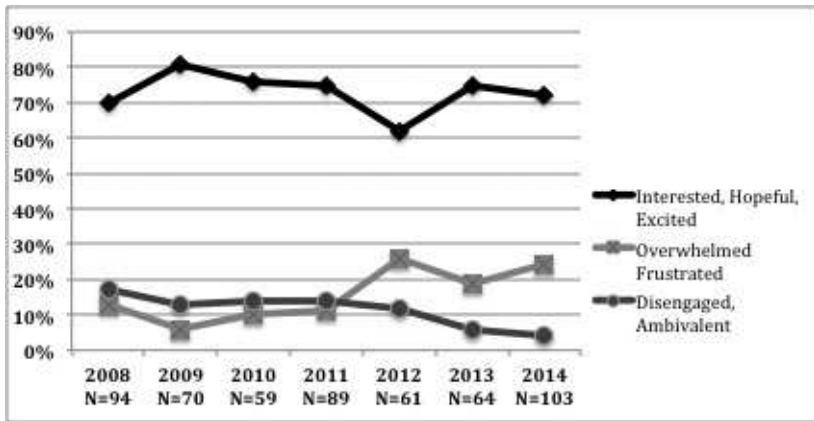
FIG. 4C All respondents: My general feeling toward the NCATE process is . . .
Note: Responses indicate all choices made by all respondents.

significance at the .05 alpha level, $t(40) = 1.084$, $p = .2849$. A breakdown of the "frustrated, overwhelmed" responses in 2014 shows that all but two respondents in the "frustrated, overwhelmed" category identified "frustrated" as a selection. Open-ended comments indicated frustration increased because of increased pressure to prepare additional data exhibits ("when is enough, enough?"), rewrite standard narratives ("This seems like the tenth time I've written this section"), and overall change ("already too much change").

In the "ambivalent, disengaged" category, no standard committee member selected "disengaged" in 2014—a further reflection of intense engagement in the work of accreditation—and few standard committee respondents selected "disengaged" outside of the years 2008 and 2009. A comment that reflected disengagement during that time period was "I have enough institutional history to know that we often embark on big projects, invest a lot of time and energy, and then suddenly go in a different direction."

Figure 4b shows that responses from nonmembers of an NCATE committee had a greater variation over time in the positive "interested, hopeful, excited" category, with a spike in the negative categories in 2012. In that year, only half of noncommittee members had positive feelings toward the accreditation process; 35% felt frustrated or overwhelmed, with half of the respondents being in each category; and 15% of nonmember respondents felt ambivalent or disengaged. Reasons for the negative response were

expressed in open-ended comments and are interrelated: not seeing the big picture, being overwhelmed with current work, and not seeing connections between accreditation and daily work. Representative comments included,

> It feels like such a huge thing that I cannot quite see the big picture.
> Because I feel overwhelmed, I have disengaged.
> I will engage when I am given a specific task with a specific deadline.
> I will be glad when it is over.
> I am not convinced that this process and accreditation is worth the time, money and effort. Too much is going on and our focus should be on improvement of programs and courses, especially online.

The last comment, in particular, shows the need to prepare *all* faculty so that each member has a clear understanding of the connection between daily tasks, program review, and standards of accreditation. These specifics support the reoccurring theme in the literature of the importance of engaging all faculty in the assessment processes (Banta and Palomba 2015; Kuh and Ikenberry 2009).

As in responses by committee members to the same prompt, the number of respondents not on a committee and in the disengaged category in 2014 was low. Virtually all faculty were engaged in final preparation of the accreditation reports in some way. Throughout the early years of the study, responses from nonmembers of a committee fluctuated between choosing "ambivalent" and "disengaged," with a slightly greater number choosing "ambivalent."

When data about feelings were aggregated to include all respondents, trend lines (shown in fig. 4c) were more evident, with the "ambivalent/ disengaged" category trending downward, and the "frustrated/overwhelmed" category trending upward.

