EXPLORING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES INHERENT TO STUDENT AFFAIRS LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF BOUNDED RATIONALITY: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
July 2016
Abstract

A major discrepancy exists between the research on and practice of student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of multiple measures to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks of student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship, yet student affairs practitioners and researchers are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method. Adding to this problem of practice, a growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning. If scholars and professional organizations recommend “multiple-measures” and mixed-method approaches to measuring student learning yet student affairs practitioners and researchers rely on self-reports surveys, which may not be valid, then more must be known about why student affairs professionals use self-report surveys as their primary, and often only, source of data on student learning. The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was to explore this problem of practice by investigating how nine student affairs assessment professionals describe the decision-making processes inherent to measuring the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs and services as well as the contexts, limitations, and environments that influence decisions. Through the lens of bounded rationality, the findings of this study reveal that student affairs assessment professionals strive to make the best decisions possible using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while remaining cognizant of the influences of internal factors, including resources, internal stakeholders and culture as well as external factors, such as existing knowledge and external stakeholders.

Keywords: student affairs learning outcomes assessment, decision-making, bounded rationality, transcendental phenomenology
Dedication

This work is dedicated to Judith Green, my most loving and encouraging mother, who instilled in me a love of learning and a profound respect for the value of education. My Mom’s hard work, sacrifice and commitment to family provided me with the opportunity to follow my dreams. My Mom has taught me patience and kindness towards others as well as adaptability and resilience in the face of adversity. Thank you for supporting me in every way possible throughout my doctoral work and throughout my life.
Acknowledgements

I have learned so much through the doctoral research process and cannot express how grateful I am to the amazing people who have helped me along the way. I want to especially thank my family—Mom, Dad, Emma, and Mama—for your support and encouragement as well as teaching me the value of education and hard work. Of course, I can’t forget to thank my beautiful Maine Coon cat, Cougar, for snuggling up by my side for over 200 pages.

I would like to sincerely thank the faculty at Northeastern University, especially my advisor Dr. Kimberly Nolan. You helped me make my argument more concise and powerful, ensure alignment between all elements of my project, and enhance readability through smooth transitions. I also appreciate Dr. Joseph McNabb, my second reader, who challenged me to embrace memoing as part of the transcendental phenomenological process of “Epoch” and align all elements of my study with my research design.

I am grateful to my work colleagues at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education and Wentworth Institute of Technology for their encouragement and to MIT and WIT for financially supporting my progress. I would specifically like to thank Dr. Judith McGuire Robinson for her support and encouragement and providing me with thoughtful feedback and expert advice as a member of my committee.

I would also like to thank the student affairs assessment professionals who participated in this study. Not only were they generous with their time, they were candid in their remarks and encouraging of my research.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and personal support team—Kellyann, Jill, Allison, Christy, Alison, Keven and Kristen. You helped me tone down my perfectionist and workaholic tendencies and apply a more holistic approach to balancing work, life and thesis.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how student affairs professionals make decisions about how to assess the learning that occurs as a result of co-curricular programs. In this study, decision-making is generally defined as the cognitive process of selecting a logical choice from available options. When attempting to assess student learning, student affairs professionals must select logical data collection methods from available options, such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, objective tests, and rubrics. Knowledge generated from this study informs student affairs learning outcomes assessment scholarship and practice.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to student affairs learning outcomes assessment to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, bounded rationality, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study, is introduced and explained.

Context and Background

Learning outcomes assessment, which aims to understand what students know or are able to do as a result of an experience, has long been a critical issue in student affairs, but the demand for evidence of student learning has never been stronger. The rising cost of college attendance, soaring student loan debt and mounting unemployment rates amongst recent college graduates have stimulated perceptions of deficits in college student learning. Accrediting agencies, professional organizations, legislators, donors, employers, parents, and students are demanding increased accountability from higher education institutions and student affairs divisions, whose mission statements promise growth in terms of leadership, citizenship and career success, have
not been shielded from this scrutiny (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Sharp, Komives & Fincher, 2011). Now more than ever, there is pressure on student affairs divisions to provide evidence of the learning and development that occurs as a result of co-curricular programs and to use learning outcomes assessment data to improve programs and services, allocate budgets wisely, and strategically plan for the future.

The call for assessment in student affairs is not new. Evaluating and improving practices has always been a part of student affairs work as outlined in seminal documents including The Student Personnel Point of View of 1937 and The Student Personnel Point of View of 1949 (ACE 1937, 1949). However, it was not until the mid-1980s, when several widely publicized reports directed national attention to the failings of the American education system, that assessment, which Upcraft and Schuh (1996) define as, “any effort to gather, analyze and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness for the purposes of accountability and improvement,” became a priority (p. 250). Since then, numerous reports have called for student affairs work to be grounded in data (ACPA, 1996; AAHE, ACPA & NASPA, 1998; ACPA & NASPA, 2004; ACPA & NASPA, 2010; NASPA & ACPA, 2004; NASPA & ACPA, 2010).

While the call for assessment is not new, several authors note that the student affairs profession has failed to fully engage assessment in practice (Doyle, 2004; Hoffman, 2010; Green 2006; Green, Jones & Aloï, 2008; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Several scholars have attempted to explore this problem of practice by examining the perceived assessment skills and competencies of student affairs professionals (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006), while others have examined elements of leadership and culture (Julian, 2013; Kirksky, 2010). Case studies of effective student affairs assessment programs have also been conducted (Green et al., 2008; Seagraves &
Dean, 2009). Nonetheless, Green et al. (2008) assert that very little research exists in the area of student affairs assessment, which has resulted in confusion amongst professionals on how to conduct quality assessment. Existing literature indicates that not much has changed in the last twelve years since Upcraft and Schuh (1996) wrote “among many staff in student affairs, assessment is an unknown quantity at best, or, at the worst, it is misunderstood and misused (p. 4).” It is clear that more research and new approaches to understanding student affairs assessment practice are needed.

