

CHANGE READINESS: STUDENT AFFAIRS
ENGAGEMENT IN ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the experience of student learning outcomes assessment among four midlevel student affairs managers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in assessment practices. This study sought to address the theory–practice gap in student affairs assessment. The aim of gathering rich descriptions of experiences was to yield new insights that senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) at the study site could use in planning effective change strategies to increase engagement in assessment practices. Two constitutive patterns and seven relational themes were revealed to gain a deeper understanding of how participants made sense of their experiences and to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs acting as inhibitors or facilitators to engage in assessment practices. Participants’ responses revealed three key tenets of how midlevel managers build a culture of assessment in their department. In addition, this study revealed four recommendations for SSAOs to consider that may help them effectively facilitate large-scale engagement in assessment practices and establish a culture of assessment on campus.

Keywords: change readiness, interpretive phenomenology, student affairs assessment, student affairs midlevel manager

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband and two sons for their sacrifices, ongoing encouragement, and loving support through this entire process. I could not have done this without your support. Thank you for believing in me, and I love you with all of my heart.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the higher education environment has placed increased demands on student affairs practitioners to (a) demonstrate a commitment to redesigning complex processes known to perpetuate low graduation rates, (b) design quality programs and services that promote achievement of student learning, (c) engage in student learning assessment, and (d) address federal regulations and accreditation criteria. These demands have reflected the necessity to determine if current programs and services in student affairs effectively meet the needs of students, the institution, and the community; demonstrate student affairs practitioners' abilities to respond to evidence through continuous improvement efforts; and communicate the impact of student affairs to key stakeholders (Bingham et al., 2015). These urgent calls to action have demanded a willingness for student affairs professionals to engage in routine critical self-examination, yet very few student affairs professionals integrate assessment practices into their daily work (Bingham et al., 2015; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Torres & Walbert, 2010).

When student affairs professionals engage in redesign efforts, assessment is of critical importance in demonstrating the effectiveness of new practices in achieving student learning, student development, and success outcomes (Bingham et al., 2015; Henning, 2016). The large gap between stated values in assessment practices and actual integration in daily work is problematic (Elkins, 2015; Thompson et al., 2018) because assessment is needed to continuously improve direct impact on student outcomes. An exhaustive review of organizational readiness for change literature showed that underlying attitudes and beliefs of change recipients are at the root of successful adoption and institutionalization of new practices (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Weiner, 2009). In this chapter, I outline the argument for why a research study was warranted to explore a full range of readiness perceptions related to

assessment of student learning outcomes among midlevel student affairs managers. This chapter contains a background of this study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of terms, and summary of the chapter.

My passion for researching this topic was twofold. First, this topic was of personal interest because, at the time of this study, I served as a midlevel student affairs manager at a community college in its 4th year of significant reform efforts. I oversaw academic advisement across the college, and over the previous 3 years, the delivery of the college's advisement services had completely transformed. Intellectually, I understand the importance of engaging in student learning outcomes assessment; similar to the majority of student affairs professionals, I am also guilty of not integrating this type of assessment practice into my daily work. I have learned through personal experience that people like to study themselves, and I am no different. Engaging in institutional reform efforts engendered my own awareness of the benefits of using student learning assessment to evaluate program effectiveness. Even more, these efforts heightened my awareness of the problematic gap between student affairs professionals' stated values in student learning assessment and the lack of their engagement in such efforts. This awareness, coupled with my lack of engagement, sparked a heightened curiosity to gain a deep understanding of the theory–practice gap.

Second, the college was in the early stages of implementing coordinated efforts to increase student affairs engagement in student learning outcomes assessment. I was a member of the college assessment committee and student affairs workgroup that was responsible for leading these efforts. Engaging in this study deepened my understanding of how to effectively build change readiness for student affairs engagement in student learning assessment and, in turn, contributed positively to college-wide efforts in moving the assessment agenda forward. As

student affairs literature (Elkins, 2015; Thompson et al., 2018) suggests, closing the assessment gap at the college could lead to enhanced processes that likely lead to improved student outcomes, thus maximizing impact on student success and completion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore a full range of readiness perceptions related to student learning outcomes assessment among a group of midlevel student affairs managers at a community college in the southwest region of the United States. Through this study, I gained a deeper understanding of change readiness for engagement in assessment practices through an exploration of participant attitudes and beliefs based on five change recipients' beliefs through the lens of a multifaceted change readiness construct (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). The aim of this study was to provide senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) at the institution where the study took place with rich descriptions of the underlying beliefs and attitudes of midlevel managers that act as either inhibitors or facilitators of readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment. Understanding these perceptions provides SSAOs the information they need to successfully plan appropriate change strategies and orchestrate messaging that will more effectively build sufficient readiness for adoption and institutionalization (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). In turn, this readiness will help close the student affairs assessment theory–practice gap.

Research Questions

This interpretive phenomenological study was designed to answer the following overarching research question:

How do midlevel student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment?

I also developed five subquestions that align with each of the five change recipients' beliefs that guided this study.

1. *Discrepancy*. How do participants make sense of the need to engage in student learning outcomes?
2. *Appropriateness*. How do participants make sense of the appropriateness of assessing student learning outcomes?
3. *Valence*. How do participants make sense of the benefits of student learning outcomes assessment to the institution, students, and themselves professionally?
4. *Efficacy*. How do participants make sense of their ability to conduct high-quality student learning outcomes assessments?
5. *Principal support*. How do participants experience administrative support to conduct high-quality assessments of student learning?

Why Phenomenology

As noted earlier, the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how midlevel student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes and beliefs that act as either inhibitors or facilitators of readiness to engage in assessment practices. *Beliefs* are mental representations composed of conscious thoughts and viewpoints that an individual believes to be true (Nespor, 1987), which often motivates behavior (Klinke, 2007). Correspondingly, organizational readiness for change literature strongly suggests that underlying attitudes and beliefs are at the

root of the successful change acceptance, adoption, and institutionalization of new practices (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Weiner, 2009).

Phenomenology seeks to describe and understand the essence of a shared lived experience for a group of individuals and explores how they make sense of the experience (Creswell, 2018). Taking a phenomenological approach involves “capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2015, p. 115). According to Van Manen (2016), phenomenologists are particularly interested in how participants experience a phenomenon.

A phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because I did not seek to objectively determine the level of change readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment; I sought to explore perceptions of this phenomenon in daily experiences of engaging in assessment practices. In this study, the research question and subquestions were designed to gather rich descriptions of experiences and how participants made sense of those experiences to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that acted as inhibitors or facilitators of the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment. Gaining a deeper understanding of attitudes and beliefs could be used by SSAOs when developing effective messaging and strategies to better establish sufficient change readiness in their institutions (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Burgan & Burgan, 2014), which, in turn, will help close the student affairs assessment theory–practice gap.

Background of the Study

A review of relevant literature on the student learning imperative in student affairs, the importance of engaging in assessment practices, the problematic gap, and organizational readiness for change helped to establish the research problem this study aimed to address.

The Student Learning Imperative in Student Affairs

Student affairs has a deep and rich history; much of this history has been identified in the profession's literature about practitioners' roles in impacting student development and learning outcomes and their longstanding value in assessment to improve those outcomes (Association of College Personnel Administrators [ACPA], 1994). In fact, the responsibilities of (a) student personnel workers for fostering student learning and development outside of the classroom and (b) core value in assessment were formally established as early as 1937 when the American Council on Education (ACE, 1937) constituted the roles and responsibilities of student personnel work in *The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)*. This seminal document was instrumental in establishing assessment as a priority for student personnel workers. Furthermore, the enduring value of assessment practices has been evident in student affairs literature over the last several decades.

There has been increased pressure and accountability for higher education institutions to “reemphasize student learning and personal development as the primary goal of undergraduate education,” due to decades of eroding public confidence in higher education (ACPA, 1994, p. 1). This pressure has produced demands for and college commitments to focus collaboratively on creating conditions that enhance student learning and personal development outcomes both in and outside of the classroom (ACPA, 1994; ACPA & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004). Decades of research has validated that the entire student

experience, inside and outside of the classroom, contributes to student success outcomes (Kerr et al., 2020).

Learning Reconsidered was a significant publication in student affairs literature that called for institutional personnel to rethink how they approach learning and argued for institutions to take an integrated approach to using all of its resources to educate the whole student, placing student affairs in the learning arena (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). *Learning Reconsidered 2* was later published to provide a roadmap to institutions for implementing the concepts posed in the first publication (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). In *Learning Reconsidered 2*, learning was redefined as “a complex, holistic, multicentric activity that occurs through and across the college experience” (ACPA & NASPA, 2006, p. 5), providing a strong basis for creating powerful partnerships.

Student Affairs Assessment Matters

An essential part of student affairs initiatives is to make a difference in student learning and development and help students achieve their educational goals (Bingham et al., 2015). Despite widespread reform efforts to close the completion gap, the latest completion data have revealed higher education institutions are not moving the needle on student success outcomes (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Given the significant role that student affairs programs, services, and activities play in contributing to success outcomes, internal and external stakeholders have rightfully asked how student affairs divisions demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs and services in creating learning experiences that impact success outcomes.

If the true promise of higher education attainment is to be gained, student affairs professionals must ensure their programs and services effectively impact student success

outcomes. In this age of increased demand for outcome measures, “the use of high-quality data to support decisions about policies, programs, and practices is increasingly expected” (Torres & Walbert, 2010, p. 10). Sandeen and Barr (2006) asserted assessment has quickly become “the most powerful force in the decision-making process for colleges” (p. 142). The current state of increased accountability, coupled with dramatic institutional budget cuts with no relief in sight, has added tremendous pressure to student affairs divisions to demonstrate their contributions and returns on investment for their work (Henning, 2016).

Despite the criticality of student affairs professionals engaging in assessment practice, very few integrate such practices into their daily work (Bingham et al., 2015; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Torres & Walbert, 2010). Lack of engagement in student affairs assessment is problematic given the pressure to improve student outcomes and accountability to demonstrate the direct impacts of student affairs initiatives on student learning outcomes. Assessment practices provide evidence that student affairs professionals need to tell their stories about meaningful contributions and direct impact on success outcomes (Bingham et al., 2015). The large gap between stated values in assessment practices and actual integration in daily work emphasizes the need for SSAOs to focus on building cultures of assessment in their divisions; however, successfully leading employees through the adoption of new practices can be incredibly challenging.

Organizational Readiness for Change

As of 2023, leaders in community colleges across the United States have been tasked with leading large-scale change efforts focused on significantly reforming the student experience to create seamless and supported pathways (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2014; Johnstone & Chaplot, 2019). Researchers have found that most large-scale organizational change efforts

fail (McKinsey & Company, 2015). Armenakis and Harris (2002) asserted implementing change is one of the most important skills contemporary leaders can have, yet this skill is one of the least understood.

Change scholars have generally described organizational change as occurring in three phases (i.e., readiness, adoption, and institutionalization), which flow along a continuum (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Holt et al., 2007). This linear three-phase model clearly demonstrates one must first be ready for change before adopting a change, which is necessary to successfully lead to institutionalization. This notion highlights the relevance of focusing on effectively implementing change readiness in employees as an essential strategy to lead to successful adoption and institutionalization of any change effort. According to Kotter (1996), some change scholars have suggested roughly half of all unsuccessful large-scale change efforts are the result of failure to establish sufficient change readiness in employees. Another key factor in successfully leading change is to consider the highly influential role that midlevel managers play in change readiness because of their dual role as change facilitators and communication bridges between senior leaders and frontline staff (Birken et al., 2012; Engle et al., 2017; Valentino, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

Despite urgent calls for action to improve student outcomes and accountability, and the growing emphasis on student affairs assessment, there remains a significant gap between stated values in assessment practices and actual integration in daily work (Elkins, 2015; Thompson et al., 2018). Assessing the effectiveness of experiences provided by student affairs professionals that contribute to student learning and development is not a new concept. In fact, the responsibility of student personnel workers for fostering student learning and development

outside of the classroom and a core value in assessment was formally established as early as 1937 when ACE constituted the purpose and essential functions of student personnel work in *SPPV* and later revised the publication in 1949 (ACE, 1937, 1949). These seminal documents asserting the value of engaging in the daily act of evaluation were instrumental in establishing assessment as a priority for student personnel workers. Furthermore, the enduring value of engagement in student affairs assessment practices has been evident in student affairs literature over the last several decades.

In spite of the steady flow of literature persuasively espousing an enduring value in student affairs assessment, and the recent intensified pressure to engage in assessment practices, progress remains slow (Kerr et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). Furthermore, few institutions engage in formal student affairs assessments of learning outcomes and service effectiveness (Ozaki et al., 2020). This gap between the stated value in assessment practices and actual integration in student affairs practitioners' daily work is particularly problematic given that assessments of student learning outcomes in student affairs divisions is an accreditation standard among all seven regional accrediting bodies (Morse & Woods, 2019). Consequently, as attention to student learning outcomes has increased in accreditation standards, so have accreditation actions (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2019).

Merely implementing known strategies to support the adoption of assessment practices does not ensure the full adoption and institutionalization of such practices. In fact, Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) asserted even when institutions dedicated a significant amount of time developing assessment plans and activities, few achieved full implementation to the point of analyzing results and making changes in policies and practices to improve outcomes. Armenakis and Harris (2002) asserted implementing change is one of the most important skills for

contemporary leaders, yet it is the least understood. Change scholars have posited that the challenge leaders face with effectively leading change is due to a lack of understanding the complex nature of change as a multifaceted and multilevel construct of interrelated psychological and structural factors directly impacting the change recipients' readiness of any change initiative (Kezar, 2018; Weiner, 2009). A review of student affairs assessment and change readiness literature in Chapter 2 provided clear support for the need to explore a more comprehensive range and depth of attitudes and beliefs underlying the theory–practice gap.

Significance of the Study

My focus as researcher was to explore how midlevel student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment to better understand the problematic gap found in the student affairs assessment literature between the longstanding espoused value in assessment practices and lack of routine engagement. An extensive review of organizational readiness for change literature demonstrated that the underlying attitudes and beliefs of change recipients are at the root of successful adoption and institutionalization of any change initiative (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Weiner, 2009). This assertion emphasized the criticality of SSAOs understanding the beliefs held by their student affairs professionals.

In this investigation of readiness perceptions, I provided SSAOs at the institution where this study took place with the information they need to more effectively build sufficient readiness of their midlevel students affairs managers to engage in student learning outcomes assessment, (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). In turn, this readiness helps close the student affairs assessment theory–practice gap at the college. The achievement of sustainable and routine student learning outcomes assessment practices benefits

students because they are the recipients of continuously improved programs, services, and activities that more effectively support their success. In addition, Bingham et al. (2015) found routine participation in assessment practices provides evidence that student affairs professionals need to tell their stories of meaningful contribution and direct impact on success outcomes.

Definitions of Terms

This section consists of the operational definitions of key terms according to how they were used in this phenomenological study.

Assessment is a strategy used to measure the extent to which students have mastered knowledge base or skill sets associated with a program, service, or activity (Schuh et al., 2016) to obtain results that provide evidence of program effectiveness. In the context of this study, *student learning assessment* and *assessment* were used interchangeably. Results from *assessment* efforts are analyzed to make changes to policy and improve practices (Bingham et al., 2015) and are connected to broader institutional metrics (Kerr et al., 2020; Morse & Woods, 2019; Schuh et al., 2016).

Capacity building is operationalized as the act of a professional providing people with the education, tools, and ongoing support needed to ensure they can successfully adopt and sustain a new practice or process (Yousey-Elsener et al., 2016).

Culture of assessment is a strong commitment to assessment demonstrated by the daily integration of assessment practices among several student affairs professionals throughout the division, for the purpose of using data in decision making for the continuous improvement of programs, services, and activities (Yousey-Elsener et al., 2016).

Midlevel student affairs managers are in administrative positions held between frontline student services professionals and SSAOs. SSAOs are administrators at the dean and/or vice

president level and are responsible for the oversight of multiple departments in the division of student affairs (Ackerman, 2007). For the purposes of this study, I defined midlevel student affairs manager as responsible for overseeing and serving as a final decision maker for a specific department in the student affairs division. They are responsible for implementing ongoing assessment practices to provide evidence that their programs, services, and activities contribute to student learning and development and use those results to improve educational interventions (Ackerman, 2007).

In the context of this study, the term *perception* was used interchangeably with *attitudes* and *beliefs*. Austin et al. (2020) asserted attitudes and beliefs (i.e., a person's perceptions) influence their state of being receptive, personally motivated, and empowered to adopt a forthcoming change. In other words, perceptions or attitudes and beliefs are a function of a person's behavior (Combs et al., 1976).

In the context of this study, *readiness* and *readiness for change* were used interchangeably to refer to a state of being receptive, personally motivated, and empowered to adopt a forthcoming change, which is an essential precursor to successfully leading any change effort (Austin et al., 2020).

Student affairs is an administrative division of a higher education institution for professionals who focus on student learning and development outcomes outside of the classroom through the delivery of programs, services, and activities, such as admissions, financial aid, testing services, academic advisement, career services, student life and leadership, and veteran services (Helfgot, 2005).

The merger of two major movements—the emphasis on the assessment of learning in higher education and the realization that learning happens outside of the classroom, spurring the

evolution of student affairs as a profession to be focused on student learning and assessment—created a new submovement of *student affairs assessment* practices (Yousey-Elsener et al., 2016).

Student affairs professionals are those who are responsible for contributing to student learning and development through the planning, implementation, and assessment of programs, services, and activities outside of the classroom (Helfgot, 2005). The profession encompasses a wide range of titles that reflect rank and area of specialization (Helfgot, 2005).

In the context of this study, *student learning outcomes*, *student learning*, *student learning assessment*, and *learning outcomes* were used interchangeably. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA, 2021) defined student learning outcomes as “the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire from an educational experience” (para. 1).

Student services are the programs, services, and activities provided to students by student affairs professionals housed in the student affairs division of an educational institution (Helfgot, 2005).

Abbreviations

ACE—American Council on Education

ACPA—American College Personnel Association

CHEA—Council for Higher Education Accreditation

NASPA—National Association of Student Personnel Administrators

NILOA—National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

SPPV—Student Personnel Point of View (ACE, 1937)

SSAO—Student Affairs Officer

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore a full range of readiness perceptions related to student learning outcomes assessment among a group of midlevel student affairs managers. This chapter contained background information on the completion agenda, student affairs assessment, and organizational readiness for change. In this chapter, I introduced the problematic theory–practice gap found in the student affairs literature, and the criticality of SSAOs taking a personalized approach to assessment based on the existing attitudes and beliefs of their midlevel managers to effectively close that gap. Understanding the readiness perceptions of midlevel managers is a pressing issue because such insights will provide SSAOs the information they need to effectively build sufficient readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment, which is necessary for successful adoption and institutionalization (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). The ability for SSAOs to sufficiently build readiness to engage in student learning outcomes will, in turn, help close the student affairs assessment theory–practice gap in their divisions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.

—Marcel Proust, 1981

The purpose of this literature review was to understand the problematic theory–practice gap between stated values in student affairs assessment and actual integration in daily work. In addition, the goal of this review was to establish the importance for institutions to intentionally work toward closing the gap and pull from change literature to theorize how organizational readiness for change theory can be leveraged to effectively close the gap. I drew on an extensive literature base to support my argument that research focused on exploring underlying attitudes and beliefs about student learning outcomes assessment among midlevel student affairs managers was warranted to improve the general understanding of the problematic theory–practice gap and obtain insight on effective ways to close that gap.

The literature review is organized into three parts. The first part of this chapter explores the history and current state of assessment in student affairs to better understand the theory–practice gap. The second part provides descriptions of three theories and how they intersect to create the paradigm through which I explored midlevel student affairs managers’ readiness for change to engage in assessment practices. Finally, the third part covers a discussion of gaps in the literature, which also served in the development of the methodological framework.

The Theory–Practice Gap in Student Affairs Assessment

In this section, pertinent student affairs assessment literature was reviewed to gain a better understanding of the theory–practice gap and establish the importance for institutions intentionally working toward closing the gap. Specifically, I outlined relevant literature on the

stated value in assessment practices, the current state of engagement in assessment practices, and the problematic theory–practice gap.

The Stated Value in Assessment Practices

The longstanding value of assessing the effectiveness of programs and services for continuous improvement in student affairs dates back as early as 1937 when the American Council on Education (ACE, 1937) formally constituted the purpose and essential functions of student personnel professionals in *The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)*. The *SPPV* of 1937 was grounded in a philosophy that imposed upon higher educational organizations “to consider the student as a whole” and an obligation for “the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone” (ACE, 1937, p. 1). A primary purpose of this seminal document was to provide clearly defined responsibilities and essential roles of the student personnel professional. The authors identified 23 expectations that described an effective educational program, five of which included evaluating the effectiveness of programs for continuous improvement (ACE, 1937).