The next prompt asked respondents to choose from three possible responses to complete the statement, "I see the NCATE process as being helpful to our School of Education." As shown in figure 5, faculty responded very positively to the statement, perceiving the accreditation process as strengthening programs and enhancing the overall quality of the College of Education, particularly in the final year of the process. Comments made to support agreement included, "It helps us do what ought to already be done in assessment" and "It is making us tighten up and improve program quality and assessment."
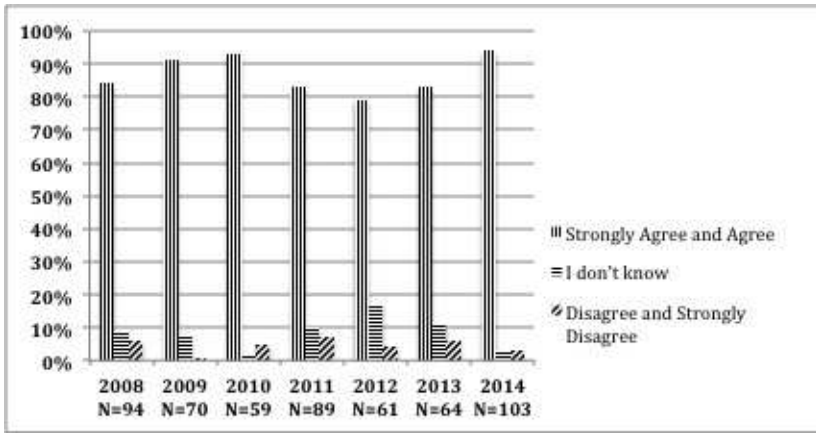
FIG. 5 All respondents: I see the NCATE process as being helpful to our School of Education.

A very low percentage of respondents disagreed with the statement that the accreditation process was helpful, the largest group (8 of 48 respondents) doing so in 2012. One such respondent in 2012 commented, "Changing 'PRIORITIES' creates frustration, confusion, concern, uncertainty to act," indicating the respondent did not see connections between specific tasks in the accreditation process that are part of the bigger picture of accreditation. However, by the time of the 2014 survey, 95% of faculty saw value in pursuing accreditation, a statistically significant change: $t(106) = 2.329$, $p = .0218$. A comment representative of those who saw value in the process was "it is always good to be reflective and try to improve."

The next survey question asked only for open-ended responses about barriers to engagement during the accreditation process. The primary themes expressed by 66% of participants who responded to the prompt across the years of the survey indicated that pressures of time and workload were the main barriers. Examples of how respondents expressed these issues as a barrier included,

Time or lack of it. It's difficult to balance responsibilities of teaching, service and scholarship while deeply engaging in NCATE processes.
I have 1 course release this year for NCATE Standard work. The work required and upcoming work has exceeded the time required of one course many times over.

The "barrier of time" theme is one that already resonated with faculty throughout the whole of the University, and College of Education faculty contributed to discussion in the University Senate about the need for additional time to meet expectations of administrators for service and scholarship, both of which are part of an accreditation process. Administrators and Senate representatives agreed on the need for a reduced teaching load, and near the end of the accreditation process the teaching load was reduced by one course across the university. The "time" barrier for faculty in the accreditation process was clearly not the only factor considered in the decision, but it represents how frustrations that arise through faculty involvement in accreditation can support political activism to create pressure for change (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen 2011).

Three themes, in addition to the barriers of time and workload, emerged from open-ended comments—though they were mentioned much less frequently. One theme expressed a lack of opportunity or invitation to participate. Example comments included, "[I was] not invited . . . I need more info on involvement opportunities," and "[I was] never contacted to serve."

Second among the less frequently mentioned themes was that of a poor match between accreditation work and other faculty responsibilities. One respondent wrote, "As a member of a specific committee, I found no relationship between my role as a faculty member and the task of the committee."

A third less frequently mentioned theme expressed the need for face-to-face meetings. Example comments included, "Face-to-face faculty contact seems needed to address progress and priorities." And "[A barrier for me in the accreditation process is] distance from La Jolla [the location of the university headquarters and dean's office] and a feeling of less than satisfactory involvement when the meetings are on line."