Of all the student affairs assessment methodologies, learning outcomes assessment, which aims to measure what a student should be able to do or know as a result of a program or experience, is the most misunderstood (Sharp et al., 2011; Tyrell & Fey, 2011; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). The confusion surrounding learning outcomes assessment is concerning because learning outcomes assessment data is the most valid way to demonstrate the impact of student affairs programs on student learning and development (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Data gathered from learning outcomes assessment is especially powerful in demonstrating the worth of student affairs, improving programs and services, and meeting accreditation criteria.

To assess student learning outcomes, assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of both direct and indirect measures (Bresciani, Zelna & Anderson, 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Direct measurement involves assessing student work products that demonstrate that specific learning has taken place. Examples of direct measures include objective tests or using a rubric to score written student work. The strength of direct measurement is that it provides student affairs professionals with direct evidence of student learning. A possible weakness of direct measurement is that not everything can be demonstrated in a direct way, such as values, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes. In contrast, an indirect
measure is based upon a report of perceived student learning. The most common example of an indirect measure is a survey that asks students to report what they have learned or gained as a result of an experience. Other indirect methods include asking students what they think they have learned through focus groups and interviews. The strength of indirect measurement is that it enables student affairs professionals to assess certain implicit qualities of student learning, such as values, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes. The weakness of this approach is that, in the absence of direct evidence, assumptions must be made about how well perceptions match the reality of actual learning. Because each method has its limitations, an ideal assessment program combines direct and indirect measures from a variety of sources. Using multiple measures and triangulating various data sources can provide converging evidence of student learning and allows practitioners and researchers to acquire a more accurate and holistic understanding of student learning (Jones, 2002; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

While scholars and professional organizations recommend using multiple measures of student learning, student affairs professionals use locally developed self-report surveys as their primary source of information on student learning. The researcher has observed this research-action conflict at each of the four institutions she has worked. Student affairs professionals, across functional areas, are using surveys that ask students to describe how much they think they have learned as a result of an experience more than any other method. Data collected from these surveys is then used for programmatic, budgetary and strategic decision making as well as satisfying accountability requirements, such as presidential reports and accreditation criteria.

Not only are student affairs practitioners over-relying on self-reports, student affairs scholars are also using self-report surveys more than any other data collection method. A search of peer-reviewed journals on ERIC and ProjectMUSE yielded several studies that used self-
report surveys to measure student affairs learning outcomes such as leadership, civic engagement and civic values (Dugan, Bohle, Gebhardt, Hofert, Wilk & Cooney, 2001; Huang & Chang; 2004; Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008; Lott & Eagan, 2011; Roan-Kenyon, Soldner & Inkelas, 2007; Wu, 2011). A search of literature only yielded one study using interviews to study perceived student learning through the student conduct system (Howell, 2005). No studies were identified that utilized direct measures of student learning, such as objective tests or assessing student work samples.

The student affairs profession’s reliance on self-report surveys as the primary source of data on student learning leads to an important question: can college students accurately report their learning? A growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning and tend to overestimate their knowledge, skill, aptitude and performance (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2011a; Bowman, 2011b; Bowman & Seifert 2011; Grant, Malloy & Murphy, 2009; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce & Lysy, 2003; Teo, 2012a; Teo, 2012b). Scholars have cited several factors that impact the accuracy of student self-reports including social desirability bias, the halo effect, acquiescence bias, intentional and unintentional dishonesty as well as students failing to put effort into the cognitive processes necessary to respond accurately (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Porter, 2011; Turrentine, 2001). These findings suggest that self-report surveys may not be a good proxy for more direct measures, reinforcing the importance of using multiple measures of student learning.

A major discrepancy exists between the research on and practice of student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of multiple measures to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks of student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft
yet student affairs practitioners and researchers are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Adding to this problem, a growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2011a; Bowman, 2011b; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Grant et al., 2009). If researchers and professional organizations recommend mixed-method approaches yet student affairs practitioners and researchers rely on self-reports, which may not be valid, then more must be known about why student affairs professionals use self-report surveys as their primary, and often only, source of data on student learning. Therefore, this study investigates the decision-making processes inherent to selecting measures of student learning for student affairs professionals engaged in learning outcomes assessment.

**Rationale**

The rationale for this study is the researcher’s interest in improving student affairs learning outcomes assessment practice. Her fascination with the problem of practice stems from her efforts to measure the learning that takes place as a result student affairs programs at the program, department and divisional level at four institutions. The researcher has witnessed countless attempts at measuring student learning through self-report surveys that have been thwarted by social desirability, which is the tendency to respond to questions in a favorable way, as students consistently rate themselves high on all items regardless of their previous experience and program type. Moreover, these experiences opened her eyes to the potential flaws in making financial, programmatic or strategic planning decisions based on students’ perceptions of learning rather than their actual learning.
Significance

Student affairs learning outcomes assessment data is used for accountability, program improvement, campus decision making, meeting accreditation criteria, and demonstrating the impact and worth of student affairs programs and services. Because self-report surveys are the most prevalent assessment method, much of what we know about co-curricular student learning is based on student perceptions. In practice, student self-reported data informs student affairs practice at the institutional and national level, influencing decisions on funding, curriculum, best practices and program structure.