The enduring value of student affairs assessment practices has been evident in the following foundational documents over the last several decades: (a) *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education* (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984), (b) *Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (Astin, 1991), (c) *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs* (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1996), (d) *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners* (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), and (e) *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (ACPA & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA],

2004). The aforementioned literature also marks a significant shift in recognizing “the essential integration of personal development with learning” (ACPA & NASPA, 2004, p. 3), emphasizing that student learning outcomes happen beyond the classroom and subsequently placing student affairs in the learning arena. Given this significant shift, engagement in student learning outcomes assessment of services and programs in student affairs has become increasingly important.

Current State of Engagement in Assessment Practices

The current state of increased accountability to improve completion rates, coupled with dramatic institutional budget cuts and no relief in sight, has placed tremendous pressure to student affairs divisions to demonstrate their contributions to improved student learning outcomes and a return on investment for the work they do (Henning, 2016). The added pressure to engage in the assessment of learning outcomes is clear, with all seven regional accrediting bodies requiring both academic and cocurricular learning outcome assessment as conditions for accreditation (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2019). This external pressure makes the assessment movement more important than ever before (Ewell, 2009).

Despite the intense pressure to engage in student learning outcomes assessment, and the steady flow of literature espousing student affairs practitioners’ enduring value in assessment practices, very few student affairs professionals engage in the formal assessment of student learning (Bingham et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). This slow progress is evident in accrediting body agency reports. Specifically, in an evaluation of assessment-related compliance with accreditation standards among the seven regional accrediting bodies, Morse and Woods (2019) found deficiencies in the assessment of student learning to be the most common compliance issue. Furthermore, according to the 2018 CHEA Survey of Accrediting

Organization, 23% of institutional accreditors reported that more than half of their informal and formal accreditation actions were in part due to problems with demonstrating evidence of learning outcomes (CHEA, 2019). Even more, 54% indicated about a quarter of their informal and formal accreditation actions were due in part to inadequate evidence of learning outcomes (CHEA, 2019).

The Problematic Gap

Given the pressure to improve student outcomes and accountability to demonstrate direct impact, the lack of engagement among student affairs professionals in assessing student learning is problematic. Engagement in assessment practices is critical in demonstrating the effectiveness of programs and services in achieving student learning, student development, and completion outcomes (Bingham et al., 2015; Henning, 2016). Varied and inconsistent assessment practices have exacerbated continued challenges and struggles with a lack of evidence of program effectiveness and the ability to sustain consistent practices (Kerr et al., 2020). Furthermore, assessment scholars have argued the assessment efforts that do take place often lack meaningful results connected to broader institutional metrics, which they have attributed to deficiencies in the skills and competencies needed to conduct high-quality assessments (Kerr et al., 2020; Morse & Woods, 2019; Schuh et al., 2016). The absence of sustainable and routine student learning outcomes assessment among student affairs professionals hinders the ability to continuously improve programs and services, which subsequently impedes institutional capacity to maximize impact on student success outcomes and move the needle on closing achievement gaps. Furthermore, because student learning outcomes assessment is tied as a condition of accreditation (CHEA, 2019), Henning (2016) suggested it is not only critical for student affairs divisions to engage in assessment, but assessment may be a matter of survival to the field.

Indeed, the broad literature base on student affairs assessment points to a myriad of common reasons for lack of engagement such as a lack of time, insufficient knowledge and skill, insufficient training, and lack of ongoing support (Morse & Wood, 2019; Schuh et al., 2016; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). Subsequently, there is no lack of advice on how to overcome these barriers, such as creating time and space for assessment, providing training, and facilitating ongoing support by way of an assessment committee or a dedicated assessment coordinator (Bingham et al., 2015; Schuh et al., 2016; Yousey-Elsener et al., 2016). The student affairs literature cited previously begs the question of why the field continues to struggle with embedding assessment in daily work, despite decades of discourse on the value and essentiality of assessment in student affairs coupled with a breadth of resources to help guide student affairs assessment efforts.

Student affairs literature has also suggested that merely implementing known strategies to support the adoption of assessment practices does not ensure full adoption and institutionalization (Ozaki et al., 2020; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). In fact, Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) asserted even in cases in which institutions dedicated significant amounts of time to developing assessment plans and activities, few achieved full implementation to the point of analyzing results and making changes in policies and practices to improve outcomes. This point was further strengthened by two case studies that traced the unique journey of Eastfield and El Centro Community Colleges in using best practices to build assessment capacity in their student affairs divisions (Ozaki et al., 2020). Both institutions concentrated on the structural factors of change such as developing an action plan and implementation schedule. The institutions both had lead facilitators, invested time in training, and provided ongoing training and support throughout the implementation phase. Despite this high level of support, both

colleges experienced challenges that prevented them from achieving full implementation to the point of analyzing results and making process improvement changes. Specifically, one college was greatly challenged with securing buy-in from directors and staff due in part to misperceptions on how results would be used and belief systems that questioned assessment as an effective means to identify strengths and opportunities to improve services. The other college did not face as much clearly communicated resistance, however, there was a disconnect between engaging in the activity of establishing assessment plans and putting them into practice on a consistent basis. The primary lesson learned about successfully implementing large-scale divisional changes from the aforementioned studies was the criticality of securing buy-in before the implementation phase (Ozaki et al., 2020), which first requires investing time in assessing and building readiness for change (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Holt et al., 2007).

Indeed, the structural factors of leading change are essential; however, psychological factors (e.g., attitudes and beliefs about change) largely affect successful implementation of change. This study explored attitudes and beliefs about student learning outcomes assessment among midlevel student affairs managers to better understand the underlying readiness perceptions that either facilitate or hinder readiness to engage in assessment practices. In the next section of this literature review, I drew on three theories to conceptualize a multifaceted change readiness framework to better understand the theory–practice gap and gain insight on how to effectively build midlevel student affairs manager readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment practices.

Theoretical Framework

Internal and external pressures to improve the quality of education and student outcomes have continued to push change in higher education (Kezar, 2018). Specifically, internal and

external stakeholders have demanded assurance that students are learning and, more importantly, “that they are acquiring the right type of knowledge to be successful in the information economy” (Kezar, 2018, p. 7). Given the current state of significant change in higher education, it has become increasingly important for leaders to know how to effectively lead change. As stated earlier, in the field of student affairs there has been extensive literature written on how to increase engagement in student learning outcomes assessment; however, a review of the literature has also revealed that progress remains slow. This poor track record affirms that leaders need assistance with how to more effectively lead change. As a starting point, senior student affairs officers SSAOs must understand the fundamental nature of institutional change. One of the theories on which this study drew was the theory of institutionalization, which examines how organizations change (Kezar, 2018; Westney, 1993).

Institutionalization Theory

Institutionalization theory provides a macro-organizational perspective and framework for conceptualizing change as a complex process of how organizations change and institutionalize structures and processes, which includes a foundational premise that organizations are social systems (Kezar, 2018; Westney, 1993). According to Westney (1993), *institutionalization* is defined as a “widespread prevalence of a pattern” (p. 57). Kezar (2018) distinguished that the institutionalization of practices takes form when they become deeply embedded in the structure and processes of the organization, which are considerably difficult to change. Curry (1992) referred to institutionalization as the system being “stabilized in its changed state” (p. 8) and characterized by members embracing the norms and values associated with new practices that become embedded in the organizational culture. In short, change scholars

have characterized the institutionalization of practices as widespread, permanent, deeply embedded in the organization, and difficult to change.

Institutionalization theorists have also examined how patterns (e.g., structures and processes) are adopted and reinforced within the organization. Specifically, they have sought to understand (a) why organizations adopt certain patterns, (b) how patterns become institutionalized or noninstitutionalized, and (c) why organizations are slow to change their patterns (Kezar, 2018; Westney, 1993). Furthermore, various change theorists have posited that institutional actors move through change over time across a continuum of stages (from preparedness to institutionalization), where one stage blends into the next without a clear beginning or end (Curry, 1992; Kezar, 2018).

Three-Stage Process Models of Institutionalization

Several organizational change scholars have proposed three distinct stages in how institutional actors move through the process of successful change adoption to institutionalization: (a) Lewin's (1947) three-stage model, which involves unfreezing, transition, and refreezing; (b) Curry's (1992) three-stage model, which includes mobilization, implementation, and institutionalization; and (c) Armenakis et al.'s (1993, 1999) work, which defined the *three-stage process* as readiness, adoption, and institutionalization. Although the three-stage process models have different names for most of the stages, they all share commonalities in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of change recipients, which are salient in each stage as they move through the process of successful institutionalization. The focus during the first stage of change is on creating buy-in and preparing the system and change recipients for an upcoming change (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Curry, 1992; Lewin, 1947). According to Holt et al. (2007), readiness for change is “when the environment, structure, and organizational

members' attitudes are such that employees are receptive to a forthcoming change" (p. 290). In the second stage, change recipients temporarily alter their behaviors and attitudes to conform to expectations of newly introduced systems and processes, thus moving toward the desired state (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Curry, 1992; Lewin, 1947). The final stage occurs when change scholars consider the change institutionalized, where the system stabilizes and new initiatives become a part of the culture and everyday behaviors and practices (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Curry, 1992; Lewin, 1947).

Some scholars have criticized the fact that these three-stage models may appear to simplify the change process; however, the models emphasize both psychological and structural factors, which include multifaceted determinants that influence the successful institutionalization of change efforts. In other words, individuals have their own core beliefs and assumptions that impact whether they adopt change or not. As Kezar (2018) pointed out, changes that have become deeply embedded in the structure and processes of an organization are considerably difficult to change. Change scholars have appreciated and conceptualized change as a complex, multifaceted construct of how organizations change and institutionalize structures and processes. Adding to the complexity, Kezar (2007) emphasized the need for different leadership strategies during each stage to effectively facilitate the realization of institutionalization.

On a final note, these three-stage models all clearly highlight that an individual must first be ready for change before they can adopt a change that leads to successful institutionalization. In other words, readiness is the first critical step and precursor to successful institutionalization (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). In fact, some change scholars have suggested roughly half of all unsuccessful large-scale change efforts are the result of the failure to establish sufficient change readiness among employees (Kotter, 1996).

Consequently, an organization is most likely to achieve institutionalization when leaders have the skills to effectively build readiness for change. For the purpose of this study, I drew on the three-stage process developed by Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999) because of their emphasis on the criticality of building readiness for change and integrated paradigms that explain how change agents can create readiness. Specifically, (a) change readiness is a manifestation of five key change recipients' beliefs strongly supported by research that spanned over 60 years, and (b) change agents can create readiness through effective messaging that comprises the five beliefs and addresses deficiencies in those beliefs that inhibit readiness for change (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999). This framework was most appropriate for my study because the purpose was to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibit or facilitate readiness to engage in student affairs assessment practices.

Institutionalization as a Multilevel Construct

The phenomenon of how organizations change is understood in terms of multiple stages of change, as cited prior, and as a multilevel construct that influences change. Kezar (2018) strongly suggested that “leaders need to think about how various levels of the system influence and help create change at another level” (p. 73). Institutionalization theory recognizes the role of institutional actors at the individual and collective levels in change acceptance (Kezar, 2018; Westney, 1993). For example, the adoption of a pattern by institutional actors at the collective level is a prerequisite for successful institutionalization; however, adoption still happens first at the individual level. For this reason, the focus of this study was on the analysis of readiness perceptions at the individual level. In addition to acknowledging that change acceptance is influenced at the individual and collective levels, institutionalization theorists have also recognized the influence of an individual's position level on the successful adoption of a change

initiative (Rousseau, 2011). For example, SSAOs greatly influence change because they make decisions about large-scale initiatives and strategies. Furthermore, midlevel student affairs managers highly influence change acceptance because they are in a dual role as change facilitators (Birken et al., 2012; Engle et al., 2017; Valentino, 2004) and communication bridges between SSAOs and frontline staff (Engle et al., 2017; Valentino, 2004). Because decisions about change initiatives and strategies usually come down from the top, midlevel student affairs managers are change recipients. They need to be sufficiently informed and ready for the change initiative themselves to effectively ready their teams for change. For the aforementioned reasons described, the focus of this study was on the analysis of change readiness perceptions of midlevel student affairs managers.

Social Cognition Theory

According to Szabla (2007), despite organizational change research results suggesting that human resistance is the main obstacle to successful institutionalization, “organizational researchers and practitioners know little about the multifaceted nature of resistance,” which is due in part to researching “resistance on a single dimension” (p. 526) rather than multidimensionally. Social cognitive theories of change build on institutionalization theory by providing a deeper discussion of change readiness as a complex multifaceted phenomenon that many change agents do not understand. Social cognitive theorists have sought to describe how people make meaning of change in organizations and discern what type of meaning-making needs to occur to help people make sense of and understand the change being implemented (Kezar, 2018). From the perspective of social cognitive theory, resistance results from people not understanding the change initiative, whereas “deep and meaningful opportunities for creating sensemaking help to overcome resistance” (Kezar, 2018, p. 194). Sensemaking scholars have

emphasized that institutional norms make implementing change difficult, asserting people are constantly making sense of their own environment and individual perspectives can be altered (Kezar, 2018; Weick, 1995).

Social cognitive theorists have posited that people's perceptions can hinder or influence their readiness to engage with change, providing a strong argument for examining attitudes and beliefs at the individual level to better understand how to successfully lead change (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Kezar, 2018). Specifically, change scholars have contended readiness exists when: (a) organizational members feel that change is needed, (b) they believe the change initiative is the appropriate strategy, (c) they see the benefit of the change, and (d) organizational members believe they have the ability and support to successfully implement the change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). Additionally, sensemaking scholars have recognized perspectives are socially constructed and have posited social interaction is a key source of change, emphasizing the critical role of conversation and messaging as facilitators of new perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs that build readiness (Armenakis et al., 1999; Kezar, 2018). Taken from this perspective, structural changes are insufficient to facilitate successful institutionalization. Rather, organizations seeking to implement deep change require change agents to focus on how individuals in their organizations make sense of new initiatives and understand their perceptions that act as inhibitors to discern the types of change strategies and messaging needed to shift mindsets and build readiness (Armenakis, Harris, et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018; Weiner, 2009).

For the reasons cited previously, leading successful change is a matter of understanding and addressing individual attitudes and beliefs that hinder change acceptance to build sufficient readiness for adoption (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis, Harris, et al., 2007; Kezar,

2018). Drawing on social cognitive theory, this phenomenological study focused on exploring how midlevel student affairs managers make meaning of their experiences with student learning outcomes assessment to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibit or facilitate change readiness to engage in assessment practices. The understanding gained from this intentional exploration provided the information leaders need to help shape individuals' thinking by helping them "make sense of and understand the change" (Kezar, 2018, p. 84) and addressed perceptions that inhibit readiness for change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007, Armenakis, Harris, et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018).

Organizational Readiness for Change Theory

The theory of organizational readiness for change draws on both institutionalization and social cognitive theories, recognizing the irrefutable, interdependent nature between the structure and natural laws of how organizations move through change and the role individual perceptions and interpretations play in the ability to successfully implement, adopt, and institutionalize change initiatives (Weiner, 2009). Drawing on both institutionalization theory and social cognition theory, organizational readiness for change theorists have expressed appreciation for the complex, multifaceted, and multilevel nature of change and have suggested a combination of both psychological and structural factors increases the likelihood a change will be successfully instituted. Organizational readiness for change theory provided a framework for analyzing institutional actors' readiness for change initiatives both at the individual and collective levels (Weiner, 2009). Armenakis, Bernerth, et al. (2007) argued, "Change recipients formulate precursors (e.g., cognitions, emotions, and intentions), which become part of their decision processes that result in resistance or supportive behaviors" (p. 482). When organizational members are ready for change, they want to feel confident in their ability to change (Weiner,

2009). Furthermore, they are more likely to initiate, engage in, and sustain the change behavior compared to engaging in a new change initiative without first building sufficient readiness (Weiner, 2009). Subsequently, the decision to adopt a change, for organizational members who are not ready, will require adjustments in individual beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). In the context of their research, Armenakis, Bernerth, et al. (2007) defined *belief* as “an opinion or conviction about the truth of something that may not be readily obvious or subject to systematic verification,” or in other words, the perception of “an organizational outcome, event, or act by someone is subject to being believed” (p. 483) by the change recipient. As cited earlier in this chapter, *readiness* is the first critical step and precursor to successful adoption and institutionalization (Weiner, 2009), which is shaped by one’s attitudes and beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018).

Armenakis, Bernerth, et al. (2007) conducted a comprehensive review of research by organizational scholars (dating from the 1940s to 2006) on belief components that are important to achieving buy-in among change recipients. This research culminated in the development of a conceptual framework of five beliefs labeled “change recipients’ beliefs,” which they contended can be used to determine the degree of acceptance among change recipients and describe an individual’s or organization’s readiness for change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). The five change recipients’ beliefs are critical precursors of an individual’s “future behavior in supporting or resisting a particular change” (Burgan & Burgan, 2014, p. 3). Successfully leading the institutionalization of change requires a focus on understanding individuals’ beliefs about the change to effectively build readiness for successful adoption and institutionalization (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Bouckennooghe, 2010; Vishwanath, 2009).

The five change recipient beliefs identified as salient to determining readiness for change include (a) discrepancy, (b) appropriateness, (c) valence, (d) efficacy, and (d) principal support (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). Additionally, sensemaking scholars have recognized that perspectives are socially constructed and have posited that social interaction is a key source of change, emphasizing the critical role of conversation and messaging as facilitators of new perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs that build readiness (Armenakis et al., 1999; Kezar, 2018). Armenakis and Harris (2002) asserted the ability of leadership to successfully build readiness with any change effort is created by messaging that addresses these five change beliefs. For the reasons cited prior, this phenomenological study was premised on the idea that understanding the attitudes and beliefs of midlevel student affairs managers who facilitate or inhibit their readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment will aid SSAOs in planning effective change strategies and messaging, which will lead to building sufficient readiness for a change initiative (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999) labeled the first change belief component as *discrepancy*. A *discrepancy* is the difference between a desired state and the current state; change recipients must believe change is necessary to move toward the ideal state (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). According to Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999), change recipients will first attempt to determine whether a change is necessary when they are faced with new initiatives. Furthermore, change is not likely to occur until organizational members establish a sense of urgency that the current state cannot continue and believe that change is needed (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999). This belief can be influenced by messaging from change agents on why organizational change is needed (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014).

Once a belief in discrepancy is acknowledged, the change initiative must also be seen as the appropriate action to effectively solve the problem and reach the ideal state (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999) labeled this belief component *appropriateness*. It is possible change recipients agree a change is needed, but may not agree with the proposed solution (Armenakis & Harris, 2002). For this reason, change agent messaging must demonstrate how the proposed change is the appropriate strategy (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). The failure to do this effectively negatively impacts the change agent's ability to build readiness for a new change initiative (Armenakis et al., 1999). If change agents cannot convince others the new initiative is the appropriate solution, they may need to reconsider their approach because it is likely to be an inappropriate or ineffective strategy (Armenakis & Harris, 2002).

When faced with new initiatives, Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999) observed change recipients would naturally ask, "What's in it for me/us?" This belief component, labeled *valence*, described one's perception that the change will produce a benefit for the organization, for those they serve, and for them personally (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Change recipients will resist new initiatives when they do not believe change has benefits (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Bandura, 1999). Subsequently, change agent messaging must emphasize how potential adopters will personally benefit and how the organization and those they serve will be better off because of the new initiative (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). The ability to do this effectively positively impacts change recipients' willingness to adopt a new change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014).

The fourth belief component that is a determinant of adoption, *efficacy*, was defined as the perceived belief in individual or collective capabilities to implement new behaviors

required by the change initiative (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Bandura (1999) argued there is nothing more pervasive in the desire to take action than the belief in personal efficacy. When faced with change, potential adopters will ask, “Can I/we successfully implement this new change?” (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). According to Bandura (1999), “This belief system is the foundation of human agency” and “unless people believe that they can produce desired . . . actions they have little incentive to act” (p. 28). For this reason, it is critical change agent messaging focuses on how potential adopters will be prepared to successfully implement the change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Kotter (2012) argued change agents have the responsibility to ensure appropriate training is provided to change recipients to support their success. Specifically, change agents need to thoughtfully consider all new skills, behaviors, and attitudes required to successfully implement the new initiative. Even more, Kotter (2012) asserted that attitude training is often just as important as skills training.