The prompt shown in figure 6 asked respondents to identify among four changes individual faculty members may have made and/or write in other changes that occurred as a result of the accreditation process. The number of respondents who stated they made changes grew from the 60% range in 2008 to 85% range in 2013.

For respondents who identified other changes made as a result of the accreditation process, the primary theme that emerged was about professional growth. Comments reflecting the theme included,
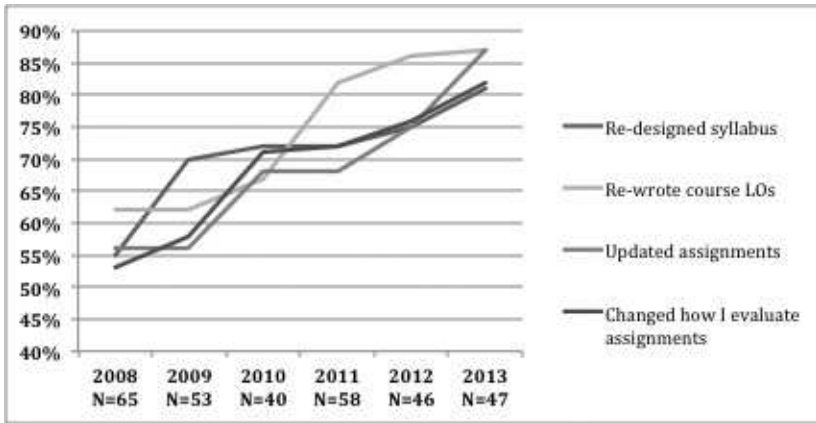
FIG. 6 The NCATE accreditation process has meant that I made changes.

> [The accreditation process] changed how I collaborate with my
> colleagues. I have a different interpretation of what an effective
> program, course, and instructor look like.
> The NCATE process did not bring about change in my professional
> practices. The process reinforced that several of my colleagues and
> I are about what we value and stand for. [We are] committed to
> providing the guiding principles in everything we think and do as
> leaders in our field.
> The process increased my awareness for the purpose/value of program
> assessment.

These comments are examples of the value of the process of accreditation, and support the findings of Banta and Palomba (2015) about the benefits stakeholder engagement brings to the assessment process. The professional growth expressed in the comments also exemplifies what Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011) identified as a recent trend in program evaluation: the process brings a new sense of learning to stakeholders, including individual faculty and the organization itself.

Data from responses shown in figure 7 show a close relationship to the historical development of the conceptual framework. Faculty discussions about the conceptual framework first took place in the spring of 2006, and first drafts of the College of Education's conceptual framework were written in August of 2006, identifying four areas of focus for all programs: continuous learning, scholarship, collaborative community

service, and responsible citizenship. A two-page document describing the conceptual framework was completed in 2008. While there was agreement among faculty about the four areas, data in figure 7 indicate fewer than 60% of respondents had a good understanding of the conceptual framework.

During the 2010 iteration of the survey, positive responses to the prompt about the conceptual framework increased to 75%, and in following years remained over 80%. The increase in understanding coincides with a reconceptualizing of the original two-page conceptual framework document to offer more description around a recognizable acronym, STARS, representing Scholarship, Teamwork, Active reflection, Responsible citizenship, and Standards of exemplary practice. The acronym lent itself to a graphic, and the conceptual framework graphic was communicated broadly to faculty and students. The visual nature of the graphic along with the easy-to-remember acronym increased both recognition and understanding of the conceptual framework, as shown in positive responses summarized in figure 7.