Reliance on self-reported data as the primary indicator of student learning is potentially damaging to student affairs research and practice in cases where perceived learning does not accurately reflect actual learning. Student affairs practitioners that place great weight on self-reported data may make political, structural, or financial decisions based on student perceptions rather than actual learning. The results of these decisions may negatively impact the co-curricular education of current and future students and may impede student affairs from fulfilling its mission of improving society by developing future leaders and engaged citizens.

Given the intense scrutiny higher education is facing, the profession as a whole needs to better understand current assessment practice in order to develop strategies for improvement. Exploring the decision-making processes of student affairs professionals conducting learning outcomes assessment will help the profession understand the assessment process in practice and the limitations and contexts in which assessment-related decisions are made. Professional organizations, student affairs leaders and scholars may also learn from the points along the process in which compromises occur, resulting in less than optimal practice. Awareness of the factors that influence decision-making may be useful to providing guidance, support and resources to professionals.
This study contributes to and extends the literature on student affairs assessment in three ways. First, an extensive literature review suggests that this is the first study to apply a decision-making framework to understanding student affairs assessment practice; studies have focused on examining the perceived assessment skills and competencies of student affairs professionals (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006), while others have examined elements of leadership and culture (Green et al., 2008; Julian, 2013; Kirksky, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2009). Additionally, this study fills a gap in the literature because a literature search yielded no studies that use a phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of student affairs professionals conducting assessment; other studies have predominantly used survey research (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006) or a case study approach (Carter, 2014; Green et al., 2009; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). This study also contributes to the study of bounded rationality in higher education administration, extending the work of Carfang (2014).

**Research Problem and Research Questions**

A major discrepancy exists between the research on and practice of student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of “multiple measures” to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks to student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), yet student affairs researchers and practitioners are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Adding to this problem, a growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Grant et al., 2009). If researchers and professional organizations recommend mixed-method approaches yet student affairs practitioners
and researchers rely on self-reports, then more must be known about why student affairs utilize self-report surveys more than any other data collection method. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how student affairs professionals make methodological decisions when conducting assessment and the context, limitations and environments that influence their decisions.

The following research questions were developed to elicit descriptions of participant’s experiences with learning outcomes assessment-related decision-making and the contexts and situations that have influenced their experiences.

1. How do student affairs professionals describe the complex decision making process associated with selecting measures of student learning?
2. How do student affairs professionals describe the internal and external factors that influence complex decision-making process associated selecting measures of student learning?

The aforementioned research questions align with the study’s research approach (transcendental phenomenology) and theoretical framework (bounded rationality). Transcendental phenomenologists seek to understand what participants experience in terms of a phenomenon and how the experience it (Creswell, 2007). Transcendental phenomenological research questions typically follow a two question common template that consists of two questions: a. what have participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon?; and b. what context or situations have influenced or affected their experiences? (Creswell, 2007). Similarly, studies using bounded rationality as a theoretical framework have used the theory to explore how decisions are made and the contexts, limitations, and environments that shape decisions. By
blending Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological research questions with the theoretical
framework of bounded rationality, the above research questions emerged.

**Definition of Key Terminology**

In the following paragraphs, key terms used in this study will be defined. *Student affairs* consists of the programs and services that help students learn and grow outside of the classroom (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; NASPA, 1997). *Student affairs divisions* consist of student support offices such as orientation, student leadership programs, housing and residential life, wellness, and student activities. *Student affairs professionals* are the individuals who work in various areas of student affairs and work to enhance student learning, guide academic and career decisions, mentor students, promote leadership skills, and counsel students through crises (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; NASPA, 1997). *Student affairs assessment professionals/directors* are student affairs professionals that lead divisional assessment efforts on a full or part-time basis; their responsibilities include assisting student affair units with assessment projects and providing assessment professional development and resources for the division. The terms *co-curricular programs* and *student affairs programs* are used interchangeably to describe the programs offered by student affairs departments, including but not limited to leadership workshops, student organization involvement, leadership positions, personal, academic or career counseling, and other educational programs and events.

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) define *student affairs assessment* as “any effort to gather, analyze and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness for the purposes of accountability and improvement” (p. 250). More specifically, student affairs *learning outcomes assessment* aims to measure what a student should be able to do or know as a result of a program or experience (Sharp et al., 2011; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).
Examples of student affairs learning outcomes measured are: communication skills, leadership skills, and ethical decision-making.

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of bounded rationality, which serves as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making processes inherent to selecting measures of student learning for student affairs professionals engaged in learning outcomes assessment. While a plethora of decision-making models exist, bounded rationality was selected as the theoretical framework for this study because it aligns with the study’s purpose, research approach (transcendental phenomenology), and because, according to Carfarg (2014) and Tverskey and Kahneman (1986), it is a simple and user-friendly framework that can be used to unearth complex matters.

Bounded rationality, which is rooted in the seminal work of Herbert Simon (1957), can be situated within the framework of rational choice theory, an economic theory, which posits that “rationality” is a “style of behavior that is appropriate to the achievement of given goals, within the limits imposed by given conditions and constraints” (Simon, 1972, p. 161). According to Simon (1972), there are several different theories of rational choice that have slightly different foci, categorizing them into three different taxonomies. First, theories of rational behavior may be concerned with the rationality of individuals or the rationality of organizations. Second, theories of rational behavior may be normative, prescribing how people should behave in order to achieve defined goals under certain conditions, or they may be purely descriptive. Third, some theories focus only on the conditions and constraints of the external environment, while others postulate that it is vital to also consider the limitations of the individual actor. Situating
bounded rationality within these three taxonomies, bounded rationality focuses on individual actors, is descriptive in nature, and incorporates the constraints of both the external environment and the limitations of the individual actor.