The final belief component that influences the decision to adopt a new initiative is principal support. *Principal support* is the belief that change agents and opinion leaders genuinely support the change and they can successfully influence others to accept change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). As such, when new initiatives are implemented, change recipients ask, “Who is supporting this change?” Burgan and Burgan (2014) asserted change agents and opinion leaders are a critical component of successful organizational change because it “ultimately comes down to changing the practices, attitudes, and behaviors of people” in the system (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014, p. 3). Midlevel managers play a highly influential role in change acceptance and implementation because of their dual roles as change facilitators (Birken et al., 2012; Engle et

al., 2017; Valentino, 2004) and communication bridges between senior leaders and frontline staff (Engle et al., 2017; Valentino, 2004).

Taken from this perspective, midlevel managers have a critical responsibility to communicate changes that come down from the top. Their own reactions, change messaging, and level of support greatly influence acceptance and readiness among change recipients. If the midlevel manager is not ready for the change themselves, they cannot effectively build readiness in their team (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). SSAOs need to invest time in building change readiness among midlevel managers so they can effectively influence change on a broader scale (Austin et al., 2020; Birken et al., 2012; Engle et al., 2017).

Drawing on social cognition theory, change recipients can have different levels of readiness reactions to a change initiative from the perspective of each change recipient belief component (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). For example, one can have a high level of readiness and understand the need for change (discrepancy) and feel the change initiative is the right solution (appropriateness); however, they may have a low level of readiness when it comes to their ability to implement the new behavior (efficacy). In this scenario, the employee is likely to have higher levels of readiness to adopt the new change once they participate in effective training and sufficient practice, which results in gained self-efficacy required to perform the new behavior successfully. This concept adds another layer to the complexity of this multifaceted change readiness framework and also highlights the importance of understanding that leading successful change initiatives requires change agents to personalize their efforts by seeking to understand the unique underlying beliefs of their organizational members. Such understanding allows change agents to strategically develop effective change strategies and messaging to address beliefs that hinder change readiness. Armenakis and Harris (2002) asserted the five

change recipients' beliefs serve as a conceptual framework to guide the development of internal change strategies and messaging for the purpose of effectively creating readiness for change. The premise behind this study was that leaders who understand the five change recipient beliefs held by employees about change initiatives have great potential to effectively guide change and communicate in a way that builds sufficient readiness for a new change initiative (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Burgan & Burgan, 2014).

Gaps in the Literature

Armenakis and Harris (2002) asserted that implementing change is one of the most important skills of contemporary leaders, yet least understood. Although myriad books, articles, and resources have been written to help guide student affairs assessment practices, few of those resources have focused on the critical first stage of change, which is *readiness* for change. *Readiness* is achieved when “the environment, structure, and organizations members’ attitudes are such that employees are receptive to a forthcoming change” (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007, p. 290). This definition clearly points toward change readiness being a multifaceted construct with psychological and structural factors that are interrelated and affect one’s readiness for change (Weiner, 2009). A review of the literature on factors impacting the integration of assessment practices lacked an exploration of the depth of the attitudes and beliefs underlying the theory–practice gap and the interplay of psychological and structural factors influencing those perceptions.

Specifically, understanding the difficulty of leading change has not been explored using a multifaceted change readiness construct to reveal a full range of change recipients’ attitudes and beliefs related to assessment practices. Furthermore, despite the influential role midlevel managers carry in change acceptance, there remains a significant gap in research on midlevel

managers' readiness for change (Austin et al., 2020). This population has often been overlooked in readiness research because midlevel managers tend to be viewed as change leaders; however, midlevel managers are also change recipients because change initiatives are typically directives from higher level leaders (Austin et al., 2020). Change scholars have emphasized the imperative to study midlevel manager readiness for change because of their unique position as change facilitators and change recipients who themselves need readiness to successfully facilitate change (Austin et al., 2020; Birken et al., 2012; Engle et al., 2017). The review of the literature on student affairs assessment and change readiness provided clear support for the need to explore a comprehensive range and depth of attitudes and beliefs underlying the theory–practice gap among midlevel student affairs managers.

Summary

In this literature review, I identified a problematic gap in student affairs assessment research. Engagement in assessment practices remains low despite student affairs professionals espousing an enduring value in assessment, increased pressure to integrate assessment into daily practices, and myriad efforts implemented to support the adoption of assessment practices. Organizational change theorists have conceptualized change as a multifaceted and multilevel construct of how institutional actors move successfully through change. Many researchers have also stressed the importance of change agents preparing change recipients for successful adoption and institutionalization of any new initiative. I drew from organizational readiness for change literature to provide a conceptual framework of five change recipients' beliefs that are essential to gaining buy-in and building readiness to engage in new initiatives. The organizational readiness for change framework emphasizes that effectively leading new initiatives requires personalized change strategies and messaging to address beliefs and attitudes

that hinder readiness for change. In addition, sensemaking scholars have posited that social interaction is a key source of change because individual perceptions are socially constructed. Subsequently, these researchers have emphasized the critical role of messaging as facilitator of new attitudes and beliefs that build readiness.

The intent of this study was to better understand how to close the theory–practice gap by exploring and understanding the underlying attitudes and beliefs hindering adoption from the lens of the five change recipients’ beliefs. In turn, change agents can effectively develop change strategies and messaging that mitigate beliefs hindering sufficient readiness, which leads to successful adoption and institutionalization. In the next chapter, I provide a description of the methodological approach used to make visible the underlying attitudes and beliefs that inhibit and facilitate engagement in assessment practices.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

A life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it has not been interpreted.

—Ricoeur, 1991

In this chapter, I describe the methodological framework used to explore how midlevel student affairs managers experience student learning outcomes assessments. I begin by restating the purpose of the study and my research questions. I then state my positionality as the researcher to provide the context from which I developed the methodological framework. Finally, I expand on my research methodology and design to describe how I went about getting the answers to my research questions. I describe in detail my research approach to data collection, data analysis, and the use of strategies to address the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

Restatement of the Purpose and Research Questions

Despite internal and external pressure for student affairs professionals to engage in student learning outcomes assessment, and literature and resources on how to effectively increase engagement, there remains still a significant gap between stated values in assessment practices and actual integration in daily work (Kerr et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). As mentioned earlier in the literature review, even in cases where institutions invested a significant amount of time and resources to increase engagement in student affairs assessment, they still struggled to close the engagement gap (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). Two recent case studies by Ozaki et al. (2020) strengthened the argument that this struggle is still relevant. Relevant to the context of this study, change scholars have asserted addressing change readiness beliefs is the first critical step to successful adoption and institutionalization (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al.,

2007; Weiner, 2009) because they influence “future behavior in supporting or resisting a particular change” (Burgan & Burgan, 2014, p. 3).

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore midlevel student affairs managers’ experiences with engaging in student learning outcomes assessment to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibit or facilitate change readiness to engage in assessment practices. For the purposes of this study, change readiness was defined as a state of being receptive, personally motivated, and empowered to adopt a forthcoming change (Austin et al., 2020), which is shaped by one’s attitudes and beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018). Armenakis, Bernerth, et al. (2007) defined belief as “an opinion or conviction about the truth of something that may not be readily obvious or subject to systematic verification” (p. 483). For reasons cited prior, this phenomenological study was premised on the idea that understanding attitudes and beliefs that facilitate or inhibit readiness to engage in student learning outcomes will aid senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) in planning effective change strategies and messaging to build readiness for successful change adoption (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). The aim of this study was to make visible the underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibit or facilitate engagement in student learning outcomes assessment among midlevel student affairs managers to gain insight that SSAOs can use to help close the theory–practice gap at their campus.

This interpretive phenomenological study was designed to answer the following overarching research question:

How do midlevel student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment?

I developed five subquestions based on five change recipients' beliefs about what is important to achieving buy-in and building readiness (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007):

1. *Discrepancy*. How do participants make sense of the need to engage in student learning outcomes?
2. *Appropriateness*. How do participants make sense of the appropriateness of assessing student learning outcomes?
3. *Valence*. How do participants make sense of the benefits of student learning outcomes assessment to the institution, students, and themselves professionally?
4. *Efficacy*. How do participants make sense of their ability to conduct high-quality student learning outcomes assessments?
5. *Principal support*. How do participants experience administrative support to conduct high-quality assessments of student learning?

Positionality

As a researcher approaching this phenomenological study from an interpretivist paradigm, it is important to be explicit about my positionality. I have worked in the community college system for 22 years in student affairs and have been in midlevel manager positions for over 12 of those years. At the time of this writing, I served as the director of advising at a college with a student population of over 13,000. I view my work as an advocate for the pursuit and achievement of one's dreams through the attainment of education. I bring an unwavering commitment to support students throughout their educational journeys from initial contact to successful completion to my work. As a deeply introspective person and inclusive leader, it has always been important for me to understand and leverage the multiple perspectives of those I lead to cocreate and make collaborative decisions on how we do our work and serve students.

My natural curiosity in exploring community members' multiple perspectives to blend ideas and cocreate is a fundamental way of being for me.

As stated earlier, given the pressure to improve student outcomes, the theory–practice gap in student affairs assessment is problematic. My experience working in student affairs for over 22 years affirmed my perception of the theory–practice gap. Intellectually, I understand the importance of engaging in assessment practices. I strongly believe assessment is essential for improving student outcomes, yet I am guilty of not integrating assessment into my own daily practices. I grapple with this internal conflict between stated values and the integration of assessment practices. Aligning the research approach with an essential aspect of who I am, I chose a “change recipient, employee-centric path” (Armenakis & Harris, 2009, p. 128). I was deeply curious about and wanted to better understand this internal conflict by exploring underlying attitudes and beliefs that inhibit or facilitate change readiness. I conducted this study at the college where I worked. I believed sharing my own experience with lack of engagement and the intentions of my research would help participants open up and be honest. At the same time, I was aware of the possibility that participants may be uncomfortable admitting their lack of engagement to a colleague.

In the current state of higher education, change occurs at breakneck speed, and those in the field cannot afford to have leaders who lack the skills to effectively lead successful change. My goals for this research were to unearth new insights that illuminated more effective strategies in building sufficient change readiness, learn how to lead change more effectively, and gain insight into how to close the theory–practice gap in student affairs assessment. The research design was influenced by my assumption that exploring lived experiences with assessment practices through interpretive phenomenological interview questions, framed by the five change

recipients' beliefs, would uncover critical insights to help SSAOs more effectively build change readiness. Furthermore, I assumed many leaders are aware of how difficult it is to effectively lead successful change, would agree leaders need this skill set, and would be interested in learning strategies that might help improve their own effectiveness. These assumptions were based on extensive scholarly research and my personal experiences.

Research Methodology and Design

My focus as a researcher was to explore how midlevel student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibit or facilitate change readiness to engage in assessment practices. My interest in exploring individual attitudes and beliefs and obtaining rich insight into human behavior steered me toward qualitative research methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A fundamental characteristic of qualitative studies is to learn about people in in-depth ways and from their own perspectives and contexts so researchers can understand what real life is like for the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). A qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate choice given the subjective nature of the data collected. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) defined *qualitative research* as, “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 43). Qualitative researchers take an interpretive, naturalistic approach to transforming the world “into a series of representations” through interviews, conversation, recordings, and journals in an attempt to “make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43), thereby making visible the unreflected and invisible.

Research Paradigm

For this research project, my choice to conduct a qualitative study using an interpretive phenomenological approach was guided by my constructivist–interpretivist epistemological position and relativist ontology. A constructivist–interpretivist epistemological worldview represents an assumption that reality and meaning making are socially constructed (Tuli, 2011), a philosophical underpinning of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From this worldview perspective, individuals have their own thoughts and interpretations and make meaning of their own social realities (Ahmed, 2008; Tuli, 2011), emphasizing the presupposition that there are multiple constructed and coconstructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The truth of one’s reality is created by the meaning an individual attaches to an experience, shaped through social interaction and the context of their environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Because reality is coconstructed, the interpretive researcher engages in the role of coconstructing the research reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). On a final note, Guba and Lincoln (1994) asserted these constructed realities “are subject to continuous revision, with changes most likely to occur when relatively different constructions are brought into juxtaposition in a dialectical context” (p. 113). A central interest of this worldview is in how meaning and sense-making activities related to a social phenomenon of individuals and groups, can be attributed to action or inaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As such, researchers oriented toward this paradigm aim to produce knowledge based on reconstructed understanding as a result of their interactions with participants and emerging analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Interpretive Phenomenology

Under the umbrella of qualitative research approaches, interpretive phenomenological methods were a natural theoretical orientation to guide this study because the aim was to draw

out underlying attitudes and beliefs through the exploration of participants' lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment. This research approach was most appropriate because phenomenology seeks to study the lived human experience (Tuffour, 2017).

Phenomenology is a research method used to “capture the processes through which humans come to know the world” (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 6), seeking to describe common meanings found among participants as they experience a phenomenon such as grief or anger (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim of phenomenological research is to “reduce individual lived experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 10). To add clarity to the term *lived experience*, Van Manen (2016) pointed out a description is one that captures the essence and presents it in such a way that the reader is able to grasp the nature and significance of that experience in a new and unseen way. Although phenomenology “has evolved into a relatively mature qualitative research methodology during the last decades of the twentieth century” (Tuffour, 2017, p. 2), scholarly debates have transpired about appropriate ways to conduct phenomenological research. There are two broad, diametrically opposing categories: interpretive (or hermeneutic) phenomenology and descriptive phenomenology, which follow the philosophical principles of Heidegger and Husserl, respectively (Finlay, 2011; Tuffour, 2017).

The concept of the “lifeworld,” now commonly referred to as “lived experiences,” was first introduced by German philosopher Husserl in his 1936 book, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, providing a basis for phenomenology (Brinkmann, 2018). For Husserl, the lifeworld referred to a prereflective and pretheorized world in which human beings live their lives and experience significant phenomena (Brinkmann, 2018). The focus of Husserl’s descriptive phenomenological approach was on the “structure of experiences in the way that it occurs to our conscious” (Finlay, 2011, p. 2; Tuffour, 2017). An essential feature of the Husserlian method is

the centrality of phenomenological reduction—that is, bracketing or suspending the researcher’s past knowledge and personal opinions about the validity of what is experienced (Schmitt, 1959; Tuffour, 2017). The use of this strategy enables the phenomenologist to establish themselves as a “disinterested spectator” and anchor the data without any “external theory” (Finlay, 2011; Schmitt, 1959; Tuffour, 2017).

German philosopher Heidegger built on the work of Husserl, with his concept of Dasein—or human existence—stating that “Dasein itself is an **enacted conversation** [emphasis added in original]” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 1008) that allows us to understand ourselves and others only because we can speak. Heidegger (1962) asserted the fundamentality of language in understanding the human experience, stating, “Discoursing or talking is the way in which we articulate ‘significantly’ the intelligibility of being-in-the-world” (p. 204). Van Manen (2016) further explicated that “human experience is only possible because we have language” (p. 38) because it is only through language that individuals can recall and reflect on their experiences. Contrary to the Husserlian view, Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenological approach involved rejecting the ideation of bracketing or suspending past knowledge and personal judgments based on the ideology that reduction is impossible due to the subjective nature of the lived experience (Tuffour, 2017) and reliance on reflective conversation as a knowledge-producing practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Through the interpretive lens, a lived experience is dualistic in nature. On the one hand, humans experience the concreteness of the reality before them; on the other hand, individuals actively engage in shaping and creating their experiential realities based on individual and collective self-understanding, perceptions, and thoughtful praxis (application of theory; Van Manen, 2016). The Heideggerian interpretive (or hermeneutic) approach involves focusing on

human situatedness, with a particular focus on the participants' subjective meanings and sense making concerning their lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Interpretive phenomenologists seek to understand the essence or nature of an experience as opposed to descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to describe the essence of the structure of an experience (Van Manen, 2016). To clarify what essence means in phenomenology, Van Manen (2016) postulated, "Essence asks for what something is, and without it would no longer be what it is" (p. xv). The aim of asking "meaning questions" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 23) in interpretive phenomenology is to bring to the forefront new insights that can increase one's thoughtfulness and effectiveness in certain situations. Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) paraphrase of Heidegger's argument for the goal of interpretive phenomenology is worth citing:

If human life itself is an ongoing conversation . . . [then] the goal of social science should not be to arrive at "fixed knowledge" once and for all but to help human beings improve the quality of their conversational reality, to help them know their own society and debate the goals and values that are important in their lives. (p. 1022)

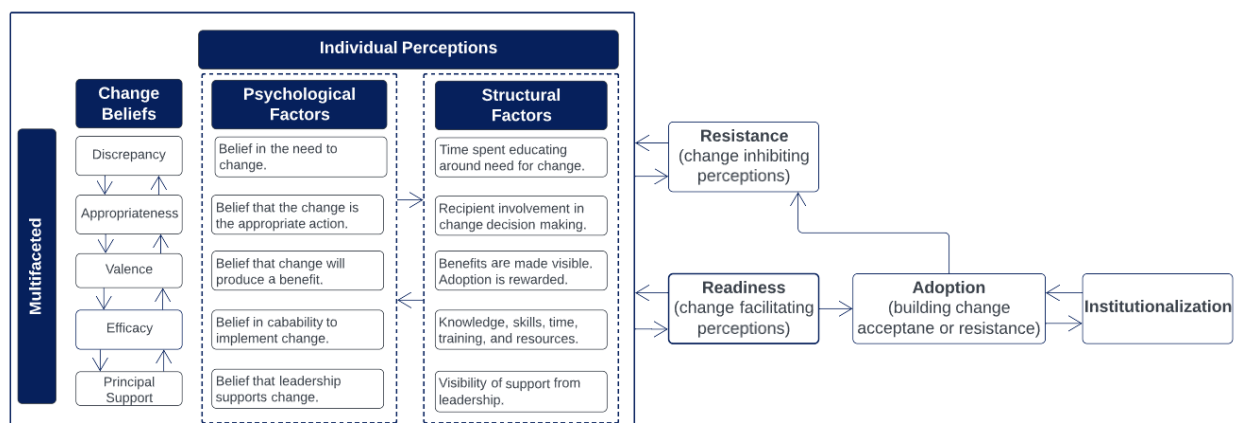
Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework allows for intentionality in pulling from various ideas and theories to create a narrow lens through which the researcher views their study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). This narrow lens provides a clear structure for how ideas are linked, relates to the purpose of the study, and provides a basis for decision making about the design (Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). The lens through which I viewed change readiness was one in which I integrated organizational readiness for change theory with the conceptualization of the three-stage process model for institutional change (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999) and the proposed set of five change recipients' beliefs that are essential in moving people through the change readiness process

(Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). The triangulation of these two conceptualizations with organizational readiness for change theory provided a framework to deepen understanding of change readiness as a complex multifaceted phenomenon. My conceptualization of change readiness consisted of three key elements: (a) readiness is the first critical step and precursor to successful institutionalization, (b) sustainability of change efforts requires change acceptance at the individual level, and (c) readiness for change is a multifaceted construct. Detailed descriptions of each of these key elements are provided as follows. The change readiness framework developed for this study (see Figure 1) was used to guide the approach for exploring midlevel student affairs managers' lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment. This approach entailed gathering rich descriptions of how midlevel managers made sense of their experiences and uncovering underlying attitudes and beliefs that either facilitated or inhibited change readiness to engage in assessment practices.

Figure 1

Change Readiness Framework



Note: Adapted from “Organizational Change Recipients’ Beliefs Scale: Development of an Assessment Instrument,” by A. A. Armenakis, J. B. Bernerth, J. P. Pitts, & H. J. Walker (2007). *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 43(4), 481–505. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886307303654>). Copyright 2007 by SAGE Publications.

Readiness As Precursor to Successful Institutionalization

Establishing readiness for change as the first critical step and precursor to successful institutionalization was the first key element in the conceptualization of my change readiness framework (see Figure 1). This conceptualization of change readiness drew on the three-stage process model of institutionalization proposed by Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999), which included readiness, adoption, and institutionalization. This three-stage process model describes how institutional actors move through the process of successful change adoption to institutionalization. Each stage is characterized by specific attitudes and beliefs that become part of an individual's decision process that either facilitates or inhibits their readiness for change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). For this study, readiness for change was characterized by the change recipient being receptive, personally motivated, and empowered to adopt a forthcoming change (Austin et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2007). As evidenced by the three-stage process model, readiness is the first critical step and precursor to successful adoption and institutionalization, emphasizing that one must first be ready for change before they are willing to adopt it.