Responses to the survey shown in figure 8 paralleled responses shown in figure 7 because of reasons already mentioned—the development of a recognizable acronym to represent the conceptual framework. Additionally, each element of the new STARS acronym was mapped to
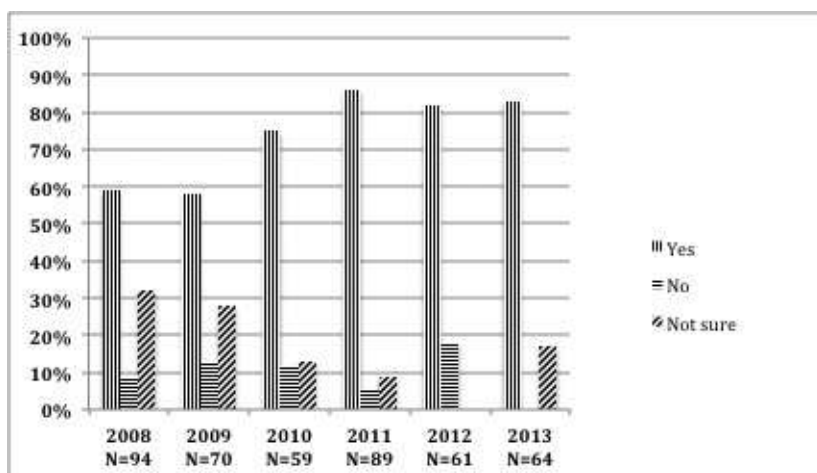

FIG. 7   I have a good understanding of the conceptual framework.

program and institutional learning outcomes, thereby contributing to respondents' recognition of direct relationships. Figure 8 depicts how the reconceptualization and mapping raised awareness on the part of faculty about connections between the conceptual framework and their teaching in 2010 and beyond.

A key expectation of accreditors is that of showing alignment between learning outcomes, standards, and assignments as well as evidence of candidates' success in mastering the learning outcomes. The expectation requires faculty to have a clear understanding of alignment within their own program and courses, and to provide accompanying evidence of candidates' learning. Figure 9 shows the increase over time of recognition on the part of faculty in seeing connections between the accreditation process and their teaching. Recognizing and then embracing this connection leads faculty to see accreditation tasks as relevant, and leads to greater engagement in the process and use of findings to implement change (Banta and Palomba 2015).

Figures 10 and 11 show responses to the same prompt by two different groups. Figure 10 shows responses from those who were members of an NCATE standard committee, while figure 11 shows responses from those who were not members. Results show that most committee member respondents saw a greater connection between NCATE
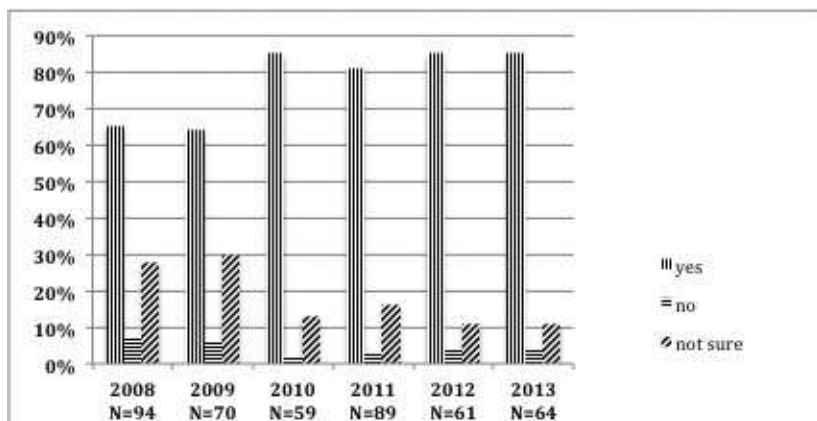

FIG. 8 I recognize clear connections between the learning outcomes in the course(s) I teach and the conceptual framework.