A central assumption of bounded rationality is that perfectly rational decisions are often not feasible in practice due to a variety of internal and external limitations. Limitations include risk, uncertainty, incomplete information about alternatives, and the complexity of the environment. In an effort to compensate for limitations, individuals will seek out information and alternatives. Individuals will arrive at the decision that is most optimal based on collecting information, examining alternatives and striving to make the best decision possible.

Optimizing and satisficing are the two overarching approaches to rational choice. Optimizing involves adopting a strategy to select the best possible solution from the available options. Because it is virtually impossible for actors to optimize decision making given the universe of possible choices and outcomes, they instead engage in satisficing behavior. Satisficing, as a decision-making strategy, allows actors to choose conduct that is adequate even though it is not necessarily optimal. Actors must make choices that they can live with: satisficing permits them to do this (Jacobs & Wright, 2010).

While bounded rationality emerged in economics, it has been used as a framework for studying decision making in other social sciences, including criminology, nursing and education. For example, Jacobs and Wright (2010) used bounded rationality as a framework for understanding retaliatory street violence using a grounded theory approach. Additionally, Wu, Lee, Yeh and Che (2014) used bounded rationality as a framework to explore women’s perspectives on the decision to undergo a hysterectomy in their general inductive study. Most relevant to this study, Carfang (2014) utilized bounded rationality to explore the complex
decision-making processes of college presidents as they internationalize their campuses in her descriptive phenomenological study. In each of these studies, bounded rationality was used to explore how participants make decisions and describe the external and internal limitations (the “bounds”) that influenced participants’ decisions. These studies also demonstrated that, compared to other decision making models, bounded rationality is simple and user-friendly framework that enables researchers to unearth the complexities of decision-making (Carfang, 2014; Tversky & Kahneman, 1986).

Critics of Bounded Rationality

Bounded rationality is widely accepted among the behavioral economist community and has been adopted as a theoretical framework for understanding decision making in other disciplines such as political science, sociology and education. Several scholars have pointed out limitations to Simon’s original conception of bounded rationality and have expanded and supplemented his original concept. Other authors have questioned the basic premise of rational choice theory—that human beings make rational decisions. In the following paragraphs, criticisms of bounded rationality will be discussed and their implications for this study will be addressed.

Simon’s model of bounded rationality has been critiqued and reworked by behavioral economists. Critics have argued that Simon’s formulation of bounded rationality is inadequate because it focuses on the wrong unit of analysis or because it uses an inaccurate characterization of the preferences involved in decision making; as a result, ideas of limited rationality, contextual rationality, game rationality, and process rationality emerged (March, 1978). Other scholars have critiqued Simon’s obscureness about the applicability of bounded rationality to organizations and have extended Simon’s ideas to organizations, including business firms, public
bureaucracies and universities (March, 1978). While these developments in the field altered Simon’s original formulation, they have retained much of his origin message—individuals are intelligent and make systematic decisions—which is the basic assumption of this study.

Critics have also questioned the basic premise of rational choice theory, arguing that people sometimes make irrational decisions. According to March (1978), critics of rational choice theory have expressed puzzlement with respect to decision inconsistencies and instabilities and the extent to which individuals and organizations do things without apparent reason. Some scholars have discussed how people make decisions based on “their gut,” intuition, and emotion (Menzel, 2009), while other scholars suggest that people and organizations make decisions based on routines and tacit knowledge (Foss, 2003). Nonetheless, advocates of rational choice argue that the fact that some people are not always rational is not itself a challenge to rational choice theory. Posner (1988) argues that irrationality can be considered one of the internal “bounds” or limitations to rational decision-making. For example, people may have the irrational fear of flying; preference for surface travel becomes one of the internal bounds to an individual’s systematic travel decisions. As such, this study will treat emotions, intuition, routines, tacit knowledge and irrationality as internal bounds to rational decision-making.

**Rationale**

Bounded rationality was selected as the theoretical framework for this study for several reasons. First, bounded rationality aligns with the study’s purpose because it acknowledges the complexity of the decision-making process and recognizes that there are various internal and external factors that influence decisions. Second, the central assumptions of bounded rationality align with the research-action conflict under investigation. The main assumption of bounded
rationality is that optimal decisions are often not feasible in practice due to a variety of internal and external limitations. According to assessment scholars, using multiple measures is the optimal decision for assessing student learning, but this decision is not being made in practice. Using bounded rationality as a theoretical framework will help the researcher understand why this optimal decision is not being made in practice. Third, using bounded rationality as a theoretical framework allows the researcher to hone in on the way in which decisions are formulated, rather than focusing on the outcomes of decisions. Fourth, compared to other theories of rationality, bounded rationality focuses on individual actors rather than organizations, is descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature. Lastly, bounded rationality is a simple and user-friendly framework that can be used to unearth complex matters (Carfang, 2014; Tverskey & Kahneman, 1986).

**Application to Study**

Bounded rationality was used to focus this study’s purpose and research strategy. Through the lens of bounded rationality, the researcher sought to understand the complexity of the decision-making process inherent to student affairs learning outcomes assessment and the limitations, conditions and contexts (the “bounds”) in which these decisions are made. The researcher drew from the works of Simon (1957, 1972) to design research questions that would elicit descriptions of how decisions are made and the contexts, limitations and factors that influence decisions. Using bounded rationality as a framework for describing a complex phenomenon lends itself to qualitative inquiry, which allows for the in-depth exploration of an issue. More specifically, bounded rationality aligns well with a transcendental phenomenological approach because both attempt to describe a phenomenon (decision-making) and the contexts, limitations in which the phenomenon takes place (the “bounds”).
The following chapter will provide a literature review that will situate this study within the greater context of existing scholarship on student affairs assessment.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

A major discrepancy exists between the research on and practice of student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of multiple measures to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks of student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani, et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), yet student affairs practitioners and researchers are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Adding to this problem, a growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Grant, Malloy & Murphy, 2009). Reliance on self-reported data as the primary indicator of student learning is potentially damaging to student affairs research and practice in cases where perceived learning does not accurately reflect actual learning. Student affairs practitioners that place great weight on self-reported data may make political, structural, or financial decisions based on student perceptions rather than actual learning. If researchers and professional organizations recommend mixed-method approaches yet student affairs practitioners and researchers rely on self-reports, which may not be valid, then more must be known about why student affairs professionals use self-report surveys as their primary, and often only, source of data on student learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making processes inherent to selecting measures of student learning for student affairs professionals engaged in learning outcomes assessment.