Although the successful movement of change recipients from the readiness stage to the adoption stage is characterized by their buy-in to temporarily alter their attitudes and behaviors, the work of building change readiness is far from over. In other words, it cannot be assumed the successful widespread adoption of a new behavior will lead to successful, sustainable institutionalization. During the adoption phase, a dichotomous dynamic takes place where recipients either build acceptance and motivation for a permanent behavior change or they build resistance and become less motivated to accept long-term changes (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). This shift in acceptance or resistance attitudes and beliefs is significantly influenced by how individuals make sense of their experiences with the new change, as framed

by the five change recipients' beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). Given the temporary and unstable nature of the adoption stage, it is critical that change agents conduct the ongoing assessment of perceptions and how change unfolds to (a) understand the current state of change readiness and (b) discern appropriate messaging and strategies that address inhibiting beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014; Weiner, 2009). Change scholars have emphasized the criticality of delivering continuous messaging and strategies that mitigate inhibiting beliefs and reinforce change acceptance until the new behavior has been institutionalized (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014).

Readiness at the Individual Level

The second key element of my conceptualization of change readiness is the sustainability of change efforts, which leads to successful institutionalization requiring change acceptance at the individual level. Although organizational readiness for change theory includes the recognition that change acceptance is influenced at the individual and collective level, social cognitive theorists have posited individual perceptions of institutional actors either facilitate or inhibit their readiness to engage in change and successfully adopt a new behavior (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Kezar, 2018; Weiner, 2009). Specifically, change recipients formulate precursors (i.e., attitudes and beliefs) that become a part of their decision-making processes and result in either resistance or readiness behaviors (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). Subsequently, successful change adoption happens first at the individual level. In addition, institutionalization theorists have recognized the influence of position level on the successful adoption of a change initiative (Rousseau, 2011). For example, SSAOs greatly influence change because they make decisions about large-scale change initiatives and strategies. Furthermore, midlevel managers play a highly influential role in change readiness and acceptance because of their dual role as

change facilitators and communication bridges between senior leaders and frontline staff (Birken et al., 2012; Engle et al., 2017; Valentino, 2004).

When change initiatives come from senior leaders, it is important to emphasize that midlevel managers are change recipients who need to be sufficiently readied for change before they can effectively build change readiness in those they lead. For aforementioned reasons, this study focused narrowly on midlevel student affairs managers' lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment. Understanding how they made sense of their experiences uncovered underlying attitudes and beliefs that acted as either facilitators or inhibitors of readiness to engage in assessment. These insights provided the information that SSAOs needed to discern appropriate change strategies and messaging to effectively address inhibiting beliefs and build readiness (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018; Weiner, 2009).

Readiness for Change as a Multifaceted Construct

Readiness for change as a multifaceted construct was the third and final key element of my conceptualization of change readiness. In this study, the framework for exploring psychological factors essential to achieving buy-in drew from the conceptual framework of five change recipients' beliefs identified as salient to determining readiness: (a) discrepancy, (b) appropriateness, (c) valence, (d) efficacy, and (e) principal support (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Multiple change scholars have contended that the five change recipients' beliefs determine the degree of change readiness and are essential in effectively readying people to adopt change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014; Weiner, 2009). In other words, the five change recipients' beliefs are critical precursors of an individual's future behavior in accepting or resisting a particular change (Burgan & Burgan, 2014). The participant interview questions designed to explore underlying attitudes and beliefs

about student learning outcomes assessment were framed by these five change recipients' beliefs.

Holt et al. (2007) conceptualized change readiness as a multifaceted construct characterized as being change ready “when the environment, structure, and organizational members’ attitudes are such that employees are receptive to a forthcoming change” (p. 290). Moreover, organizational readiness for change theory recognizes the irrefutable interdependent relationship between structural factors and psychological factors, shaping the ability to successfully institutionalize change initiatives (Bouckenooghe et al., 2009; Weiner, 2009). The manifestation of resistance or readiness perceptions is shaped by the interplay between psychological factors or *intangible* aspects (i.e., attitudes and beliefs) and structural factors or *tangible* aspects (i.e., conditions within the organization) that facilitate or inhibit implementation (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Holt et al., 2007; Vishwanath, 2009). For example, readiness is bolstered when individuals feel confident enough about their knowledge and skills to successfully perform tasks required for a new change (i.e., efficacy). As such, an important *tangible* aspect would be infrastructure, which creates time and space for training and ongoing support to reinforce the development of new skills needed to successfully implement a new change. If those *tangible* aspects are not provided, change recipients may lack confidence in their ability, resulting in inhibiting perceptions that can potentially build resistance (Bouckenooghe et al., 2009). As demonstrated in the prior example, having a deep understanding of underlying attitudes and beliefs can point change agents toward appropriate solutions focused on shifting inhibiting perceptions into facilitating perceptions (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018; Weiner, 2009).

Contextualization of the Study

Interpretive phenomenology is the study of the lived experience or lifeworld as human beings experience it prereflectively, rather than as they reflect on and conceptualize or categorize it (Van Manen, 2016). The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how midlevel student affairs managers made sense of their lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibited or facilitated change readiness to engage in assessment practices. According to Heidegger (1962), human beings are self-interpreting and always in the process of creating meaning and understanding of who they are by being-in-the-world and experiencing their everyday situatedness. Human science researchers have become increasingly aware of the importance of interpretive phenomenology in which human situatedness is central and the notion that human beings can be best understood through the experiential day-to-day reality of their lifeworld is emphasized (Van Manen, 2016). Specifically, human beings are situated in the world in the context of their environments (including structural and cultural factors, activities, and relationships); this context influences their sense-making and shapes how they understand what it means to experience being-in-the-world and the meaning of being (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Heidegger, 1962). Furthermore, Heidegger pointed out that human beings are situated in the historical context at a specific point in history, which also influences their worldview. In other words, the essence of meaning and underlying beliefs midlevel student affairs managers have in relation to the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in assessment practices is influenced by the social, structural, and historical contexts of their situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Heidegger, 1962; Ozaki et al., 2020; Tuli, 2011; Weiner, 2009). The lifeworld of a midlevel student affairs manager can present different lived “world of work” experiential qualities based

on their situatedness; for example, although two different midlevel student affairs managers may work at the same college, they could each have very different experiences with student learning outcomes assessment based on the department in which they work and the dean to whom they report.

The context of this study was a community college in the Southwest. At the time, this college was in the early stages of implementing intentional strategies to increase engagement in student learning outcomes assessment among their student affairs professionals. The student affairs division was composed of roughly 220 employees collectively working in 12 key areas: academic advisement, admissions and records, athletics, disability resource services, early outreach programs, financial aid, global education services, recruitment, student life and leadership, success coaching, testing services, and veteran services. The institution had a college-wide assessment team with formal leadership positions that included a director, an assistant director, and two assessment developers. During the 2018–2019 academic year, the college assessment team expanded its membership to include student affairs representation. During the Spring 2019 semester, enrollment services and student life professionals participated in student learning outcomes assessment training provided by a member of the college assessment team. In addition, the college assessment team was able to secure a National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) coach, which provided a 1-day campus visit and training focused on student affairs assessment from an expert in the field.

Following these student affairs assessment training efforts, 10 distinct student affairs areas began to draft their student learning outcomes with the goal of completing their assessment in Fall 2019; however, changes in student affairs leadership during the Fall 2019 semester and the COVID-19 global pandemic in Spring 2020 disrupted those plans. Only three out of the

initial 10 key student affairs areas finalized their student learning outcome assessments to completion.

Despite these setbacks, the college assessment team continued to make progress toward the goal of increasing engagement in assessment among student affairs professionals. For example, a student affairs workgroup was formed in May 2020, focusing on advancing assessment efforts in student affairs and cocurricular areas. Notable achievements produced by this group included the development and implementation of an assessment proficiency survey to evaluate employees' understandings of assessment, the revision of the "Student Affairs Assessment Report," and development of the "Student Organization Assessment Report" and guide to involve students in the assessment process. Due to continued disruptions caused by the pandemic and changes in student affairs leadership, particular emphasis was focused on student organization assessment efforts, specifically guiding student leaders through the process of assessing student learning in activities provided by their organizations.

I became a member of the college-wide assessment team in Spring 2021. During that time, the assessment team worked on defining cocurricular assessment and identifying which student support programs had student learning as their fundamental goal. This information was intended to be used as a foundation for creating a 3-year cycle plan of cocurricular assessment among these areas to begin during the 2023–2024 academic year.

Participants

In this study, I collected data from four midlevel student affairs managers to provide an in-depth, interpretive exploration of their lived experiences with assessment practices. The participant selection process involved recruiting a purposive sample of participants who met the following inclusion criteria necessary to study the phenomenon of interest:

- *Midlevel student affairs manager.* Defined in Chapter 1, a midlevel student affairs manager is responsible for overseeing a specific department in the student affairs division and serves as a final decision maker for that department. They are also responsible for implementing assessment practices and using the results to improve services in their areas of supervision.
- *General understanding of student learning outcomes assessment.* An individual's change readiness to engage in assessment practices falls along a continuum, from not integrating student learning outcomes assessment at all to systematically integrating assessment practices into daily work and using the results to improve student learning. The aim of this study was to uncover attitudes and beliefs that either inhibited or facilitated engagement in assessment practices, so it did not matter where participants were on the continuum of change readiness; however, participants needed to have at least a general understanding of student learning outcomes assessment to engage in conversations that could reveal their attitudes and beliefs about such practices.
- *Willingness to participate at multiple touchpoints.* The nature of interpretive research requires participants (i.e., coresearchers) to engage in multiple touchpoints to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. This process may have required a second interview with follow-up questions to increase clarity and understanding, and asked participants to review their interview transcripts and my interpretations for accuracy. For these reasons, I selected participants who were willing to participate in a second interview, if necessary, and willing to review their transcripts and researcher interpretations for confirmation.

The recruitment process for participants began following the successful proposal defense and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals. I began the recruitment process once I received IRB approval from Northern Arizona University (see Appendix A) and IRB approval from the community college district where this study took place (see Appendix B). The projected timeline for participant recruitment was 2 weeks. I took the following steps to identify and secure study participants:

1. At the time of this research, I was a midlevel student affairs manager at the college where the study took place. As such, I recruited participants by reaching out to my colleagues. I announced my study at a manager's meeting and followed the announcement with an email (see Appendix C).
2. I briefly met with each colleague who expressed interest and provided them with a general overview of the study and participant expectations. I confirmed their eligibility and answered any questions before they signed the participant consent form (see Appendix D).
3. Confirmation of participant eligibility and completed consent forms were sent to participants using their preferred email addresses. The emails included information about the steps to follow to schedule the first interview. The projected timeline to secure an interview, upon confirmation of participation, was 1 week.
4. The selection process continued until I had four participants sign the consent form.

Data Collection

Common data collection procedures in phenomenological studies include surveys, participant observations, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, and each of these methods is suited for obtaining specific data (Check & Schutt, 2012). The purpose of this phenomenological

project was to gather meaning and sense-making data drawn from participants' conversational dialogues of their lived experiences with assessment practices to make visible the underlying attitudes and beliefs that either inhibited or facilitated engagement in student learning outcomes assessment. Due to the specific type of data gathered, in-depth interpretive interviews were the most appropriate data collection procedure for this study. The interpretive (or hermeneutic) interview is an approach to gathering rich descriptions of lived experiences through conversational dialogues focused on coconstructions of meaning and interpretation. Interpretive interviews are distinct from other interviews in that they entail a collaborative conversation between the researcher and interviewee that is oriented toward sense making and interpreting the meaning of lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). My role as the researcher was to facilitate a collaborative conversation in which reflection and meaning questions were oriented toward understanding how midlevel managers made meaning of their experiences with student learning outcomes assessment (Van Manen, 2016).

Facilitating collaborative conversations required deep listening and flexibility on my part as the researcher, because questions that directed the interpretive dialogue emerged during the interviews from experiential descriptions provided by the interviewee (McManus Holroyd, 2007). For this reason, I used a semistructured interview design instead of an unstructured or structured one because the semistructured format provided a framework to keep the conversation focused on the phenomenon of interest and enough flexibility to maximize knowledge-producing potential (Brinkmann, 2018). Semistructured interviews gave me enough flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participant responses for added clarification and understanding and deeper meaning compared to the level of detail I could obtain in structured interviews (Burgan & Burgan, 2014).

I conducted in-depth interpretive interviews with four midlevel student affairs managers. In the interpretive interviews, I asked participants to reconstruct their lived experiences with assessment practices and explore how they made meaning of those experiences (Van Manen, 2016; McManus Holroyd, 2007; Seidman, 2019). Interview preparation consisted of steps designed to ensure the participants understood the purpose of the interview, were clear about the interview process, and were aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Seidman, 2019). I used an interview guide (see Appendix E) to help keep the interviews focused on the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in assessment practices. The interview guide began with an overarching explanation of the study, included interview questions with prompts, and concluded with a debriefing and explanation of the next steps (Seidman, 2019).

Interviews were scheduled upon confirmation of participant eligibility and completed consent forms were sent to participants. An agreed-upon location was determined that was considered to provide a private, quiet, and comfortable environment. The timeframe for the first interview was 90 minutes, consisting of 15 minutes at the beginning for an overview, 1 hour for questions, and 15 minutes at the end for debriefing. If there was a need for a second interview, the timeframe was 60 minutes, with the first 45 minutes intended for follow-up questions and the last 15 minutes dedicated to debriefing. Although I had an interview guide, my primary approach to interviewing was to listen actively and build on interviewee responses with questions seeking clarification and/or concrete details to go as deep as possible into the nature of the assessment experience (Seidman, 2019). To facilitate active listening, I took notes on statements that I wanted to further explore so that I could remain fully present and quell any urge to interrupt the interviewee. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data gathered, which also enabled me to be fully present and focus on the interview at hand.

Data Analysis

The aim of this interpretive (or hermeneutic) phenomenological study was to gain a deep understanding of the attitudes and beliefs that inhibited or facilitated change readiness to engage in assessment practices by asking questions that allowed participants to describe how they make meaning of those experiences. The two key methods I used to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment were (a) gathering rich descriptions of experiences through in-depth interviews, and (b) entering the hermeneutic circle to analyze the phenomenological text generated from interviews (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Heidegger emphasized that examining phenomena by entering the hermeneutic circle is a method researchers can use to move beyond depersonalized popular conceptions and generate deep understandings of the phenomenon being studied (McManus Holroyd, 2007). Specifically, deep understanding is generated by uncovering participants' meaning and sense making that was derived from their experiences (McManus Holroyd, 2007).

The process of understanding and interpreting phenomenological texts by working the hermeneutic circle was described by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) as “a movement between parts (data) and whole (evolving understanding of the phenomenon), each giving meaning to the other such that understanding is circular and iterative” (pp. 622–623). This ongoing back-and-forth movement of comparing parts to the whole, in practice, involved comparing parts of the interview text to the entire text, across interview texts, and the larger body of related literature (Diekelmann, 2001). Further, the meaning of the text was interpreted in consideration of each participant's historical context and/or situatedness, and my own knowledge, situatedness, and personal experiences with the phenomenon (Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 2016). On a final

note, this ongoing circular and iterative process continued until new shared insights were uncovered (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Finlay, 2011).

Phenomenological scholars have acknowledged that there is no definitive set of standard steps with which to analyze phenomenological texts (Diekelmann, 2001; Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 2016). Van Manen (2016) posited his hesitation to provide a step-by-step process was a precaution taken so as to not impede the openness and flexibility required to go deep and garner rich descriptions, noting, “A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project” (p. 162). Diekelmann (2001) concurred with Van Manen’s (2016) sentiments; however, Diekelmann expressed greater concerns of not doing so. Specifically, Diekelmann (2001) noted, “Failing to describe the method in a sequential manner implies a lack of rigor or thoughtlessness that does not reflect the scholarliness or the meticulousness of hermeneutical research” (p. 55). Though heeding the mindful advice of not letting structure impede the openness and flexibility needed to effectively conduct interpretive research, as a novice researcher, I found establishing some structure to serve as a guide provided a needed level of confidence as I began to engage in the dance of phenomenological text interpretation. As such, a step-by-step approach for this study was developed by drawing on the seven stages of phenomenological analysis developed by Diekelmann et al. (1989) and the integration of various research activity components drawn from other phenomenological scholars. This multimethod approach reflected my attempt to produce an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in assessment practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). After collecting data from participants through phenomenological interviews, I followed the below step-by-step process as a guide:

1. *Conduct a thorough read.* After the interviews were transcribed, I read the text from each phenomenological interview in its entirety to obtain a general understanding of each text as a whole. I reread each interview transcription and began to highlight words and phrases that drew me in.
2. *Write interpretive summaries.* For each interview, I began to write several short interpretive summaries focused on “capturing the individual’s point of view” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 5) and directly linked them to quotations from the text that served as supportive data for the interpretation. During this process, interpretive summaries were constructed in a way that illuminated how participants made meaning of their own experiences with student learning outcomes assessment to uncover attitudes and beliefs that acted as facilitators or inhibitors to change readiness to engage in assessment practices and the psychological and structural factors that shaped their attitudes and beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Van Manen, 2016; Weiner, 2009).
3. *Establish common experience themes.* I analyzed the text in each transcript by working the “hermeneutic circle” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 622) to identify common experience themes of midlevel student affairs managers that were embedded in the interview texts. Van Manen (2016) defined phenomenological themes as “the structure of experience” that makes up an experience (p. 79). Furthermore, Van Manen (2016) posited that interpreting meaning from text is more accurately a process of insightful discovery and deep interest in the act of “seeing” (p. 79) meaning, rather than an urge to simply formulate categorical statements. As such, I captured the essence of those experiential themes through the creation of labels based on direct quotations from the text.

4. *Identify relational themes.* I reread the experience themes in each interview and shared themes across all interview texts. I wrote my interpretation of those themes to identify shared common meaning and link supporting excerpts directly from the interviews. The generated interpretations were reread to determine whether similar or contradictory interpretations were present in the various interviews. During this step in the process, I made note of any additional clarifying questions that I had for participants and engaged in follow-up interviews when needed.
5. *Identify constitutive patterns.* To deepen my understanding of the relational themes, constitutive patterns across all interviews were identified by examining the “relationships of the relational themes” (Diekelmann et al., 1989, p. 12), which is the highest level of hermeneutical analysis. As interpretations and explanations of these shared relational themes emerged, so did movement toward an interpretive phenomenology, which revealed the constitutive nature of change readiness to engage in student learning outcomes assessment. (Diekelmann, 2001).
6. *Validation of the analysis.* I validated the analysis by sharing findings with interviewees (coresearchers). During this stage, I provided the opportunity for participants to review the analysis of their interviews, relational themes, and constitutive patterns to validate my understanding and interpretation. Any discrepancies in interpretation were clarified by participants and directly linked back to the text.
7. *Development of final report.* The final step of the process involved the development of a final report of the findings using excerpts from the interviews to validate the finding to the reader. Diekelmann et al. (1989) posited, “There is no single correct

interpretation” of phenomenological interview texts (p. 13). Rather, engagement in the process of continuous examination of the parts and the whole with constant reference back to phenomenological texts helps ensure interpretations are “grounded and focused” (Diekelmann et al., 1989, p. 13). The circular, multiple stages of reading, writing, and interpretation provided a means of substantiating the meanings embedded in the text and the validity of the interpretations of the phenomenological text (Diekelmann et al., 1989).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the experience of student learning outcomes assessment among four midlevel student affairs managers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in assessment practices. Rich descriptions of experiences with the assessment of student learning were gathered through in-depth interviews that were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I analyzed the text in each transcript by working the “hermeneutic circle” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 622), drawing on the seven stages developed by Diekelmann et al. (1989), based on the philosophical work of Heidegger (1962). I identified 154 key text excerpts across all interviews to capture the essence of the shared lived experience of student learning outcomes assessment. In the context of this study, a text excerpt was a sentence or a grouping of sentences representing an idea coded to a meaning component. For example, the statement, “Assessment is the only way that we’re going to be able to know definitively whether what we’re doing is working for the student or not. It gives us the ability to be better,” is a text excerpt coded to the “assessment informs practices” meaning component.

Two constitutive patterns and seven relational themes were revealed to gain a deeper understanding of how participants made sense of their experiences and to discover underlying attitudes and beliefs that act as inhibitors or facilitators to engage in assessment practices. A constitutive pattern is the highest level of hermeneutical analysis that reveals the “relationship of the relational themes” (Diekelmann et al., 1989, p. 12) that emerge across all interviews. As interpretations and explanations of shared relational themes emerged from the text, so did the movement toward the identified constitutive pattern (Diekelmann, 2001), which revealed the essence of the experience. Subsequently, relational themes provided further meaning and support

to the constitutive pattern. The two constitutive patterns and seven relational themes are described in more detail with supportive text from participants' responses.