accreditation and PARs than did noncommittee members, particularly in the years 2009–2012. However, as the intensity of work picked up and included faculty outside the accreditation committees in 2013, a greater number of faculty saw connections between the work of accreditation and PARs.
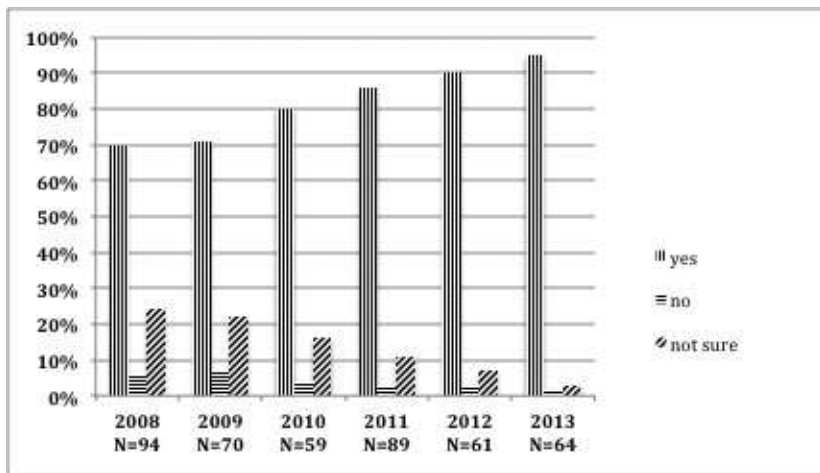
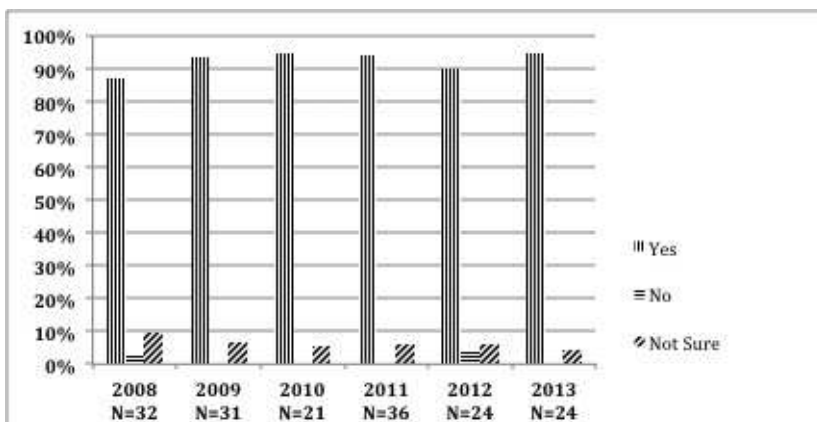FIG. 9 There is congruence between tasks in the NCATE process and my teaching practice.

FIG. 10 NCATE committee members only: There are clear connections between NCATE accreditation and Program Annual Reviews (PARS).
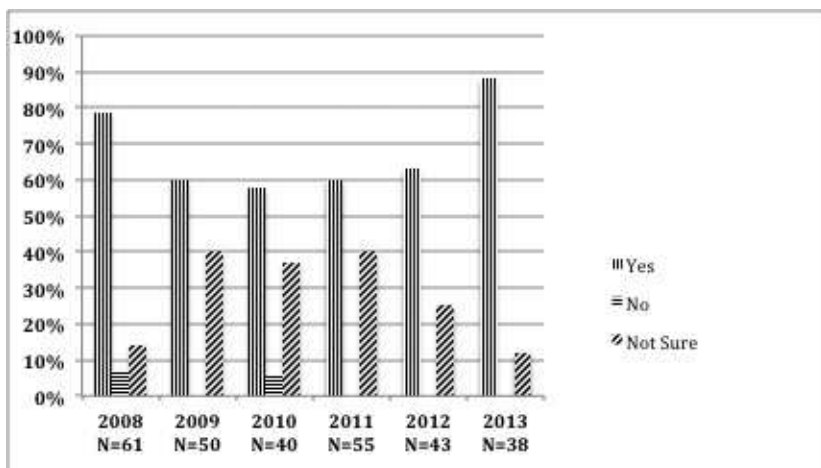
FIG. 11 Non–NCATE committee members only: There are clear connections between NCATE accreditation and Program Annual Reviews (PARs).