The purpose of this literature review was to situate the identified problem of practice—overreliance on self-reports surveys—within a political-historical, theoretical and research context. This chapter is organized into four sections. First, background on the history of the
assessment movement in higher education and specifically student affairs assessment will be provided. Second, the four research traditions that influenced current assessment concepts and measurement techniques will be described. Third, an overview of student affairs assessment frameworks will be provided, with a specific focus on learning outcomes assessment. This chapter will conclude with an examination of empirical research on the validity of self-report surveys designed to measure student learning.

**Historical Background**

To understand the significance of the problem under investigation, it is valuable to examine the history of the assessment movement and the events that led to the current climate of scrutiny over the effectiveness of higher education. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the history of the assessment movement in higher education in general and student affairs specifically. This chapter is divided into two sections. First, the assessment movement in higher education will be traced from its origins in the early 1980s to today. Second, the history of student affairs assessment will be discussed. This section will conclude with a brief summary of key themes identified in the literature.

**The Assessment Movement in Higher Education**

The assessment movement in higher education emerged in the early 1980s, coinciding with the standards movement in secondary education. During this time, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) directed national attention to the failings of the American education system. While *A Nation At Risk* (1983) focused on secondary education, several highly publicized national reports by the National Institute of Education, Association of American Colleges and National Governors Association called attention to the issues related to what college graduates were learning and their preparation for the workforce (Association of American Colleges; 1985; National Governors Association, 1986; National Institute of
While some colleges had been engaged in assessment for decades, very few institutions could provide evidence of student learning or answer the questions raised in these reports (Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Attention to the quality of higher education was also heightened by the rising cost of college attendance and rising student-to-faculty ratios (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000). Additionally, as college campuses became more diverse, national attention turned towards gaps in access, equity and achievement (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000). Overall, the 1980s marked a shift toward a nation-wide disenchantment with higher education.

Higher education responded to these pressures at multiple levels. First, at the national level, the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) co-sponsored the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education, which was held in Columbia, South Carolina in the fall of 1985. Several assessment scholars credit this conference as the official “birth date” of the assessment movement in the United States. At the state level, most states began to adopt assessment policies requiring institutions to collect and report data, and by 1990, more than two thirds of states had established assessment mandates (Ewell, 2008). By 1988, all federally approved accrediting agencies were required to provide evidence of institutional outcomes when making their reports to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 1988). National reports, professional association discussions, as well as state and accreditor policies prompted institutions to begin to develop assessment practices. Early assessment practices relied primarily on data related to GPAs and retention rates, but little attention was devoted to the multiple facets of the learning process (Seagraves & Dean, 2010).

**Professional association reports.** Several influential documents that call for the creation and assessment of learning outcomes have been published as guidelines for educators in higher
education. The 9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning, published by the American Association for Higher Education, designates principles to be upheld by higher education administrators conducting assessment (Astin, Banta, Cross, El-Khawas, Ewell, & Huchings, 1996). This was followed by a report titled Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (2001) that declared that universities would improve their definitions of learning objectives and develop methods for assessing the achievement of the learning objectives. In 2002, an influential report named Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation was created when the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) gathered a panel of leaders across sectors (business, education, government) to discuss the purpose of college education; the report recommended a focus toward intentional learning and ensuring that ongoing improvement takes place by evaluating how well students learn (AAC&U, 2002). Building on the work of Greater Expectations, the AAC&U introduced the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP): Excellence for Everyone as America Goes to College initiative. This group's report, College Learning for the New Global Century included a list of "essential learning outcomes" for a twenty-first century college education and called for colleges and universities to commit to supporting the achievement and assessment of these common outcomes (AAC&U, 2007). (Hoffman, 2010)

The Spellings Report. In 2006, a U.S. Department of Education report, A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education, also known as “The Spellings Report,” highlighted significant shortcomings of U.S. higher education and called colleges and accrediting agencies to be held to a higher level of accountability as well as provide higher quality information about student learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Several national
higher education associations filed formal responses to the Spellings Report, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), who, in their report *New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability: A Statement of Principles, Commitments to Action* (2008), urged the higher education community to commit to measuring student learning and development as well as use results for improvement and to demonstrate the value of higher education (AAC&U & CHEA, 2008).

**Current state of the assessment movement.** Since the publication of “The Spellings Report,” pressure on colleges to provide evidence of learning has increased. The rising cost of college attendance, soaring student loan debt, and mounting unemployment rates amongst recent college graduates have stimulated perceptions of deficits in college student learning; the federal government, states, accrediting agencies, students and parents expect, and will continue to expect, accountability from higher education in the area of student learning (Zumeta, 2011).

Today, all accreditation agencies have standards for institutional assessment and have emphasized the importance of using assessment data in decision making (Maki, 2004). Currently, many states have begun to require campuses to provide evidence of student learning and are tying assessment data to financial rewards (Berrett, 2013). Additionally, at the campus-level, decision makers are requiring departments, including student affairs divisions, to provide documentation of student learning. While these various stakeholders are requiring that assessment is being done, little guidance has been given on how assessment should be performed or what college students should be learning.