The data were reported using pseudonyms, and participants' descriptions were kept broad-based to protect their confidentiality. Defining a study population to gain a deeper understanding of participants' background and experiences could have provided context that added richness to understanding participant responses and strengthened the validity of the study (Creswell, 2018). However, because the study site was at the institution of my employment, members of the institution who were aware of my study could have identified participants if I provided rich descriptions of participants' typical of phenomenological studies. To ensure confidentiality, which is of utmost importance, participant descriptions were left minimal. At the time of research, all four participants held roles as midlevel student affairs managers at the college in the Southwest where this study took place. As midlevel student affairs managers, the participants were responsible for the oversight of an area that contributed to student learning and development outside of the classroom. All participants had at least 10 years of experience in leadership positions that entailed the responsibility of overseeing programs and services designed to support student learning and development outcomes outside of the classroom. The four participants are presented as: Participant 1 (Lili), Participant 2 (Mia), Participant 3 (Luca), and Participant 4 (Maddy). Each participant recalled numerous examples of their experiences with the assessment of student learning, which provided a breadth and depth of shared expressions across all interviews.

The interpretations of the findings revealed the constitutive nature of change readiness to engage in assessment practices as the experience of (a) embracing a culture of outcomes and assessment, and a philosophy around (b) framing student learning outside of the classroom.

Findings suggested the underlying attitudes and beliefs influenced by structural factors are at the root of these two constitutive patterns and were thus consistent with the conceptual framework in this study (see Figure 1). As described in Chapter 3, the conceptual framework for this study was used to explore the relational influences between psychological factors (i.e., attitudes and belief) and structural factors (i.e., social, environmental, and historical contexts) framed by the five change recipients' beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007), see Figure 1.

Both Heidegger (1962) and Van Manen (2016) referred to this framework as human situatedness, which is of central importance in interpretive phenomenology. Humans are self-interpreting beings and are always in the process of creating meaning and understanding of being-in-the-world, which is influenced by the context of their environmental (i.e., social, structural, and historical) contexts of the situation (Heidegger, 1962). As such, the meaning of the text was interpreted in consideration of each participant's situatedness and my own knowledge, situatedness, and personal experiences with the phenomenon (Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 2016). Interpretations of the data are provided in the following sections and are organized by the two constitutive patterns and corresponding relational themes, described in more detail with supportive text from participants' responses.

Constitutive Pattern 1: Embracing a Culture of Outcomes and Assessment

The interpretations of participants' responses revealed the essence of change readiness to engage in assessment practices as the pattern of embracing a culture of outcomes and assessment. The pattern of embracing a culture of outcomes and assessment emerged through five relational themes: A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment (Theme 1), Active Engagement in Assessment Practices (Theme 2), Environmental Influences (Theme 3), A Community of Support (Theme 4), and The Role of the Midlevel Manager (Theme 5). These five

relational themes were revealed through the analysis of 138 key text excerpts across all interviews as participants described their experiences with assessment practices. The five relational themes supported the identified constitutive pattern, revealing the essence of what it means to embrace a culture of assessment among the four participants; these themes provided key tenets on how to foster a culture of assessment in their departments. The five relational themes revealed through participants' responses to the interview questions are provided in more detail, followed by supportive text.

Relational Theme 1: A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment

As participants recounted experiences with the assessment of student learning, the relational theme of A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment emerged through 26 key text excerpts. This theme was woven in participants' narratives throughout the interviews across multiple questions. There were numerous experiences of using assessment results to improve student outcomes across all interviews, which affirmed a strong sense of commitment and responsibility to design college experiences that led to positive student outcomes among all participants. Even more, participants' stances that student learning was at the core of the outcomes they sought to produce revealed a common sentiment that the nature and meaning of their work was to affect student learning and serve as partners in the campus curriculum. Mia best expressed the prior sentiments, noting:

Honestly . . . student outcomes . . . is really what drives a lot of the initiatives and activities that we end up wanting to do. We're looking at the things that we really want for our students to get. What do we want them to learn? What kind of success skills do we want them to have? And we're talking about things that are outside of academics. So . . . we think about what we need students to learn and to get out of this and then what can

we put together, build, put on, and implement, that would actually help them to learn that particular skill.

As it related to the conceptual framework in this study, the underlying beliefs of the manifestation of A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment were three change readiness belief components: (a) discrepancy—a strong belief in the need to focus on outcomes; (b) appropriateness—a belief the assessment of student learning is an effective tool to improve students outcomes; and (c) valence—a belief there is a benefit of engaging in assessment practices (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999). Across all interviews, participants’ responses revealed three shared expressions related to their beliefs in the benefits (valence) of assessment: (a) assessment makes learning visible, (b) assessment informs practice, and (c) all assessment results are good. Participants’ expressed commitment to positively affect student outcomes, coupled with their beliefs in the benefit of assessment to improve those outcomes, brought meaning to the essence of the experience of embracing a culture of assessment.

Assessment Makes Learning Visible

The shared expression “assessment makes learning visible” emerged through narratives that described participants’ abilities to “see” outcomes. Lili stated, “That was an ‘aha’ moment for me to see that and to witness it” when she recalled an experience with observing a learning gap in a student. Luca stated the following when sharing an experience implementing an assessment on an intervention: “It was good to see the improvement made on some of the [students]. And it wasn’t all of them, I’ll be honest with you, not all of them but there was a majority that ended up improving from that.” Maddy held a similar sentiment, stating:

Being able to see how what we’re doing makes a difference for students. For a lot of our workshops, we have assessments. We’ve created student learning outcomes, and we have

an assessment that we give out and it's cool to see how they're taking in the information. So I think that is what's really cool about it, is that you could see, okay, this is what we hope you're going to get out of this and then you can see how they do. It's cool to see their learning.

Participant feedback revealed a strong personal value in the practice of assessment, as it made visible the learning that took place. The aforementioned narratives from participants were interpreted as a common sentiment in the importance of transferability of information between student affairs professionals and students. Particularly salient was the context of service delivery and the importance in the visibility of staff impact on student learning and development.

Assessment Informs Practices

Visibility is essential in student affairs professionals' ability to impact outcomes because it brings to light a *way of knowing* of how effective programs and services are in achieving desired student outcomes. The shared expression "assessment informs practices" in relation to the benefits of assessment emerged through narratives describing participants' experiences with making improvements based on assessment results that produced positive outcomes. Lili voiced her strong belief in the benefit of assessment as she discussed her experience with using assessment to create a new learning modality to improve the learning experience for students; she noted:

When you assess something it's to learn, it's to learn how to do it better. Yeah, streamline your processes too . . . that's a huge benefit. It may be a different modality but you're meeting needs. We're reaching more people and things are actually . . . better attended than they were pre-COVID.

Mia emphatically stated her belief in the benefit of assessment, connecting it to her responsibility and ability to effectively impact student outcomes:

Assessment is the only way that we're going to be able to know definitively whether what we're doing is working for the student or not. It gives us the ability to be better. At the end of the day that's probably one of the biggest things that we're able to do is take all of that data and . . . make decisions based on that. Decisions for the good to improve, to keep, to drop . . . all of those things because we are looking at . . . what we want our students to learn.

Luca revealed his belief in the benefit of assessment as he retold his experience of making programmatic changes to enhance student learning based on student feedback:

We learned that a lot of our students didn't know what resources were available. We ended up having [different support services] come in and meet with our students. They would talk about the things that the library offers and [being able to get] help with tutoring in the late hours, it was just a matter of logging in and getting somebody to help them out. It [students learning more about support services available] was a big thing.

Maddy similarly expressed her belief in the benefit of assessment through her experience of improving the student experience at an event to enhance student learning:

We wanted to see if students felt more comfortable talking to [community partners] after the event. Some of the feedback that we got was that not all of our [community partners] were engaging with students and so . . . [for the next year] we had sent out information to the campus that talked about how you prepare and how you speak with [community partners]. And then . . . we would send confirmation emails to [community partners] and put language in there that encourages them to stay off their phone or their laptops and

engage with students. We reviewed the feedback and figured out how . . . we can make sure that this is a better experience for our students.

All Assessment Results Are Good

A final shared benefit of assessment was the sentiment that “all assessment results are good.” Although reasonable to conclude a belief that “all assessment results being good” is inherent with a strong belief in assessment because it helps identify what is not working, the level of openness and unapologetic way of embracing visible gaps in student outcomes among two participants is worth noting. Lili conveyed her ability to be completely open and willing to examine any assessment results reflecting gaps in outcomes:

Yeah, there’s no failures. You go, well that didn’t work. That’s where you dust yourself off, pick yourself up and you try it again. The best advice I can give anybody is to understand that we’re all learning. Have the courage to fail, at least you’re moving forward.

Similar to Lili, Mia explicitly articulated her openness and willingness to accept results that reflect gaps in outcomes:

A big part of my role is to make sure that anything we do, I can show some kind of an impact, even if it’s a negative. It’s like, oh yeah, we tried this and it was not successful but to be able to know that . . . this treatment, if you will, didn’t produce the type of results that we had hoped for . . . so because of that, we’re either going to revise, or just completely reimagine.

Underlying this openness and willingness to explore gaps in desired outcomes reflected a deeper meaning of how Lili and Mia work to positively affect student outcomes through an intentional assessment process.

The three shared expressions related to the benefit of assessment (i.e., assessment makes learning visible, assessment informs practice, and all assessment results are good) emerged as participants recounted their experiences with assessment practices. Participants' shared expressions were interpreted as a group of student affairs professionals who have a strong sense of responsibility and deep commitment to follow a thoughtful and systematic process for collection, review, and use of information for the purpose of delivering meaningful learning experiences to students outside of the classroom in ways that positively impact student outcomes.

Relational Theme 2: Active Engagement in Assessment Practices

The theme of Active Engagement in Assessment Practices emerged through 34 key text excerpts from participants' common experiences, which supported the pattern of embracing a culture of assessment. Participants recounted numerous experiences in developing and implementing assessment strategies across all interviews, clearly expressing a strong commitment to actively engage in assessment practices. Two shared expressions about assessment practices emerged among participants: (a) assessment is an ongoing and iterative process, and (b) the benefit of multiple types of assessment. Participants' common experiences with engaging in the assessment process brought meaning to the essence of their experiences with assessment and what it means to embrace a culture of assessment.

Assessment is an Ongoing and Iterative Process

The shared expression of "assessment is an ongoing and iterative process" emerged as participants reflected on their experiences with developing and implementing assessment strategies, revealing a common experience of assessment being a cyclical process of refining programs and services and a systematic process that is facilitated throughout the year. Luca

conveyed the sentiment that assessment is an ongoing process as he detailed his experience with yearly assessment processes:

It's not always an easy task, but you got to be consistent and . . . make sure that you stay on top of it. We evaluate it [our programs and services] after each year. We'll look at all aspects of it. Besides us monitoring . . . [we'll get student feedback]. They'll tell us what's working, what's not working, what they like, what they don't like and . . . talking about how and what we can do better for next year.

Maddy expressed her view that assessment is an ongoing process as she described her experiences with assessment processes:

At the end of it [an event], we would always do a plus delta meeting with my team . . . to make sure we [took time to think about] what went well and what could have been better. [We would] look at the feedback and start brainstorming . . . to see how we can come up with solutions At the end of every semester we take a look at them [assessment results from workshops] to see how students are responding. If maybe they're scoring a little low . . . [on specific content in a workshop] we'll take a look at that slide . . . and maybe we need to add more information or how we communicate that needs to be a little different.

Lili divulged her view that assessment is an interactive process as she discussed her experiences of working with her staff when they are interested in developing and implementing a workshop:

[I asked], how are you planning on assessing it to know whether or not it's been effective? So that happens all the time. [The team] would do pre-planning, [run a practice] workshop, and assess the group while they were in it and then debrief. So there

were multiple steps to actually close that learning loop. Then they would apply what they learned and get it ready to run it again.

Mia disclosed the sentiment that assessment is an interactive process, recounting her experience with implementing student learning outcomes assessment and making content changes to a workshop:

What we were finding is that the students were not necessarily picking up on the concepts that we were trying to teach them. So what we ended up having to do is reevaluate . . . the language that we're using. So we actually did shift some of the topics . . . and then [figured out how to] relate them back in a way that made better sense. [In] doing that, we found that it made more sense to them. We didn't change the concept, we just figured out a way to better present the information. So, it took some time to just be able to do that. We had to figure out what stuck and what didn't and then go back and revise it. Being able to go through that process is what has helped us . . . have a pretty solid module.

The Benefit of Multiple Types of Assessment

Participants clearly indicated they all engaged in the use of multiple types of assessment strategies, which was a shared expression of what it means to actively engage in assessment practices among participants. A total of seven different assessment strategies were represented in participants' experiences. All participants engaged in at least two different assessment strategies, and one participant engaged in all seven strategies. Of the seven different types of assessment strategies, participant feedback and student learning outcomes assessment strategies emerged across all interviews. There was a shared expression across all interviews the selection of an appropriate assessment strategy was situational. Specifically, selection was based on factors such as the data needing to be collected, the learning strategy, and the learning environment. The

participants' responses indicated their use of different types of assessment strategies reflected their situatedness (Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 2016) and situated them in the studied phenomenon. Mia explicitly stated their belief in the value of using multiple forms of assessment:

Looking at it [assessment] in the big picture, being able to assess in any way, helps to improve or to change or to keep . . . because you know what's working . . . and you know what's not. You know, we can have great student learning outcomes, but then the other part of that is the data collection [referring to student outcomes data such as retention rates].

Table 1 illustrates the different types of assessment strategies used by participants.

Table 1

Assessment Strategies and Participant Engagement

Assessment strategy	Participant engagement
Focus groups	Lili, Luca
Observation	Lili, Luca
Participant feedback	Lili, Mia, Luca, Maddy
Student learning outcomes assessment	Lili, Mia, Luca, Maddy
Student satisfactions survey	Mia, Luca
Student outcomes data (retention and grade point average)	Mia, Luca
Tracking and monitoring (engagement and academic performance)	Luca

Relational Theme 3: Environmental Influences

The theme of Environmental Influences emerged through 24 key text excerpts as participants detailed their experiences with the assessment of student learning. Environmental Influences referred to any psychological or structural factors that facilitate or inhibit engagement in assessment practices. As noted in Chapter 3, the manifestation of resistance or readiness perceptions are shaped by the interplay between psychological factors (i.e., attitudes and beliefs) and structural factors (i.e., conditions in the organization) that either facilitate or inhibit adoption of a change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Holt et al., 2007; Vishwanath, 2009). Furthermore, sensemaking scholars have recognized that perspectives are socially constructed and have posited that social interaction is a key source of change, emphasizing the critical role of conversation and messaging as facilitators of new perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs that build readiness (Armenakis et al., 1999; Kezar, 2018). Four shared expressions about environmental influences emerged among participants: (a) expectations for involvement, (b) engagement of colleagues, (c) college-wide messaging, and (d) organizational and social constraints. Participants' common experiences of environmental influences brought meaning to the essence of what it is like to experience a culture of outcomes and assessment.

Environmental Influences: Expectations For Involvement

Across all interviews, each participant recounted experiences of receiving their leadership's expressed expectations for participation in assessment practices. Regarding expectations for assessing her programs and services, Mia stated, "Well, I mean, just from my direct supervisor, she definitely [has said], we need to be able to know how you are going to measure that [programs and services]." She added, "That's kind of a big part of [my responsibility] . . . is that I have to assess everything that we are doing to prove that the things we

are doing are actually working.” Mia also noted her responsibility to work with and report to external stakeholders:

Anytime that we’re doing . . . [a] bigger project that is going to be a little bit more intensive, we [the external partner and I] discuss how I will be measuring student success from that. Also, every year we have an annual report, where I report on the things that did happen during that year and [I have to provide] whatever data I have to support, whether what we did was working, not working, or what is going to be revised . . . [or changed] to get better results.

As with Mia, Lili also expressed a common experience of feeling pressured to validate her programs. Lili stated, “I have had to do reports that validate my programming. Yeah, especially before I was given a budget of my own.” When sharing his experience talking with leadership about expectations for assessment, Luca revealed, “making sure that our [students] are doing well academically” was an ongoing expressed expectation from leadership.

In conversations about leadership expectations, Maddy described an experience at another college where her supervisor set clear expectations for the development and implementation of student learning outcomes assessments:

I don’t think I really started creating or collecting meaningful data until I had a conversation with [my dean at the time]. I wanted to do something and . . . she wanted an explanation of what I wanted to do and . . . asked me to think about what I wanted the students to learn in that experience.

It was evident in Maddy’s experience that a poignant question from her direct supervisor, who asked her to explain what she wanted students to learn from her services, was instrumental in

shifting her thinking about her role in improving student learning. This approach translated into being an effective strategy in building change readiness, as Maddy stated:

She [the supervisor] is really the one that made me think about . . . how I can collect more meaningful data and do more meaningful work. So, it was really that influence that made me start looking at data in a different way. Because, like I said, I was doing it, but I wasn't doing it in a meaningful way.

The notion that Maddy interpreted student learning outcomes as meaningful data *and* connected those outcomes to her being able to do more meaningful work pointed to the underlying change recipients' belief components of (a) the belief in the need (discrepancy), (b) a belief in the strategy (appropriateness), and (c) a belief in the benefit (valence) that influence Maddy's willingness to engage in student learning assessment practice. As evident in the experiences she recalled of working with her team, Maddy's transformative experience with her supervisor later translated to her approach to how she facilitates change readiness with her employees.

Environmental Influences: Engagement of Colleagues

Rogers' (1962, as cited in Zhang et al., 2015) innovation diffusion theory is one of the most popular theories for studying how the adoption of change spreads in a social system. According to this theory, information about any new change flows from one person to another in the social system and people's willingness to adopt a new change is influenced by the extent to which they perceive the change as useful (Zhang et al., 2015). Mia remembered an experience of being influenced by another department's assessment efforts. To provide some context, Mia had moved away from some standard program assessment efforts established in the past due to a shift in focus influenced by external stakeholders. She recounted her experience of observing the assessment efforts taking place in another area that provided similar services to those her

department provides: “They’re starting to get better at looking at data, you know, the student data that comes through and how we are interacting with students and how we are engaging with students.”

Mia also continued to explain how that shift influenced her engagement in assessment practices, noting, “I think from that [assessment efforts in another department], you know, it has been a little bit more of a push to make sure that we’re also doing this, too.” The meaning an individual attaches to an experience is shaped through social interaction and the context of their environment, which influences action or inaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Mia’s experience of seeing positive outcomes of assessment practices in another department influenced her to engage in similar assessment practices. As such, the act of engagement alone can serve as an effective facilitator of adoption.

Although Mia confessed she did return to past assessment efforts, the experience confirmed in her the belief that assessment is not integrated into the fabric of the college. She stated, “That’s why I say I don’t feel like it’s [assessment] necessarily integrated into the fabric of [our college] . . . because there certainly wasn’t the urgency to continuously track and evaluate every year like we did [with my previous responsibilities].”

Environmental Influences: College-Wide Messaging

Individual perceptions are socially constructed, and for that reason, sensemaking scholars have emphasized the critical roles of messaging as facilitators of new perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs (Armenakis et al., 1999; Kezar, 2018). Both Mia and Maddy detailed their experiences with college-wide messaging about assessment at the college where this study was conducted. They shared expressions on a great deal of communication about assessment from the director of assessment, primarily in the form of emails; participants’ responses revealed a gap in the

consistency of messaging from senior leadership at the college-wide level. As revealed by Mia:

The messaging that we receive here from the campus about assessment . . . is, let's do assessment. I'll see emails on assessment . . . and . . . messaging that the assessment team is here to help you but honestly I don't see, like there's no campaign. There's no . . . direct marketing to just get people to really participate more in assessment. I don't hear about it like, hey, we should be doing assessment . . . to really drive the decisions in your department.

Mia continued to make a distinction in messaging between academic affairs and student affairs, noting:

I think you hear it more, obviously, on the . . . academic side because they have to assess their classroom. And they have . . . traditional student learning outcomes for the curriculum and . . . they have to assess that. In terms of the other side of the house, we don't necessarily see that, as like, it's important for us to be doing that with everything we do.

Although Mia relayed she had embraced a culture of assessment in her department, she expressed her sentiment that assessment in student affairs is not a part of the college culture. She said, "I hear it because I have to with the type of job that I have but I don't think it's necessarily messaging . . . that you hear everywhere. I think it's in pockets so far." Maddy also voiced her appreciation for the considerable amount of information that is sent out about assessment from the director of assessment:

I know that our [college assessment committee] is really big and we get a lot of messaging from the director of assessment. At convocations, we hear about it. So there's a lot of encouragement for assessments I think, for us as a whole.