Limitations

The study design, a case study in action research, has inherent limitations to generalizability. Additionally, there are three further limitations to consider when interpreting findings. One is that participation in the survey was voluntary. While the response rate was acceptable, with a range of 64% in 2010 and 98% in 2011, the rate fluctuated. For this study in particular it is possible that faculty who were so disengaged or negative toward the accreditation efforts did not complete the survey, thus skewing the findings in a positive direction. A second limitation is that responses may have been skewed by basic research participant principle because both researchers were participants in the accreditation efforts and held various leadership levels within the unit over the course of the seven-year study. Generalizability of these findings is a third limitation. The structure of the university in this study consists of multiple campuses across the state working as a unit toward accreditation. Thus, the generalizability of the findings from this setting to that of traditional universities may be limited.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Findings from the study fall into two general categories: how the accreditation process was of benefit and what should be done to make the process better.

This first category highlights the most important benefit to the College of Education and the university: the true value of the accreditation process is less about specific assessment results, and more about the impact of the process on faculty. Respondents said the process was of benefit because it served as a springboard for professional development; programs improved; and faculty collaboration was strengthened (see data in figure 3 above and corresponding comments). These findings parallel those found in previous studies (e.g., Bucalos 2014; Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker 2012; Fullan 2008; Fullan, Hill, and Crevola 2006; Johnston 2013; Steel and Boudett 2009; Springer 2013; Volkwein et al. 2007).

Each program within the College of Education entered the process at a different level of proficiency in program assessment. However, respondents' comments were very rarely specific about findings that emerged during the assessment process. Rather, faculty commented on the bigger-picture connections they recognized between teaching, assignments, assessments, rubrics, and standards, as well as their observations that collaboration and teamwork were strengthened as a result of being part of the accreditation process. Comments made by participants about changes to syllabi and teaching over the five years showed that engagement with accreditation inspired growth and openness to change. In effect, "Accreditation becomes . . . more of the continuous road to improvement that it is designed to be" (Bucalos 2014, par. 7).

In the second category, respondents said that accreditation standards need to be more explicitly connected and reinforced with the day-to-day work of faculty as well as with their beliefs and professional goals, thus addressing potential elements of faculty resistance (see data in figures 3, 7, 8, and 9). There is need for faculty to meet face-to-face to work on accreditation tasks, particularly in the early stages of the process. These findings align with work done by Bergquist (1992) emphasizing that change is a social process. Similar to the findings of Haviland, Turley, and Shin (2011), faculty in this study benefited from a positive social environment. Reflection on these themes brings forward the work by Vygotsky on social learning. Basic to his theory on cognitive development is that social interaction plays a major role in learning. Educators embrace this theory for the students they teach, and we see here that faculty members participating in this study are no different. Additionally, comments by respondents support the need to make accommodation for the time needed to work on accreditation tasks to reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed. Efforts by administrators to include a time

allowance commensurate with added tasks of accreditation will show commitment by administrators, and address the concern on the part of faculty that these changes will "come and go," thus addressing another element of faculty resistance.

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend the following actions when preparing for an accreditation self-study:

1. At the outset of an accreditation process, all program faculty members become intimately familiar with the accreditation standards, including the interrelationships between standards.
2. All faculty members identify particular areas of the standards that have a direct relationship to their specific areas of program responsibility and professional goals, and share the areas with accreditation process leaders.
3. Prior to the start of an accreditation process, articles describing the accreditation experiences of others are reviewed and shared among faculty as a self-study.
4. Leadership makes accommodation for the extra workload undertaken by faculty.
5. At the start of the accreditation process, faculty committees meet face-to-face for the first few meetings to share progress, discuss ways of moving forward, and increase the collaborative process.