While the federal government has not yet mandated specific measures for colleges to use, many educators believe that this is not far off (Berrett, 2013). This perception is shaped by state
and federal involvement in secondary education reform, which came in the form of high-stakes testing. It is crucial that higher education researchers and practitioners determine effective ways to measure student learning, or they may be forced to live with state or federal mandates. Moreover, it is important that higher education professionals develop assessment practices that support student learning, not just document it.

**History of Assessment in Student Affairs**

Evaluating and improving practices has always been a part of student affairs work as outlined in seminal documents including *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1937 and *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1949 (ACE 1937, 1949). However, the rise of the accountability movement in the 1980s put added pressure on student affairs as these professionals were asked to provide evidence that they were providing high quality programs in a cost-effective manner. Early student affairs practices included collecting data on the usage of services, such as the number of students that participated in a program, student needs and satisfaction surveys, campus environment studies, and benchmarking with other institutions (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Not surprising, the main driver of assessment during this time, and oftentimes today, was survival. Student affairs practitioners collected data on the impact of co-curricular programs to defend their program and avoid budget cuts as well as program and staffing reductions.

According to Green et al. (2008), it was not until the publication of *The Student Learning Imperative* in 1996 that student affairs professionals began to embrace learning outcomes assessment (ACPA, 1996). The *Student Learning Imperative* calls student affairs professionals to demonstrate their contribution to the overall educational mission of the institution and to the undergraduate learning experience. Since then, numerous reports have
called for student affairs work to be grounded in data as well as more research to develop practices that best support student growth and success (AAHE, ACPA & NASPA, 1998; ACPA & NASPA, 2004; ACPA & NASPA, 2010; NASPA & ACPA, 1997; NASPA & ACPA, 2004).

**Influential publications.** Several other influential documents call for the creation and assessment of student learning outcomes. First, *The Student Learning Imperative* created by a collaboration of leaders in the student affairs profession (ACPA, 1996b) echoed the concerns documented in *A Nation at Risk* and called for student affairs professionals to systematically assess learning outcomes to measure the impact of programs on learning and development (ACPA, 1996b). In 1997, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) published *The Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs*, which emphasized the importance of assessing the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs. In 1999, leaders from both NASPA and ACPA developed *Good Practice in Student Affairs: Principles to Foster Student Learning* (Blimling, Whitt, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1999) to provide principles of practice designed move the profession toward a learning orientation. *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), is another seminal document that adds to the literature of assessment in student affairs; it calls for a holistic view of learning throughout the university setting and recommends seven student learning outcomes while emphasizing assessment. Published in 2006, *Learning Reconsidered 2* provides action strategies for implementing the concepts from the original document (Keeling, American College Personnel Association, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, & Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, 2006).
**Professional associations.** In addition to published documents, commitment to assessment in the student affairs profession is evident in the development of assessment-related professional organizations, conferences and other professional development opportunities. The two largest professional associations for student affairs professionals, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), each established committees dedicated to assessment. The Assessment, Evaluation and Research Knowledge Community and the Commission for Assessment and Evaluation (respectively) have subsequently developed training materials and coordinated workshops, training and conferences like the International Assessment and Retention Conference (IARC). The Commission for Assessment and Evaluation also established the Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) standards, consisting of 13 content standards that student affairs professionals need to assess student learning (American College Personnel Association’s Commission for Assessment and Evaluation, 2006). Additionally, NASPA’s Ezine, an electronic newsletter that publishes articles on critical issues in student affairs includes assessment as one of the four areas addressed.

**Current state of student affairs assessment.** While the demand for assessment has never been stronger, several authors note that the student affairs profession has failed to fully engage in assessment in practice (Doyle, 2004; Hoffman, 2010; Green 2006; Green et al., 2008; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Several scholars have attempted to explore this problem of practice by examining the perceived assessment skills and competencies of student affairs professionals (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006), while others have examined elements of leadership and culture (Julian, 2013; Kirksky, 2010). These studies have predominantly used survey research (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006) or a case study approach (Carter, 2014; Green et al., 2009;
Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Existing studies of student affairs assessment practice have focused on new professionals (Hoffman, 2010), middle managers (Timm, 2006) and chief student affairs officers (Green, et al, 2009; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Nonetheless, Green et al. (2008) assert that very little research exists in the area of student affairs assessment, which has resulted in confusion amongst professionals on how to conduct quality assessment.

Authors have identified several challenges to assessment. First, existing literature on student affairs assessment indicates that student affairs professionals lack time, staffing, funding, and tools, to perform quality assessment (Green et al., 2008; Sandeen and Barr, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman, Aloï & Jones; 2003). Second, a consistent theme in existing literature is that student affairs professionals are not prepared to conduct learning outcomes assessment. Several authors note the minimal expertise held by student affairs professionals, even amongst senior student affairs officers (Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman et al., 2003). Additionally, several studies note the lack of professional development and assessment training opportunities available to them (Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman et al., 2003). Third, Green et al. (2008) states that lack of research on student affairs learning outcomes assessment has contributed the lack of skills and competency in the field of student affairs. Fourth, while professional organizations and assessment scholars emphasize that assessment is imperative to student affairs work, Sandeen and Barr (2006) assert that assessment is not considered a priority in professional practice. Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, Dean (2012) argue that many student affairs professionals conduct assessment simply to include statistics in their end-of-year-report. Low priority level amongst senior student affairs officers is listed as the most significant factor for the low level of student affairs commitment to assessment (Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman et al., 2003; Smith & Rodgers, 2005).
Conclusion