Maddy continued to speak to how this information has increased her engagement in professional development around assessment:

So, I know that I participated in some online learning stuff because of what [the director] is sharing . . . out to the campus. There's a lot of information that's shared about assessments [and] a lot of resources that are shared about assessment. So we're constantly seeing that information. So I think it makes it easy for me just to read up about it.

Mia and Maddy also recounted their experiences of receiving college-wide messaging about assessment while working at other colleges, and working at other colleges that had a culture of college-wide communication about assessment as a priority and expectation from senior leadership. Maddy said the following about her experiences working at another college:

At that time, [my college] was really interested in doing student learning outcomes for a lot of the things that we had going on. They actually had standardized SLOs [student learning outcomes] after every student affairs event. They had the same three questions or something at every event we had to ask. So that was really big at the college.

Mia recalled the following while having a conversation about her experiences:

We did a much more comprehensive job of regular strategic planning . . . where we were evaluating the strategic plan and then the plans for each department and . . . then every 3 years, we had a big all-campus strategic planning review. So I think just coming from a campus where assessment was used in a much more purposeful way than [this college] where it's there, but I don't feel like it's really been fully integrated into the way that we do our day to day business.

Mia's expressions of her experiences with college-wide messaging and reflections on working in two different cultures of assessment revealed the point of view that there should be messaging

from senior leadership at the campus-wide level. This messaging should not only prioritize assessment, but also emphasize the strategic use of results to align with institutional goals and drive effective decision making.

Environmental Influences: Organizational and Social Constraints

In response to the question about a time when participants struggled with implementing student learning assessment, Mia and Maddy described challenges with environmental constraints that impacted their effectiveness with assessment efforts. Specifically, Mia said, “Trying to get students to participate in any kind of assessment [was a challenge], especially if we don’t have them physically in front of us.” She described her experience with students, recalling, “You just say hey, we’ve got a survey, can you guys please fill this out before we log out of this and they may say, ‘Oh, okay,’ and then they just start logging out because they don’t care.” Mia also expressed the implications of her challenge:

So, the hardest thing for us is being able to gather consistent data on some of these engagement sessions that we’ve had. But in terms of just being able to assess programs, that’s been the hardest thing for us is to just get students to do the assessment. It’s been almost impossible.

Maddy identified an organizational constraint that had impacted her ability to successfully implement a college-wide student learning assessment initiative:

We’re really struggling with it [a large-scale assessment initiative] because a lot of it, I think, comes down to the support that we need in this space. Our challenge is we don’t have the means to easily collect that information institution wide. We just don’t necessarily have all of the technology that I think could better support us in this space.

Relational Theme 4: A Community of Support

The theme of A Community of Support emerged through 22 key text excerpts as participants spoke of their experiences with student learning assessment. Two of the change recipients' beliefs were significant drivers of A Community of Support, which buttresses embracing a culture of assessment, and included (a) efficacy—a belief in the capability to implement the change strategy, and (b) principal support—a belief that change agents and senior leaders genuinely support the change and are able to successfully influence others to adopt the change. A belief in the capability to successfully adopt a new change behavior is “the foundation of human agency” (Bandura, 1999, p. 28) and if an individual does not believe they can produce the desired change, there is little incentive to act.

A significant *source of confidence* in the ability to develop and implement assessment practices emerged across all interviews as the act of leveraging support from leadership, peers, collaborative partnerships, and campus resources. Subsequently, a strong common sentiment emerged that engagement in assessment practices is not a solo endeavor. This prevailing sentiment, expressed through participants' experiences, helped to gain insight into the essence of what a community of support looks like in a culture of assessment.

A Community of Support: Leadership

A belief component that heavily influences an individual's decision to adopt a new behavior is principal support—the belief that change agents and senior leaders genuinely support the change and are able to successfully influence others to adopt a change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Because successful facilitation of change comes down to changing structural factors (i.e., conditions in the organization) and psychological factors (i.e., attitudes and beliefs), change agents and senior leaders play a critical role in successful

organizational change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). As Luca disclosed his experience with senior leadership, he expressed the sentiment that employees need more from senior leaders than just knowing that they support the work of their constituents. Specifically, he said it is important for him that senior leaders act as partners by making time to look at outcomes data together and help with problem solving. Luca detailed what he appreciates from senior leadership, such as, “Getting input from them [senior leadership and my supervisor] about what things we could do better or how we can [make improvements] to support . . . our students’ success in the classroom and . . . in life as well.”

Principal support includes all levels of leadership, not just senior leadership. As participants recalled their experiences of engaging in assessment practices with their teams, the significant role that midlevel managers play in change acceptance emerged. This role was so prominent in the data that it became one of the relational themes supporting the pattern of embracing a culture of assessment. Those findings are reported later in this chapter.

A Community of Support: Peers

As Lili remembered her experiences with the assessment of student learning, she expressed the important role that her peers have played in her ability to successfully develop and implement student learning outcomes (SLOs) assessments, stating, “I learned [how to do SLOs] from my colleagues. Initially when I first started [doing SLOs], I got put on the right track by my colleagues.” Lili continued to express how she received peer support:

We would have these meetings where we would come together and . . . determine three learning outcomes that we were going to explore [for that year]. And at that time, I was a brand new [manager] and there were some seasoned people in there who just had a wealth of information.

Lili noted she had continued to receive support from her peers through the district council to which she belongs: “As a council, we are constantly assessing. We follow the student development theory, where we are growing them [our students] and so we’re constantly assessing our programs. We assign a learning outcome as a council annually.” In addition to the peer support she receives, Lili revealed her personal fulfillment with serving as a resource for others as they learn how to do SLOs assessment:

When they put those plans in place and training [SLOs workshops] . . . I didn’t learn a single thing but it was nice to be in a room with other people and help them to understand what learning outcomes were . . . and it was nice to have the tool [reporting template] to be able to use.

A Community of Support: Collaborative Partnerships

As participants recalled their experiences with the assessment of student learning, a predominant common experience emerged: the belief that assessment is a highly collaborative process both in development and implementation. Mia explicitly stated just about all of her assessment efforts are collaborative endeavors:

I look at two different things. Is this something that is already being captured on the campus that is in a data repository . . . somewhere that we can just pull a report on? Or is it something where I need to develop the actual measurement itself to gather that data? So just about all of the assessments that we’ve done have been something that we’ve worked on in collaboration with our institutional effectiveness [IE] department or even as a team here.

Luca retold his collaborative assessment experience as follows:

After each year, we [would meet] . . . one-on-one with [support services that our students used] to see what is working, what's not working, what are their challenges . . . and how we can overcome those challenges. Meeting with them directly and talking to them about how our [students] are doing was beneficial in other ways to get other resources for them or to help them.

Maddy also relayed her experience in collaborating with a committee to address a large-scale assessment effort:

As a committee, we . . . work together to figure out . . . our SLO questions so we're not just relying on us [our team] and that is really important that we're doing this in the committee because it has a lot of faculty involved. Getting their voices and their input is really important for us because we obviously want to hear what their input is. [We want to know] from their perspective as a faculty, "What do you see that is important?" "What do you think would be the easiest way to communicate this with faculty?" So, we really lean on our committee to help us . . . and figure out how we can address challenges.

A Community of Support: Campus Resources

As participants recalled their experiences, they also expressed appreciation for the support they received from subject matter experts on campus. Mia mentioned her deep appreciation for the support she receives from the institutional effectiveness (IE) office:

It would've been very difficult for me to have to do this all completely on my own. I have to use our IE office, . . . they're able to pull data for me and I can give them . . . the parameters that I need and not only that but also to discuss what data points I'm looking for.

Maddy noted her appreciation in having a director of assessment available to support her and her team with crafting quality assessment instruments:

And then also knowing that [our director of assessment] is there. We just recently shared it [an assessment that we created] with [our director of assessment to review]. Because we were like . . . before we send it, can you just look at it one more time just to make sure from an assessment wording [perspective], it looks good. So I think just knowing that we have . . . her . . . makes it really helpful.

As participants recounted their experiences of using expertise on campus, their voices and tone exuded confidence in the quality of the assessment strategies they implement.

Relational Theme 5: Role of the Midlevel Manager

The Role of the Midlevel Manager theme emerged through 32 key text excerpts as participants recalled experiences with student learning assessment. Participants' shared expressions of their role as midlevel managers, through experiences of their everyday situatedness, revealed the highly influential role they play in fostering buy-in to participate in assessment practices among their team members. Each participant provided multifaceted responses in which four significant leadership functions emerged that foster buy-in and willingness to participate in assessment practices: (a) prioritizing intentional engagement, (b) setting clear expectations with high levels of support, (c) communicating purpose and impact, and (d) emphasizing professional development. These four significant functions represented the essence of what it means to support a culture of assessment in their department.

Prioritizing Intentional Engagement

All participants voiced a strong value and commitment toward their team members actively participating in assessment practices. As noted earlier in this chapter, underlying this

unwavering commitment was a strong belief in the need, the appropriateness, and the benefit of assessment practices. As participants recalled their experiences with assessment practices, intentionally engaging team members in the assessment process emerged as a key strategy in effectively facilitating employee buy-in and ongoing support. Lili declared a strong belief that the only way to effectively facilitate buy-in and willingness to participate in assessment practices is by getting team members to actively engage in the process. Her philosophy of “engagement as a facilitator” was based on her own personal value and stance of what she needs to buy-in and embrace any new change. Lili further stated:

If they helped to create it, they will support it. The manager’s role is to make that effort [engage staff in the assessment process]. You want them to tell you what they want students to learn because then they will own it [the SLOs].

Lili said she will ask the team, “‘Tell me what you would like for students to learn?’ and then they can help draft it . . . [if you] bring them along with you, you will get them on board.” Mia similarly expressed her unwavering commitment to always include her team:

I always work with my team depending on who’s working with me on a particular initiative and we [work together] to create . . . the student learning outcomes that we . . . assess at the end. I just ask them, What’s the value add here? What are we giving our students? What do we want them to know if we’re gonna do something like this?

Analogous to the other participants, Maddy voiced a strong commitment and value in always working with her team and belief that actively engaging them in the assessment process is a highly effective strategy to foster permanent buy-in. Moreover, Maddy confessed her hope that the act of engagement in assessment practices will also provide her team members the added

value of building confidence by seeing their impact on student outcomes and fostering intrinsic motivation to want to keep doing better. Maddy stated:

I like to work with my team always with assessments because I want them to see the value of it . . . and helping them learn that what they do can impact student learning. It can really impact them in a positive way and I hope that by them looking at it [assessment results] and then reading [student] comments, that it gives them confidence and motivation for the work that they're doing.

Maddy continued:

If they say, "Oh, [the presenter] was so amazing, I learned so much from her about this." [Then] I hope that gives them that intrinsic motivation to want to do better and see how what they're doing does matter to students . . . and the impact they have on students' learning as well.

Maddy's sentiments about her hope for the experience of engaging in assessment practices, translating into greater confidence and intrinsic motivation to keep doing better, painted a picture of a professional who deeply cares about her employees' personal growth and development.

On a final note, Maddy outlined her approach to starting the process of fostering buy-in with new employees: "When I have a change over in staff, I do the same thing with them." She noted she will say to the new employee, "This is what we have. It's a good time to review and figure out [what] we need to update . . . and reword." Maddy also said she will go over all of the SLOs for each workshop with the new employee, emphasizing the nature and essence of creating a culture of assessment is an ongoing process. It was evident in all participants' responses that the work of creating a culture of assessment in their departments is a serious undertaking that requires attention on a daily basis.

Setting Clear Expectations With High Levels of Support

Participants expressed a strong value and commitment toward setting clear expectations to participate in assessment practices, coupled with providing a high level of support as an effective strategy in facilitating permanent employee buy-in. As participants relayed numerous examples of developing and implementing assessment strategies with their teams, setting clear expectations for participation coupled with providing a high level of support was evident. Luca conveyed the importance of genuinely showing his passion for student success and the importance of staying on top of outcome measures:

If you go in there and just say, “Hey, okay, I want you to make sure you monitor [student outcomes]” some will do it, some won’t. To gain buy-in, you have to show what is going on [performance data] and also that you have a passion for [student success].

Luca also added that staying on top of the data helps him know where his support is needed:

The other part of this as well, is [supporting their efforts]. I would meet with some of the students . . . as well, especially those that we . . . have major concerns with. That gives me a chance to look at how they’re doing, are they being successful, and what other things that we need to do to help them out.

When Maddy recalled her experiences with getting her team on board, she noted she remained clear and emphatic about what they were going to do, and always paired those statements with a collaborative conversation to pull them in as partners in the process. Maddy remembered a conversation she had with a team member, noting, “These are the SLOs. These are the assessments that you’re going to do and we’re going to create student learning outcomes for this workshop. What do we think?” Maddy continued, “I wanted her to feel like she was a part of

the process, but I also wanted her to be invested. I want her to have the buy-in but also know why it's important that we're doing what we're doing.”

As it related to the conceptual framework in this study (see Figure 1), intentionally engaging team members in the assessment process by setting clear expectations and providing high levels of support can be an effective strategy. Noted in Chapter 3, change readiness is defined as being receptive, personally motivated, and empowered to adopt a forthcoming change (Austin et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2007). The common experience among all participants was they all worked very closely with their team members, providing enough support for employees to temporarily adopt a new behavior. The real work of strengthening acceptance and motivation for permanent behavior change occurs during the adoption phase, when experiences either reinforce acceptance or resistance, which is significantly influenced by the five change recipients' beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). Managers who are successful in fostering buy-in and ongoing support create experiences that continue to build acceptance, which is characteristic in the other key leadership functions that emerged in this theme.

Communicating Purpose and Impact

Organizational readiness for change theorists have strongly suggested that underlying attitudes and beliefs are at the root of the successful change acceptance of new practices (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Weiner, 2009). As described earlier, participants in the study revealed a shared expression of underlying beliefs in the meaning and purpose of their work as a responsibility to design college experiences that affect student learning and produce positive student outcomes. Being connected to this deeper meaning and purpose served as a source of participants' personal motivation and fulfillment when they could see the impact of their work. How participants make meaning of the work they do

translates into how they approach meaning making with their teams. Subsequently, participants showed a strong belief and value in the importance of helping their staff make sense of and understand the purpose, meaning, and impact of their work on students as an effective facilitator of buy-in. As it related to the conceptual framework of this study, participants focused on three key change readiness belief components (i.e., discrepancy, appropriateness, and valence) to build sufficient readiness for future successful permanent adoption.

As Mia reported her experiences with strategic messaging to staff geared toward effectively facilitating their buy-in, she said the following:

So that my team understands that when we do something, it has to be for a purpose. I always tell them, this is why we're here. This is exactly why we're here because . . .

we're trying to help [our students] because [many] don't persist . . . they don't graduate.

She continued with describing what her conversations with the team entail to help them understand their purpose, recalling:

When we look at when a student leaves your desk, What should they know? What do we want to make sure they walk away with? How should they feel? You know, those are those things that we talk about and I think it helps the team to understand their purpose.

We want them [students] to be more independent. We want them to be able to take better control of their own educational journey. So . . . it gives them [the team] a better sense of the why behind all of the stuff that we do. I mean student learning outcomes are obviously something we want the student to be able to do but it's the "why" behind why we're doing that, [which is] so they do learn how to do these things.

While detailing her experiences with facilitating buy-in through communicating purpose and impact, Maddy said she has found ways to personalize the meaning and benefit to staff. She explained:

I know personally how important it is to have that sense of individuality, I guess when it comes to how we present materials but at the end of the day, I wanted to make sure that the work that we were doing, no matter who was providing that information that we were on the same page and the foundations of what we want individuals to learn are the same. I want to make sure that at the end of it, students come out of that workshop knowing the core concepts that we think are important for them to learn. Going over our SLOs and our assessment questions together . . . makes them [the team] understand, “Oh, okay so these are the things that are really important . . . [for me to] make sure that I’m going to do a good job explaining this or that [so students] really learn something out of every workshop that I’m doing.”

Emphasizing Professional Development

When faced with new initiatives, a key belief component that shapes an individual’s willingness to accept a change is the belief the change will produce a benefit (i.e., valence) to those they serve, to the institution, and to them personally or professionally (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). As participants recalled their experiences with how they foster buy-in among team members, two participants had a shared expression of emphasizing the benefit of professional development. This sentiment affirmed the appreciation and value they have for their employees’ continued growth, development, and advancement. As Luca retold experiences working with his team to gain their buy-in and support, he expressed his belief in the

importance of acknowledging their achievements and emphasizing them as opportunities to build their resume. He stated:

When you come back in and say, “Hey, here’s what’s happening” [show positive student outcomes data] and also recognize that, that’s huge. [And emphasize to employees] . . . that all builds up your resume, it’s what you do with them, it’s not me. That was huge.

Analogous to Lucas’s approach, Maddy explained how she communicated the benefits of engaging in assessment practices as opportunities for professional development:

I hope that with however much time they have with me and on my team, I hope that this at least gives them some way of thinking of things differently and can prepare them [for their next step]. I feel personally that if I had not had a lot of this SLO assessment experience . . . I don’t know if I would’ve been really ready for the level of position that I have today. I feel like that helped me and prepared me for moving forward and so I hope that, at this level, it helps them move forward in their own career. And I tell them all the time, “Hey, on your resume you can say . . . out of all my workshops, 97% of my students say X, Y, Z or 89% say blah, blah, blah, blah.” So I want them to know that what they’re doing matters to the students but it also helps them professionally, not just for doing the work but also to market themselves for future opportunities as well. So always letting them know, “Hey, this is helpful for you. You could throw this on your resume. You can ‘quantify’ now.” So thinking of it in a professional development way, I think it gets them a little bit more like, “Oh, okay. Yeah, let’s do this.” It’s not, “Oh my God, I got to do this.” Or “Oh, I hate doing this.” Or, “Oh, I don’t want to do it.” It’s just a part of what we do.

Constitutive Pattern 2: Framing Student Learning Outside of the Classroom

The pattern of framing student learning outside of the classroom emerged through two relational themes: Navigating College and Beyond (Theme 6) and Making Learning Meaningful (Theme 7). The two relational themes were revealed through the analysis of 16 key text excerpts across all interviews. These two relational themes supported the identified pattern of framing student learning outside of the classroom, revealing the essence of what learning outside of the classroom means to the participants, which included shared expressions of the student affairs curriculum as it relates to content and pedagogy. The two relational themes revealed through participants' responses are provided in more detail, followed by supportive text.

Relational Theme 6: Navigating College and Beyond

The theme of Navigating College and Beyond emerged through nine key text excerpts as participants' common experiences with student learning assessment. As Mia relayed her experiences with developing student learning outcomes, she provided examples of the learning outcomes on which her department focuses to help students achieve, in essence, a student affairs curriculum. She stated:

We're looking at what . . . we really want . . . our students to get. What do we want them to learn? What kind of success skills do we want them to have? And we're talking about things that are outside of academics.

She chronicled what is included in this curriculum, listing, "Things [that are] not necessarily academic tools but . . . their Students Center . . . Canvas . . . how [to] navigate the website, [and] how they find [college] resources." Mia continued to explain why it is important to teach students how to use their student center:

[It] is something that we have found students are not necessarily getting a real training on how to use, [which is a tool that] is actually there for them to be able to add classes, to drop classes, to look at transcript, etc. Those kinds of things that are essential to them . . . being able to navigate college . . . to be successful, and take better control of their own education. Then . . . we can put together . . . and implement something that would actually help them to learn that particular skill.

Mia made a clear distinction in the connection between students knowing how to use college tools and resources and their ability to take control of their own education and succeed in college, which was a common sentiment among all participants. In addition to acknowledging the importance of students learning how to use college tools and resources, Luca emphasized the important role assessment practitioners play in students' personal development. He stated the following:

One thing we've learned as well is that we need to make sure that we give our [students] the right tools to be successful [here]. And then it's also managing their time, getting help, and not being afraid of asking for help and not being embarrassed because they don't know how to do something or they feel dumb. And we found that individuals [who did engage in support services] did well. Having individuals available for [our] students to make sure they have the tools and the resources to be successful, were successful in the classroom.

Student affairs assessment scholars have asserted that student affairs educators can play a crucial role in a student's holistic growth, development, and learning. This role can contribute to student success when educators are purposeful and strategic about what opportunities students should

have to learn outside of the classroom and how they can best facilitate that learning to maximize their college experience (Kerr et al., 2020).