The findings and recommendations from this study concur with the growing body of literature on accreditation and assessment processes in noting that the process can be as important to faculty and the institution—or more so—than specific findings. Trust is built in the developmental change of faculty, programs, and the unit through the accreditation process. Moreover, there is general agreement with the few studies published on how to overcome the resistance and other barriers to realize a positive growth experience in the process of accreditation (Banta and Palomba 2015; Bird 2001; Kuh and Ikenberry 2009). The findings also highlight a general trend in changing perceptions of faculty through a long accreditation preparation process. The researchers conclude that if the preceding recommendations had been in place prior to their SOE's accreditation process, the process would have been a more positive experience overall for faculty, while still retaining or increasing the benefits of faculty professional development, collaboration, and program improvement. Through thoughtful consideration of the

perspectives of faculty and administrators who are embarking on accreditation, the process has the potential to be a series of inspirational faculty development experiences rather than a begrudged necessity. The potential impact of implementing these recommendations calls for future research investigating whether such changes might indeed improve the perceptions of faculty about the process, and therefore strengthen relationships within the institution (Banta and Palomba 2015; Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen 2011). Additionally, future research should investigate the impact of assessment when faculty involvement is increased. As academicians it behooves us to examine whether we are increasing the efficacy of our courses, programs, and students' learning when faculty buy-in and involvement with assessment are increased. Evidence from such investigations can only strengthen our professional practice and benefit the students we serve.

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Appendix

Survey Administered **2008–2013**

Faculty Survey about the NCATE Accreditation Process

The purpose of this survey is to discover perceptions of College of Education faculty about the NCATE process.

1. I have been involved as an NCATE Standard Committee member. Circle one: Yes   No

If yes, please respond to items a–e and then other survey items. *If no,* please go to item 2.

   a. I am currently involved as an NCATE Standard Committee member. Circle one: Yes   No

   b. The NCATE Standard(s) I worked on was Standard # _____.

   c. Involvement as a Committee member broadened my comprehension of the NCATE Standard I worked on.

   Circle one: Strongly disagree, Disagree, I don't know, Agree, Strongly agree

   d. Involvement as a Committee member has broadened my comprehension of other NCATE standards.

   Circle one: Strongly disagree, Disagree, I don't know, Agree, Strongly agree

   e. The time I have spent working on NCATE accreditation is valuable to me.

   Circle one: Strongly disagree, Disagree, I don't know, Agree, Strongly agree

   Why or why not? (Please use the back of the page as needed.)

2. My general feeling toward the NCATE process is (circle all that apply)

   Disengaged Excited Overwhelmed Hopeful Ambivalent Interested Frustrated

   Please explain (Use the back of the page as needed.)

3. I see the NCATE process as being helpful to our SOE. (Circle one)

   Strongly disagree Disagree I don't know Agree Strongly agree

   Why or Why not?

4a. The barriers to my engagement in the NCATE process are: (Use the back of the page as needed.)

4b. What can be done to lift or overcome those barriers?

5. The NCATE accreditation process has meant that I have (circle Yes or No)

   a. Redesigned the syllabus for the course(s) I teach. Yes   No

   b. Rewritten learning outcomes for the course(s) I teach. Yes   No

   c. Updated assignments in the course(s) I teach. Yes   No

   d. Changed the way I evaluate assignments. Yes   No

   e. Other changes I have made as a result of the NCATE process are: (use the back as needed)

6. I have a good understanding of our Conceptual Framework.

   Yes   No   Not Sure

7. I recognize clear connections between the Learning Outcomes in the course(s) I teach and the Conceptual Framework.
     Yes   No   Not Sure
8. There is congruence between tasks in the NCATE process and my teaching practice.
     Yes   No   Not Sure
9. There are clear connections between NCATE accreditation and
     a. CTC accreditation Yes   No   Not Sure
     b. WASC accreditation Yes   No   Not Sure
     c. College of Education Program Review Yes   No   Not Sure
10. My position in the College of Education is (circle one):
     a. Administrator
     b. Department chair
     c. Professor
     d. Associate professor
     e. Assistant professor
     f. Associate faculty
     g. Adjunct faculty
     h. The Center I work out of is

Thank you for completing the survey. Please return it to Ron Germaine or Lisa Spencer.

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