Three themes emerged from a review of literature on the historical roots of the assessment movement in higher education and student affairs. First, the demand for accurate evidence of co-curricular learning from internal and external stakeholders is not going to disappear. To meet these demands, it is critical that student affairs practitioners evaluate current assessment practices and professional competencies to ensure high quality, accurate assessment of student learning. Second, while the literature cites accountability demands as the main driver of assessment, using assessment as a vehicle for improving student learning and development has been described by professional associations as the central purpose of assessment. The tension between these two purposes will be examined in more detail in the third section of this chapter. Third, the literature suggests that the student affairs profession has been engaged in assessment for almost a century, yet several authors assert that the field is not engaging in assessment; scholars have also described barriers to student affairs assessment practice, such as lack of time, training, resources and guidance. These three themes will serve as a backdrop for this study and underscore the significance of the problem under investigation. To provide further insight into assessment practice, the intellectual roots of assessment will be discussed in the following section.

Intellectual Roots of Assessment

While the impetus for assessment is best examined from a historical-political perspective, it is also valuable to examine the research traditions that influenced the development of assessment methods, especially since this study questions why student affairs professionals are selecting one method over others. Ewell (2002) identifies four intellectual roots of assessment: a. research on student learning, which dates back to the 1930s, b. literature on retention and student behavior, which emerged in the 1960s, c. the standards movement in secondary
education, which began in the mid-1960s. Methods and techniques drawn from these established traditions decisively influenced the language and methods of early assessment practice and continue to do so today. In the following paragraphs, each research tradition will be discussed.

**Student Learning in College**

Research on student learning in college, which dates back to the 1930s and 40s, began as an application of educational developmental psychology; as such, its primary objective was discipline-based hypothesis testing and theory building. By the end of the 1960s there was a large enough body of work in this area for Feldman and Newcomb (1969) to synthesize its findings, updated two decades later by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and again in 2005. Later, Astin’s *Four Critical Years* (1977) promoted the use of longitudinal studies to examine net effects and measuring the value of the college experience. Additionally, Bowen (1977) established a public policy context for assessment by emphasizing the societal returns on investment associated with higher education. Lastly, Pace’s *Measuring the Outcomes of College* (1979) emphasized the role of college environments on student development and learning and the importance of measuring student behaviors rather than student perceptions. This research tradition made several conceptual and methodological contributions to assessment, including basic taxonomies of outcomes, models of student growth and development, and tools for research like cognitive examinations, longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys, and quasi-experimental designs. (Ewell, 2002)

**Retention and Student Behavior**

A distinct literature on retention and student behavior emerged in the late 1960 and 1970s and influenced assessment practice in three ways. First, it provided a powerful theoretical model—Tinto’s notion of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975)—which proved equally
useful in guiding applied research on student learning. Second, retention research tested new methodologies involving longitudinal study designs, specially configured surveys, and multivariate analytical techniques, later adopted by many assessment practitioners. Third, retention scholarship was action research; its object was always to use data to improve practice, which is one of the main goals of assessment. (Ewell, 2002)

Evaluation and “Scientific” Management

The 1960s and 70s also saw the rise of program evaluation as an action research tradition. Program evaluation gained ground in higher education as a way to measure effectiveness and inform strategic planning and budgeting. It was also related to a wider movement toward “scientific” management and total quality management (TQM). This tradition drew attention to student outcomes as a needed output variable for studies of effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses. This tradition also yielded one of the most extensive taxonomies of collegiate outcomes ever produced (Lenning, Lee, Micek and Service, 1977) and stimulated a range of surveys designed to provide campuses with information about how students used and perceived their programs. While this tradition relied on quantitative methods, somewhat later program evaluation began to embrace more qualitative methods, such as open-ended interviewing and participant observation, providing early models and vocabularies for qualitative assessment that are used by assessment professionals today. (Ewell, 2002)

Competency-Based Learning Movement

The mastery and competency-based learning movement, also known as the standards movement, began in elementary and secondary education, but quickly found postsecondary applications in adult and professional education by the mid-1960s. This movement placed great value on learning outcomes assessment; competency-based education emphasizes the importance
of designing learning experiences based on agreed-upon learning goals, and developing assessment strategies and examine and certify that learning has occurred. This movement also advanced “direct” assessment of student work as the best way to measure learning. (Ewell, 2002)

**Conclusion**

These four traditions contributed to assessment conceptually and methodologically. These traditions and their literatures draw attention to the tensions inherent to assessment work, such as the natural tension between quantitative and qualitative methods and concerns over the purpose of assessment—improvement or accountability. These tensions, which will be examined more deeply later in this literature review, serve as a backdrop for this study. These four traditions also provided theoretical models, such as learning outcomes taxonomies and Tinto’s model of social and academic interaction. Methods and techniques drawn from these four established traditions, including direct and indirect measures and quantitative and qualitative measurement and analyses, decisively influenced the language and methods of early assessment practice and continue to do so today.

A review of the intellectual roots of assessment reveals that there are many ways to measure learning. Student affairs professionals can choose from several different methods that have been utilized and validated for decades, including surveys, observation, interviews, objective tests, and using rubrics to score student work. This theme provides context to the problem of practice under investigation in this study: student affairs professionals are consistently choosing one method (self-report surveys) over others. To better understand this problem, it is useful to examine student affairs assessment practice in terms of its purposes, processes, types, and measurement strategies. These frameworks will be discussed in the next section.
**Student Affairs Assessment Frameworks**

This section will introduce concepts and frameworks related to student affairs assessment practice, specifically learning outcomes assessment. In the first half of this section, the reader will be introduced to broad assessment concepts, including assessment paradigms, the assessment process and types of assessments. In the second half of this section, learning outcomes assessment will be described in detail and an overview of different ways to measure learning will be provided. This section will conclude with a summary of the major themes identified in a review of student affairs assessment literature.