Mia and Luca both made explicit statements identifying the relational connection between learning the tools to successfully navigate college, and a student's ability to succeed beyond college. Mia stated:

If we want our students to be successful, they have to know how to use the tools that we are expecting them to use here on this campus. We want them to retain, we want them to graduate, and we want them to successfully transfer [to higher learning or the workforce]. In order for them to be able to do that, they have to know how to use all the tools that [are] given to them at their disposal.

Luca said, "Being effective here is going to help them be effective wherever they go as well. Student success is huge."

Participants' responses revealed a shared expression the curriculum of navigating college and beyond includes how to use college systems, how to navigate the college website, how to access support resources, and how to facilitate personal development skills. This common sentiment was not a comprehensive list of the student affairs curriculum, but reflected the essence of what it means to successfully navigate college and beyond. Among participants, there was a shared expression that the meaning of student success is about student retention, graduation, and successful transition to higher learning or the workforce. Participants' responses indicated a relational connection between the student affairs curriculum and student success. This strong belief among all participants between what they teach students and the positive impact it can have on student outcomes, brings purpose, meaning, and fulfillment to their work.

Relational Theme 7: Making Learning Meaningful

As participants recalled their experiences with assessing student learning, the theme of Making Learning Meaningful emerged through seven key text excerpts. Mia voiced her belief that a significant benefit in using student learning assessment results is the ability to design more meaningful learning experiences and, in turn, produce a greater impact on student outcomes. She remembered a time when the results from a SLOs assessment indicated they were not accomplishing desired learning outcomes:

We wanted to see if the student felt like from being in the session that they had a better grasp on these particular topics and the responses that we were getting back, were, well actually no. And actually, I don't know what that meant, and I still have more questions after going through this session. So from those responses . . . we realized students aren't getting it. They're confused about what we're saying.

It was important to Mia to effectively redesign their workshop, so she pulled her team together and tasked them with figuring out how they could present the content in a way that students would understand. The desire to present content in a way that is meaningful to students translates into a philosophy of curriculum design from the lens of the student experience. Mia stated:

We needed to get out of our heads . . . [and] . . . had to . . . really go back to our own experiences [and] figure out how to explain it to somebody who might [be hearing it for the first time]. So, we were looking at . . . experiences that students would more likely be going through at this point in their life [and] then relate it back to those things that we were trying to teach them. To relate them [the concepts] back in a way that made better sense [to our students].

In collaboration with Mia's team, they shifted some of the topics and redesigned the content using scenarios that would be more relatable and make more sense to students. After the redesign, the SLO assessment results indicated students were understanding the content. Mia revealed, "[In] doing that, we found that it made more sense to them. We didn't change the concept, we just figured out a way to better present the information."

In addition to designing workshops based on what educators want students to learn, Lili confided she also seeks to understand the students' interests and current level of understanding about the topic. Lili explained:

So one of the questions that I incorporate . . . before [planning a workshop] is to assess what they already know about what it is that we're hoping to assess. So I'm like, what do you already know about this? Is it important to you? What spin do we need to put on this to make it important to you?

Lili mentioned student feedback is important because she wants to make sure what she develops is what her students want and is designed to propel them to that next level of thinking so they can continue to grow. In this way, Lili was able to create an even greater impact on her students' learning and development, an important source of fulfillment for her.

Participants' responses revealed a shared expression of the importance of developing curriculum for support services (e.g., workshops, training sessions, Canvas courses) to which students can relate, creating meaningful learning experiences that enhance learning. Participants' responses indicated a relational connection between engaging in the assessment process (i.e., using assessment results that identify learning gaps to finetune learning experiences) and the ability to provide meaningful learning experiences that impact positive student outcomes. These common sentiments provided insight into the essence and nature of student learning outside of

the classroom, including a curriculum and active engagement in the assessment process to create meaningful learning experiences.

Summary

The findings presented in this chapter were the result of an interpretive phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of student learning outcomes assessment among four midlevel student affairs managers. I identified 154 key text excerpts to support the thematic and pattern analysis. Two constitutive patterns and seven relational themes emerged through text analysis to gain insight into the essence of the experience of student learning assessment and deepen an understanding of underlying attitudes and beliefs that serve as facilitators or inhibitors to engagement in assessment practices. Participants' responses revealed the insights of a group of student affairs midlevel managers who were deeply committed to positively impacting student success outcomes and recognized the power of ongoing assessment in creating meaningful learning experiences that lead to improved student outcomes. Participants were dedicated professionals who were influenced by their environment, acted collaboratively in a community of support, and played a highly influential role in fostering a culture of outcomes and assessment in their respective departments.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the experience of student learning outcomes assessment among four midlevel student affairs managers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of change readiness to engage in assessment practices. The aim of gathering rich descriptions of experiences was to yield new insights that senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) at the study site can use to plan effective change strategies to increase engagement in assessment practices. Through an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, I gained a deeper understanding of their lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment and drew out underlying attitudes and beliefs. The research was driven by the overarching question:

How do midlevel student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment?

I also developed five subquestions that align with each of the five change recipients' beliefs that guided this study.

1. *Discrepancy*. How do participants make sense of the need to engage in student learning outcomes?
2. *Appropriateness*. How do participants make sense of the appropriateness of assessing student learning outcomes?
3. *Valence*. How do participants make sense of the benefits of student learning outcomes assessment to the institution, students, and themselves professionally?
4. *Efficacy*. How do participants make sense of their ability to conduct high-quality student learning outcomes assessments?

5. *Principal support.* How do participants experience administrative support to conduct high-quality assessments of student learning?

The interpretations of participants' responses, through the analysis of 154 text excerpts, revealed two constitutive patterns and seven relational themes that described the essence of their lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment. Chapter 5 presents a brief summary of each of the constitutive patterns and seven relational themes, a discussion of the findings, recommendations for practical application, recommendations for future related research, and my experience conducting phenomenology.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Embracing a Culture of Outcomes and Assessment

The essence of the shared lived experiences with engagement in assessment practices among the four participants was revealed as the constitutive pattern of Embracing a Culture of Outcomes and Assessment, supported by five relational themes describing what it means to embrace a culture of assessment. These findings provided key tenets for how to build a culture of outcomes and assessment in a student affairs department. These five relational themes—A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment (Theme 1), Active Engagement in Assessment Practices (Theme 2), Environmental Influences (Theme 3), A Community of Support (Theme 4), and The Role of the Midlevel Manager (Theme 5)—are all critical components in building a culture of outcomes and assessment.

A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment

The relational theme of A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment represented a deep commitment to positively impacting student learning and development outcomes. Mia best described the aforementioned sentiments, noting, “Honestly . . . student outcomes . . . is really

what drives a lot of the initiatives and activities that we end up wanting to do.” Participants’ expressed commitment to affect student outcomes, coupled with their beliefs in the benefit of assessment as an appropriate tool to help improve those outcomes, revealed a common sentiment that the nature and meaning of their work was to design effective college experiences that produced positive student outcomes.

Active Engagement in Assessment Practices

The relational theme of Active Engagement in Assessment Practices represented the lived experiences of actively engaged midlevel student affairs managers in the process of assessment, revealing a shared expression among participants of what it means to actively engage in assessment practices. Participants’ responses revealed a common practice of assessment as an ongoing and iterative process, along with a shared belief in the benefit of using multiple types of assessment strategies.

Environmental Influences

Environmental influences are psychological and structural factors that facilitate or inhibit engagement in assessment practices (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Holt et al., 2007; Vishwanath, 2009). Participants’ responses revealed four environmental influences shaping the ability to embrace a culture of outcomes and assessment: (a) expectations for involvement, (b) engagement of colleagues, (c) college-wide messaging, and (d) organizational and social constraints. Participants’ common experiences of environmental influences brought meaning to the essence of what it was like to experience a culture of outcomes and assessment.

A Community of Support

Participants’ experiences revealed the highly social aspect of assessment. Subsequently, a strong sentiment emerged throughout interviews that engagement in assessment practices is not a

solo endeavor. Embracing a culture of outcomes and assessment requires a heavily reliable community of support involving leadership, peers, collaborative partners, and campus resources as instrumental in the ability to effectively develop and implement assessment practices. This common sentiment, expressed through participants' experiences, provided insight into the essence of what a community of support looks like in a culture of assessment.

Role of the Midlevel Manager

A predominant expression in participants' day-to-day development and implementation of assessment practices was the highly influential role they play in fostering buy-in and providing support for their team via assessment practices. The essential leadership functions that were revealed in their role of building a culture of outcomes and assessment included: (a) practicing intentional engagement, (b) setting clear expectations with high levels of support, (c) communicating purpose and impact, and (d) emphasizing professional development. These four leadership functions defining the role of the midlevel manager supported the constitutive pattern of Embracing a Culture of Outcomes and Assessment and revealed key tenets of how midlevel managers effectively foster and sustain a culture of outcomes and assessment in their department.

Overall, the constitutive pattern represented a group of professionals who exhibited a deep passion and commitment for impacting student learning and development to facilitate positive student outcomes. The participants were a group of caring professionals who were highly collaborative and prioritized building a culture of assessment in their departments through active engagement, structure, and high levels of support with their team members to ensure success. The relational theme of A Strong Belief in Outcomes and Assessment relationally connected to the other four themes due to participants' deep personal commitment to positively affecting student outcomes and their belief in assessment of learning as an effective tool to

improve those outcomes, which served as a foundational source of motivation for action (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Klinke, 2007; Weiner, 2009).

Framing Student Learning Outside of the Classroom

The constitutive pattern of Framing Student Learning Outside of the Classroom emerged from two relational themes: Navigating College and Beyond (Theme 6), and Making Learning Meaningful (Theme 7). The essence of these two themes described the nature of student learning outside of the classroom, which included a curriculum and pedagogy that best facilitated student learning. Participants expressed the sentiment that what they taught students, and the ability to create meaningful learning experiences that are vital to their success, brought purpose, meaning, and fulfillment to their work.

Navigating College and Beyond

The essence of relational Theme 6, Navigating College and Beyond, was the identification of the student affairs curriculum, which included the knowledge and skills students need to successfully navigate college and support future success beyond college.

Making Learning Meaningful

The essence of relational Theme 7, Making Learning Meaningful, reflected the personal commitment among participants in their active engagement of ongoing assessment, development, and refinement of educational strategies to create meaningful learning experiences. Mayhew et al. (2016) asserted the entire student experience, including learning outside of the classroom, provides valuable learning experiences that contribute to student success. The theme of Navigating College and Beyond was relationally connected to the theme of Making Learning Meaningful because the former theme represented a curriculum vital to student success that students were not receiving in their academic classes.

Discussion

The purpose of exploring four midlevel managers' experiences with student learning outcomes assessment was to gain a deeper understanding of attitudes and beliefs inhibiting or facilitating change readiness to engage in assessment practices. The aim of gathering this information was to provide SSAOs with the information they needed to create effective change strategies, develop messaging that addresses beliefs hindering change readiness, and increase engagement in assessment practices. The following discussion outlines the underlying beliefs of midlevel managers, the significant role midlevel managers play in change acceptance, recommendations for SSAOs to build a culture of assessment at their college, recommendations for future research, and my reflections on conducting phenomenology.

Beliefs

The two constitutive patterns of (a) Embracing a Culture of Outcomes and Assessment and (b) Framing Student Learning Outside of the Classroom emerged as evidence of the constitutive nature of participants' lived experiences with assessment practices. Underlying these constitutive patterns were beliefs that influence change readiness to engage in assessment practices. The conceptual framework in this study used a narrow lens to explore the relational influence between psychological factors (i.e., attitudes and beliefs) and structural factors (i.e., conditions in the organization), framed by five change recipients' beliefs, which influence an individual's willingness to temporarily adopt a new behavior (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2007). The change readiness framework developed for this study (see Figure 1) was used to guide the approach for exploring midlevel student affairs managers' lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment. Underlying beliefs aligned with the five change

recipients' beliefs were found to be at the root of the two constitutive patterns, consistent with the conceptual framework and summarized in the following sections.

Discrepancy and Appropriateness

According to Armenakis et al. (1993, 1999), change recipients first attempt to determine whether a change is necessary to achieve the ideal state (discrepancy); the change must also be seen as the appropriate action to effectively reach the ideal state (appropriateness). All participants spoke of a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to positively impact student outcomes. Many comments were made with the sentiment that affecting student outcomes is “their job” and drives what they do in their departments (discrepancy). Participants also voiced a belief that assessment is an effective tool for improving student outcomes, indicating their belief in the appropriateness of student learning outcomes assessment (appropriateness). As discussed in Chapter 2, when organizational members are ready for change, they are receptive and personally motivated to adopt a change (Austin et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2007). Participants' strong sense of responsibility and commitment to positively affecting student outcomes, coupled with their belief that assessment of student learning is an effective tool for improving student outcomes, serve as foundational precursors facilitating their readiness to engage in assessment practices (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Weiner, 2009).

Valence

Valence describes one's perception that the change will produce a benefit for the organization, for those they serve, and for them personally (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). In comparison to the other five change recipients' beliefs, the belief in the benefit of student learning outcomes assessment was mentioned more than any other beliefs.

A frequently relayed sentiment about the benefit of assessment was the visibility it brought to impact, which allowed for continuous refinement of learning and created even greater impact. Valence also included a belief in the benefit to the employee. One participant expressed her belief that learning how to develop and implement student learning assessments prepared her for the leadership position in which she held at the time of the research. Two participants emphasized a belief in the benefit to their team members, which they emphasized with their team as a way for them to understand the benefits and help facilitate their buy-in.

Efficacy

Efficacy was defined as the perceived belief in individual or collective capabilities to implement new behaviors required by the change initiative (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). According to Bandura (1999), there is nothing more pervasive in the desire to take action than the belief in personal efficacy. Participants felt confidence in their ability to develop and implement student learning assessments, which could be attributed in part to their ability to access and use campus resources when needed. Participants also discussed supporting their team members' abilities to conduct assessments by working side-by-side with team members through all phases of the assessment process to ensure their success. When organizational members feel confident in their ability to engage in the change behavior, they are more likely to initiate, engage in, and sustain the change (Weiner, 2009). Subsequently, the high level of support managers provide to build confidence in their employees' ability to develop and implement assessment strategies facilitates increased participation and sustainability in the engagement assessment practices among their team members.

Principal Support

Principal support is the belief that change agents and opinion leaders genuinely support the change and they can successfully influence others to accept change (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Participants' experiences with principal support varied. One participant divulged their belief that they felt supported by their direct supervisor and senior leadership. Another participant felt supported by their direct supervisor regarding having clear expectations set, but this participant and others did not convey any sentiments of feeling supported by senior leadership at the studied college in the Southwest. Two participants shared what they believed effective support for influencing large-scale change acceptance from senior leadership looked like based on their experiences working at other colleges. Effective support from senior leadership was expressed as providing transparent, college-wide communication with messaging that (a) prioritized assessment; (b) set clear expectations for engagement; and (c) integrated assessment into the structure of the college, such as linking student learning assessment to the strategic planning process.

The Role of Midlevel Manager

Insights gained from participants' lived experiences with student learning outcomes (SLOs) assessment revealed the constitutive pattern of Embracing a Culture of Outcomes and Assessment with five relational themes that described the essence of the experience. These themes provided key tenets on how to build a culture of assessment. The highly influential work of strengthening acceptance of and motivation for permanent behavior change occurs during the adoption phase, when experiences either reinforce acceptance or resistance, which is significantly influenced by the five change recipients' beliefs (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). An in-depth exploration of the five relational themes revealed the role of the

midlevel manager as the single-most important facilitator of successful change adoption in a department. The five relational themes were further interpreted to identify four key strategies that served as a blueprint for how to establish a culture of outcomes and assessment.

Communicating Purpose and Impact

Participants proclaimed a deep passion and commitment to the development of the “whole” student and creation of learning experiences that positively affect student outcomes. A consistent message rang true across all interviews: helping students achieve their goals was why they do the work. Participants emphasized the purpose and meaning of their work as they worked to gain buy-in from team members to participate in assessment practices. Student affairs professionals’ responsibility to help students reach their full potential is a core value documented in student affairs literature as early as 1937, when the American Council on Education (ACE) first published the purpose and essential functions of student personnel work in *The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)* of 1937 (ACE, 1937, 1949). Participants’ deep sense of commitment, coupled with a belief that assessment of student learning is an effective tool to help improve outcomes, serves as a strong foundational source of motivation for action (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Klinke, 2007; Weiner, 2009).

Set Clear Expectations for Participation with High Levels of Support

All participants recalled setting clear expectations for employee participation in assessment practices. Many explained assessment as being “what we do.” Although someone new to assessment could feel intimidated with this expectation, participants were highly engaged leaders and described working side-by-side with team members through all stages of the assessment process. For change theorists, this level of support is key to gaining temporary buy-in and is a characteristic of the change adoption phase (see Figure 1). Recipients are willing to

adopt the new behavior; during this phase, the work of building change acceptance occurs and the ongoing provision of a high level of support is critical to successfully build change acceptance leading to permanent adoption of assessment practices (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009). Some examples of high-engagement, high-support managerial actions revealed through participants' responses included working side-by-side as partners with the employees, monitoring progress on assessment efforts, proactively stepping in where needed, collaborating with employees during each step in the assessment process, and celebrating successes. This level of engagement and support is characteristic of change acceptance experiences that build acceptance and lead to permanent behavior change. In this stage, recipients either build change acceptance or change resistance (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Weiner, 2009).

Leveraging Campus Resources and Partnerships

A final important tenet in building a culture of assessment was the midlevel managers' intentional development of partnerships and the use of campus resources to support their success in developing and implementing assessment strategies. Leveraging campus resources and partnerships was a critical facilitator in change readiness, because the perceived belief in ones' ability to successfully implement assessment practices is essential to successful adoption (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). Examples of partnerships and resources included collaboration with the institutional effectiveness (IE) office, the director of assessment, members of the college assessment and review team, and faculty. All participants' examples of assessment work showed collaboration was involved. From their perspectives, it became clear assessment efforts were not a solo endeavor; embracing a culture of outcomes and assessment called for a

high level of collaboration with district councils, college committees, faculty, and other student support areas.

Recommendations for Practice

The aim of gathering rich descriptions of experiences with student learning outcomes assessment among midlevel student affairs managers was to bring insights to SSAOs at the study site that can be used to plan effective change strategies designed to increase engagement in assessment practices. Although midlevel managers are dedicated to and responsible for building a culture of assessment in their department, participants' responses revealed a belief that SSAOs are responsible for building a campus-wide culture of assessment, which is strongly supported in student affairs assessment literature (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1996; ACPA & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004, 2006; Kerr et al., 2020). Furthermore, change scholars have asserted senior leaders are a critical component of successful organizational change because successful large-scale change comes down to changing practices, attitudes, and behaviors of employees in the system (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). Participants' responses related to the seven relational themes were examined and interpreted to identify recommended strategies SSAOs can explore that may help facilitate large-scale engagement in assessment practices and establish a culture of assessment on campus. Recommendations were provided as consideration because the study population was not large enough to make assertions of the most effective strategies for the college study site; however, the shared experiences of how midlevel managers foster a culture of assessment in their departments pointed toward worthwhile strategies to consider.

Bridging the Gap Between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs

Participants' responses revealed leveraging campus resources and partnerships served as a critical facilitator in their ability to successfully develop and implement assessment practices. Leveraging partnerships is emphasized as a best practice in the student affairs assessment literature (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). Specifically, given the current understanding of learning as a holistic and multicentric activity that occurs throughout and across the college experience, collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs divisions is emphasized as critical to effective development and achievement of institutional student learning outcomes (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). The authors of ACPA's (1996) *Student Learning Imperative* stated, "if learning is the primary measure of institutional productivity by which the quality of undergraduate education is determined, what and how much students learn also must be the criterion by which the value of student affairs is judged" (p. 2), emphasizing the shared responsibility of student learning.

If the institution is interested in expanding efforts to create conditions that emphasize educating the whole student, student affairs assessment literature has strongly suggested that intentional steps need to be taken toward bridging the gap between academic affairs and student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). The tendency for lack of collaboration is a common barrier identified in student affairs assessment literature (Kerr et al., 2020). Furthermore, if there is interest in strengthening a college-wide culture of assessment, a promising strategy in bringing faculty and student affairs together, identified in *Learning Reconsidered 2*, is to engage in a process of mapping the learning environment (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). This process would entail documenting programs and service areas that provide learning opportunities and collaborating with faculty to identify what activities enhance classroom experiences. Mapping

can serve as a framework to develop a broad understanding of learning experiences through the lens of institutional learning outcomes (ILOs), working together to identify strategies and resources that support holistic learning of students and opportunities for powerful partnerships (ACPA & NASPA, 2006).

Professional Development

The findings revealed participants used multiple different types of assessment strategies to assess student learning in their programs and services. Mia explained how they were able to use a student satisfaction survey to identify a gap in learning. Specifically, Mia interpreted student feedback indicating a low level of confidence in staff knowledge (on a particular topic) as a gap in student learning; in turn, they described developing staff training around that competency to help close the learning gap for students. Luca indicated he primarily used the tracking and monitoring of grades to determine how their services contribute to SLOs. Traditional assessment measures (e.g., grades, retention, student satisfaction, participant feedback) contribute to a comprehensive assessment approach, but do not provide evidence of how well an individual program or service affects student learning (Kerr et al., 2020). Furthermore, as participants recounted their experiences with developing and implementing student learning outcomes assessments, alignment with ILOs was not mentioned. Allen (2006) asserted alignment with ILOs is critical in supporting a cohesive learning environment. In a discussion about learning outside of the classroom, Allen (2006) added the institution, “as a whole, should support the general education program” (p. 103).

The way in which practitioners define and understand learning is critical to their effectiveness (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). As efforts are taken to strengthen partnerships across the college, it is critical these learning communities speak the same language (ACPA, 1996). A

major challenge in building a campus-wide culture of assessment is the lack of consistency in assessment expertise among staff (Kerr et al., 2020). In every case, coordinated efforts must be taken to ensure those working together in partnership are fully prepared to create and assess meaningful learning experiences (ACPA, 1996). Change scholars have asserted that taking the time to educate staff on the attitudes, knowledge base, and skill sets necessary to successfully engage in assessment practices (i.e., discrepancy, appropriateness, and efficacy) is critical to staff having positive experiences, which help build acceptance while they are in the adoption phase (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; see Figure 1). In other words, once staff start to engage in the new behavior and they see the benefit of assessment, their belief (acceptance) will grow, which is likely to lead to permanent behavior change and build a sustaining culture (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). Conversely, an individual who is expected to adopt a new behavior but does not understand why, and does not have the basic knowledge and skills to be successful, will most likely resist during the adoption phase (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007). Investing time in training is time-intensive, but if senior leadership are invested in effectively creating a sustainable culture of assessment at their campus, such time is needed (principal support).

Integrating Learning Assessment and College Strategic Planning

Participants' responses revealed setting clear expectations for employee participation in assessment practices served as a critical facilitator in their ability to successfully develop and implement assessment practices. Especially in the current climate of increased accountability in higher education, it is more important than ever for senior leaders in student affairs and academic affairs to hold all campus educators accountable for their contributions to student learning outcomes. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, two participants recounted their experiences working at other colleges that have a strong culture of assessment. Mia asserted integrating

student learning assessment into the college strategic planning process is an effective strategy for fostering a culture of assessment. In *Learning Reconsidered 2*, the authors argued, “advancing student learning through strategic planning” (ACPA & NASPA, 2006, pp. 53–54) is critical to building a culture of assessment. Acknowledging how difficult it is to create change, the authors asserted integrating the assessment into strategic planning establishes a strong foundation to ensure systematic and intentional review of learning outcomes, which leads to strengthened institutional structures throughout the entire campus, purposeful resource allocation, and greater alignment with priorities and accountability for student outcomes (ACPA & NASPA, 2006). According to change scholars, integrating assessment practices into the strategic planning process is a strategy likely to contribute to successful large-scale engagement in assessment, because institutionalization of practices form when they become embedded in the structure and processes of the organization (Kezar, 2018).

Prioritizing Change Readiness With Midlevel Managers

Participants’ responses clearly demonstrated the importance of the midlevel manager role in the acceptance of change by their team members. Participants indicated they spend a significant amount of time preparing team members for change. Notably, for the managers to build readiness among their team members, they must first be ready for the change themselves (Armenakis, Bernerth, et al., 2007; Burgan & Burgan, 2014). For this reason, the most impactful strategy a senior administrator can use is to focus their attention on building change readiness among their midlevel managers.

Two case studies introduced in Chapter 2 can be used to emphasize the significant role that midlevel managers who are change ready play in change acceptance. The case studies traced the unique journeys of Eastfield and El Centro Community Colleges in using best practices to

build assessment capacity in their student affairs divisions (Ozaki et al., 2020). Both institutions concentrated on the structural factors of change, such as developing an action plan and implementation schedule. The departments both identified lead facilitators, invested time in training, and provided ongoing training and support throughout the implementation phase. Despite this high level of support, both colleges experienced challenges preventing them from achieving full implementation (i.e., analyzing results and making process improvement changes). One college was greatly challenged with getting buy-in from directors and staff because of misperceptions of how results would be used and belief systems that questioned assessment as an effective means to identify strengths and opportunities to improve services. Drawing on my findings in this scenario, if senior leadership had dedicated their focus to first building sufficient readiness with directors, which would have provided the opportunity to address concerns about appropriateness, they may not have had any issues and would have been successful in their assessment efforts. The other college did not see as much clearly communicated resistance; however, there was a disconnect between engaging in establishing assessment plans and putting them into practice on a consistent basis. It is important to have support in place, but as my interviews suggested, the level of support from a manager in the department who is fully committed to assessment and working side-by-side with their team is irreplaceable. An engaged manager who strongly believes in assessment and is committed to measuring their impact would be putting them into practice consistently, similar to the participants in this study. The difference is in the midlevel manager's beliefs. If senior administrators focus on building sufficient change readiness in their midlevel managers, they would be well-positioned to successfully build a culture of assessment at their colleges (Armenakis et al., 2007a).

Recommendations for Future Research

As stated earlier, at the time of this research, I worked at the college where this study took place. I was a member of the college assessment committee and we were in the early stages of developing coordinated efforts to increase engagement in student learning outcomes assessment in the student affairs division. My goal in selecting this project was to gain insight that would help contribute to our efforts. A particular question generated insight about moments and created shifts in participants' thinking about their role in improving student learning: "Can you tell me about a moment that made you start to think about your role in improving student learning?" These conversations sparked my curiosity about the dynamics in moments of major paradigm shifts. *Beliefs* are at the root of a shift in perception, but is there anything else senior leaders and change agents can gain by exploring this specific question more deeply with student affairs professionals? Perhaps we will learn more about effective facilitation skills. What specifically was said? How was it said? I would like to conduct additional interviews with more midlevel managers in the student affairs division, focusing on this specific question to see if there are any additional insights to be gained that would add to understanding of how to effectively lead change in student affairs.

Conducting Phenomenology

My goal in exploring the experience of SLO assessment among four midlevel student affairs managers was to gain a deeper understanding of underlying attitudes and beliefs that facilitate or inhibit change readiness to engage in assessment practices. My choice of the interpretive phenomenological approach was guided by my constructivist–interpretivist worldview, which assumes reality and meaning making are socially constructed (Tuli, 2011).

I used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the experience of SLO assessment. The aim of phenomenological research is to “reduce individual lived experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 39), which means to grasp the nature and significance of that experience in a new and unseen way. Through the interpretive lens, a lived experience is dualistic in nature. On one hand, an individual experiences the concreteness of reality before them. On the other hand, the individual actively engages in shaping and creating their experiential realities based on individual and collective self-understanding, perceptions, and thoughtful praxis (Van Manen, 2016). Heidegger (1962) asserted the fundamental nature of language in understanding the human experience, stating, “Discoursing or talking is the way in which we articulate ‘significantly’ the intelligibility of being-in-the-world” (p. 204). In other words, it is only through language that individuals are able to recall and reflect on their experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Despite framing interview questions in a way that attempted to get at the essence of the experiences such as “What was that like?”, “How did you . . . ?”, and “What do you mean by . . . ?”, many responses were more oriented toward describing the structure of the experience. After each interview, I reflected on how I asked questions and continued to finetune my approach. After the first two interviews, I felt more comfortable with my ability to guide participants in describing the nature of their experiences. I recalled the first two interviews feeling more like interviews to me and the last two feeling more like conversations. Despite this learning curve, I obtained rich descriptions from all interviews and interpreted the meaning of the text in consideration of each participant’s situatedness, as well as my own knowledge, situatedness, and personal experiences with the phenomenon (Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 2016).

The aim of providing SSAOs with information they could use to increase engagement in assessment practices was achieved through three primary research outcomes: (a) the interpretation of participant responses, which revealed the significance of the role that midlevel managers play in change acceptance; (b) identification of three key tenets on how midlevel managers effectively build a culture of assessment in their departments; and (c) recommendations for practice which senior administrators can use to increase engagement in assessment practices at their college.

Summary

This interpretive phenomenological study sought to address the theory–practice gap in student affairs assessment by exploring the lived experiences with student learning outcomes assessment among four midlevel student affairs managers. The findings revealed the study’s participants were a group of midlevel managers who were deeply passionate for the work they do. They were committed to positively impacting learning outcomes, believed in the appropriateness of SLO assessment, and were highly engaged in assessment practices. This study is significant in that participant responses revealed three key tenets of how they build a culture of assessment in their department: (a) communicating purpose and impact, (b) setting clear expectations for participation with high levels of support, and (c) leveraging campus resources and partnerships. Though this group of managers all embraced a culture of assessment in their departments, the college as a whole had not yet established a campus-wide culture of assessment that held all educators accountable for engagement in systematic and intentional review of learning outcomes throughout the entire campus.

Although the participants embraced a culture of assessment in their departments, an in-depth examination of study themes revealed four significant barriers to fostering a campus-wide

culture of assessment, addressed in the recommendations for practice: (a) strengthen partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs; (b) support professional development to ensure there is a common language, standard knowledge base, and skill sets necessary for successful collaboration; (c) integrate learning assessment into college strategic planning efforts; and (d) prioritize building change readiness among midlevel managers because of the significant role they play in change acceptance within their departments. These findings were significant because they provide a blueprint the college can use as a basis to build a stronger culture of assessment and close the theory–practice gap on campus. In addition, the exploration of lived experiences was framed by five change recipients’ beliefs that were consistent with change readiness literature, thus validating its application to the student affairs assessment literature.

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Appendix A: NAU IRB Approval (Minimal Risk Letter)



Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board for the
Human Research Protection Program

525 S Beaver St
PO Box: 4062
Flagstaff AZ 86011
928-523-9551
<https://www.nau.edu/IRB>

To: Christine Neill, Ed.D.
From: NAU IRB Office
Approval Date: February 20, 2023

Project: Change Readiness: Student Affairs Engagement In Assessment Practices
Project Number: 2000040-1
Submission: New Project
Action: APPROVED
Project Risk Level: MINIMAL RISK
Approval Expiration Date: February 20, 2028
Next Report Date:
Review Category/ies: **The project is not federally funded or supported and has been deemed to be no more than minimal risk.**

This project has been reviewed and approved by an IRB Chair or designee.

- Northern Arizona University maintains a Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (FWA #00000357).
- All research procedures should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the guidance.
- The Principal Investigator should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that affect the protocol and report any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others. Please refer to Guidance Investigators Responsibility after IRB Approval, Reporting Local Information and Minimal Risk or Exempt Research.
- All documents referenced in this submission have been reviewed and approved. Documents are filed with the HRPP Office within IRBNet. If subjects will be consented, the approved consent(s) are available within IRBNet upon approval notification from the HRPP Office.

Important

The principal investigator for this study is responsible for obtaining all necessary approvals before commencing research. Please be sure that you have satisfied applicable external and University requirements, for example (but not limited to) data repositories, listserv permission, records request, data use agreement, [conducting University surveys](#), [data security](#), [international](#), [conflicts of interest](#), [biological safety](#), [radiation safety](#), [HIPAA](#), [FERPA](#), [FDA](#), [sponsor approval](#), [clinicaltrials.gov](#), [tribal consultation](#), or [school approval](#). IRB approval does not convey approval to commence research in the event that other requirements have not been satisfied.

Appendix B: IRB of the Maricopa County Community College District



Institutional Review Board

2411 W. 14th St., Tempe, AZ 85281
(480) 731-8701

March 1st, 2023

MCCCD IRB Authorization: 2023-02-PI-Neill-C

Dear Ms. Neill,

The IRB of the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) in Arizona has conducted an Administrative Review of the research study below and decided to authorize it at the site(s) indicated.

<i>Name of Principal Investigator (PI)</i>	Christine Neill
<i>Title of Research Study</i>	Change Readiness: Student Affairs Engagement in Assessment Practices
<i>Site(s) of Study in MCCCD</i>	Glendale Community College
<i>Name of Approving IRB</i>	Northern Arizona University
<i>Protocol Number</i>	2000040-1
<i>Date of Approval</i>	February 20th, 2023

The MCCCD Administrative Review process does not include review under 45 CFR 46 Protection of Human Subjects. The PI remains responsible for ensuring compliance with the determinations of the approving IRB. If changes or modifications are made to the study, the MCCCD IRB must be notified by the PI.

Additionally, by undertaking this study at MCCCD, the PI acknowledges and agrees that authorization does not commit MCCCD to provide resources or data collection for the investigator(s), nor recruit for or participate in the project.

Chandler-Gilbert • Estrella Mountain • Gateway • Glendale • Mesa • Paradise Valley
Phoenix • Rio Salado • Scottsdale • South Mountain • District Office

1



Institutional Review Board

2411 W. 14th St., Tempe, AZ 85281
(480) 731-8701

Cordially,

Ladonna Lewis, PhD

MCCCD IRB Member

Chandler-Gilbert • Estrella Mountain • Gateway • Glendale • Mesa • Paradise Valley
Phoenix • Rio Salado • Scottsdale • South Mountain • District Office

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Email Participant Recruitment Letter

To: (employee email address)
From: xxxx@nau.edu
Subject line: Request for Participation in Dissertation Study

Dear [Student Affairs Manager],

I hope that my email finds you well. My name is Christine Neill and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Northern Arizona University (NAU).

I am conducting a research study on mid-level student affairs managers' experiences with the assessment of student learning as a result of their programs and services. It is my hope that the study can provide information that will help senior leaders better understand more effective ways to support increased participation in student learning assessment in student affairs.

The research study has been approved by the Northern Arizona University and Glendale Community College Institutional Review Boards (IRB) and I am now in the process of participant recruitment. The Informed Consent form and IRB approval letters are attached to this email for your consideration.

I am seeking your participation in my dissertation study where you will be interviewed for approximately 90 minutes. The interview will take place during the weeks of [insert dates]. The interview will be conducted in a private room on your campus, with the researcher, where interruption is minimal or in an agreed upon location that is convenient for you. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

Your name and the name of your college will not appear in the dissertation. Any identifiable details that might point toward your identity will not appear in the study or any published results to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

If you are willing to participate in my dissertation study or have any questions, please contact me at xxxx@nau.edu or ###-###-####.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Christine Neill
Doctoral Candidate, Northern Arizona University

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form



Office of Research Compliance

Project Number: 2000040-1
Approval Date: February 20, 2023
This stamp must be on all
consenting documents



NAU Human Subject Informed Consent

Study Title: Change Readiness: Student Affairs Engagement in Assessment Practices

Principal Investigator: Christine Neill, Doctoral Candidate, Northern Arizona University

This is a consent form for research participation.

This form contains important information about the study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. Please consider this information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is designed to explore mid-level student affairs managers' experiences with the assessment of student learning as a result of their programs and services. My hope is that the study can provide information to senior leaders about the experiences of their mid-level managers so that they may better understand more effective ways to support increased participation in the assessment of student learning in student affairs. This study is being conducted as part of the final requirements for the Doctor of Education (EdD) degree in Educational Leadership at Northern Arizona University.

Procedures

I understand that I will be asked a series of questions related to the topic of the study in the form of an interview. I understand that my interview may take approximately 90 minutes. If the researcher needs to have a follow-up interview to ask additional questions for clarification and understanding, I understand that the second interview will not take any longer than 60 minutes. The interview session(s) will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes only.

Requirements of study participation

1. I am a mid-level manager in student affairs that serves as the department's final decision-maker.
2. I am responsible for implementing assessment practices and using the results to improve services in my areas of oversight.
3. I have at least thought about what students should be learning as a result of the programs and services I oversee, and ways to improve that learning.
4. After the initial interview, I am willing to participate in a second interview with follow-up questions to increase clarity and understanding if needed.
5. I am willing to review the researcher's summary of my interview to validate their interpretation/provide clarification to ensure accuracy. I understand that doing so will help increase the validity of the research findings.

NAU Adult Consent Non-Federally Funded

V Mar 2020

Consent Version: 02/20/2023

Page 1 of 3



Potential Risk

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. This means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the study are not greater than in everyday life. An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subject's research at Northern Arizona University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Compensation

I understand that I will not receive payment for my participation in this study, nor will I benefit directly from participating in the study.

Confidentiality

The researcher will use a pseudonym for me in the study rather than my name to guarantee that my participation is kept confidential. The list connecting my name to this pseudonym will be stored in an encrypted folder on Christine Neill's password protected computer, which will be destroyed when the study is complete. I also understand that any identifiable details that might point to my identity will not appear in the study or any published results. I understand that the audio-recordings will not be stored with my name or contact information in an effort to protect my personal data and will be destroyed after they are transcribed. I understand that the information that I provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board may review the research records for monitoring purposes.

Future Data Use

The information collected about you will not be used or shared for future research studies. This study is being conducted as part of the final requirements for an EdD in Educational Leadership at Northern Arizona University.

Voluntary nature of the study

If I decide to participate, I understand that I am free to not answer any question and can withdraw from the study at any time.

Contacts and questions

The researcher conducting this study is Christine Neill, under the guidance of Dr. Frances Riemer at Northern Arizona University. The researcher will answer any question you have about the study. Please contact Christine Neill at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]@nau.edu or Dr. Frances Riemer at 9[REDACTED]er@nau.edu. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone



Office of Research Compliance

who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 928-523-9551 or online at <http://nau.edu/Research/Compliance/Human-Research/Welcome/>.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read the above information, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I acknowledge that I meet the requirements of study participation. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I agree to be audio recorded. I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date

Signature of Investigator:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form.

Investigator: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Research Question

This interpretive phenomenological study is designed to answer the following overarching research question:

1. How do mid-level student affairs managers understand and experience student learning outcomes assessment?

Introduction/Building Rapport

Before we begin talking about your experiences with student learning, I would like to learn a little bit more about you.

Can you tell me about how you came to your role as a manager in student affairs?

Prompts: lengths of time in student affairs, decision to lead in student affairs, value in the contribution they bring.

What stands out to you as the most significant part of your roles as a student affairs manager and the impact that you have on student outcomes?

Prompts: values, beliefs, purpose, impact etc.

Research Questions

I have developed five sub-questions that align with each of the five change recipients' beliefs that guide this study.

RQ1: How do participants make sense of the *need* to engage in student learning outcomes assessment? (Discrepancy)

IQ1: Reflecting on what you want students to learn as a result of your programs and services.

- a. Tell me about an experience where you discovered a gap in student learning and how you worked to close that gap.

Prompts: belief in the need, level of engagement, frequency/consistency, influences/inhibitors to engagement

RQ2: How do participants make sense of the *appropriateness* of assessing student learning outcomes assessment? (Appropriateness)

IQ2: Reflecting on your journey moving from a focus on student satisfaction to thinking about assessing student learning:

- a. Tell me about a time/an experience that helped you understand your role in improving student learning.
- b. When was a moment when you learned about the value of assessing student learning as a means to improve program effectiveness?

Prompts: theory and practice, what influenced engagement, experiences that inform understanding of assessment, principal support

RQ3: How do participants make sense of their ability to conduct high-quality student learning outcomes assessment? (Efficacy)

IQ3: Reflecting on your experiences with thinking about student learning as an outcome of your services:

- a. Tell me about a time/an experience when you developed and implemented a plan for improving student learning that resulted in successful program changes.
- b. Tell me about a time/an experience when you developed and implemented a plan for improving student learning that was not carried out to completion or where the data was not used.

Prompts: confidence in skills or lack thereof, challenges/ barriers to engagement, what is it like to engage in assessment

RQ4: How do participants make sense of the benefits of student learning outcomes assessment to the institution, students, and themselves professionally? (Valence)

IQ4: Tell me about a moment when you saw the benefit of using student learning results to make improvements in programs and services.

Prompts: understanding of the benefits to the institution/students/themselves professionally

RQ5: How do participants experience administrative support to conduct high-quality assessment of student learning? (Principal support)

IQ5: Tell me about an experience you've had in receiving support to conduct high-quality assessment of student learning?

Prompts: ongoing training, visible advocacy from leadership, expectations to engage in assessment, frequency of discourse on the importance of assessment and capacity building

Additional Prompts:

1. What was that like for you?
2. How would you describe...?
3. Can you share more about....?
4. What do you mean by...?
5. Can you give me an example?