**Two Paradigms of Assessment**

Ewell (2008) describes two different conceptions of what assessment is and how it should operate—an improvement paradigm and accountability paradigm. Table 2 presents the differences between these two paradigms on a number of factors.

Table 1: Two Paradigms of Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Dimensions</th>
<th>Improvement Paradigm</th>
<th>Accountability Paradigm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Formative (improvement)</td>
<td>Summative (judgment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Implementation               |                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------|                                    |                                  |
| Instrumentation              | Multiple/triangulation              | Standardized                     |
| Nature of Evidence           | Quantitative and Qualitative        | Quantitative                     |
| Reference Points             | Over time, comparative, established goal | Comparative or fixed standards   |
Ewell (2008) describes three strategic dimensions in which the two paradigms differ: purpose, orientation, and motivation. From the improvement paradigm perspective, the purpose of assessment is to enhance teaching and learning. In contrast, from an accountability perspective, the purpose of assessment is to demonstrate effectiveness to external stakeholders and to garner continued financial support. In terms of orientation, under the improvement paradigm, assessment is accomplished by practitioners as part of the teaching and learning process, while under the accountability paradigm, evidence is gathered from an external, more objective standpoint. Lastly, from the improvement paradigm, assessment is used as a vehicle for engagement and continuous improvement, while for the accountability paradigm, the posture is one of institutional compliance. (Ewell, 2008)

Ewell (2008) describes five ways the two paradigms differ in terms of implementation: instrumentation, nature of evidence, reference points, communication of results, and use of results. With respect to methods for gathering evidence, the improvement paradigm embraces many kinds of evidence gathering, including objective tests, projects, demonstrations, portfolios. In contrast, the accountability paradigm places greater emphasis on standardized tests. On the same note, the improvement paradigm embraces both quantitative and qualitative methods, while evidence under the accountability paradigm is typically quantitative. The reference points for the improvement paradigm include tracking progress over time, across units, or among different groups of students, or against established institutional goals, while reference points for the accountability paradigm are typically benchmarks against other institutions, programs or other
fixed standards. The improvement paradigm uses various internal channels for sharing results, while the accountability paradigm typically entails written reports to stakeholders. Lastly, in terms of uses of results, the improvement paradigm uses results for improvement, while the main use of data under the accountability paradigm is reporting. (Ewell, 2008)

While almost no assessment approach fully conforms to either paradigm, examining these two paradigms demonstrates some of the fundamental tensions embedded in assessment.

**The Assessment Process**

Several scholars have described assessment as a process that involves a series of steps or decisions (Bauer, 2003; Bresciani et al., 2009; Huba & Freed, 2000; Maki, 2004; Polomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Carter’s (2014) synthesis of seven assessment process frameworks reveals that the assessment process involves the following key features: a. specifying purposes, goals and audiences; b. designing methods and measures; c. carrying out the data collection and analysis; d. communicating findings to the audience and e. using results for improvement or assessment redesign.

The most frequently used framework in student affairs assessment literature and practice is Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) Assessment Process, which has been cited in over 340 studies, and has been endorsed by national student affairs professional associations. Drawing on the work of Terenzini (1989), Hanson (1982), Brown and Podolske (1993a), Erwin (1991) (as cited in Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), Upcraft and Schuh (1996) identify twelve decisions that need to be made when engaging in an assessment project:

1. What’s the problem?
2. What’s the purpose of the assessment?
3. Who should be studied?
4. What’s the best assessment method?

5. How should we decide whom to study?

6. How should data be collected?

7. What instrument should we use?

8. Who should collect the data?

9. How should we record the data?

10. How do we analyze the data?

11. How do we report the results?

12. How do we use the results?

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) assert that these twelve decisions are helpful in determining the most appropriate type of assessment to conduct and guiding the process once a type is selected. In the following section, eight assessment types will be described.

**Types of Assessment**

There are various types of assessment conducted by student affairs practitioners. The most-documented, comprehensive typology in student affairs literature was developed by Upcraft and Schuh (1996) (revised in Schuh & Upcraft, 2001) and outlines eight components including tracking clients' use of services, needs assessment, satisfaction assessment, environment and culture assessment, outcomes assessment, cross or peer institution comparisons, national standards assessment and cost-effectiveness assessment. These eight types are defined in Table 2.

**Table 2: Assessment Types (Adapted from Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tracking</td>
<td>Keeping track of who uses student services, programs and facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Assessment</td>
<td>Assessing what types of services, programs and facilities are needed based on several factors,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
including but not limited to staff expectations, student expectations and methods to understand what students want versus what they need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction Assessment</td>
<td>Gathering information on student satisfaction with services, programs and facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment and Culture Assessment</td>
<td>Gathering information on and evaluating how culture or the campus environment shape student perceptions, behaviors and learning/growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes Assessment</td>
<td>Measuring what students know or can do as a result of a program or service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross or Peer Institution Assessment</td>
<td>Comparison with similar or “peer” institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Standards Assessment</td>
<td>Using national benchmarks to compare performance to national standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost-effectiveness Assessment</td>
<td>Examining the benefits to students based on cost of the experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Schuh & Upcraft, 2001)

All eight types of assessment are relevant and useful to student affairs professionals depending on the questions that need to be answered or the problem that needs to be addressed. For instance, a coordinator of a health services office might track client use of the health center by hour to determine staffing schedules to meet student needs. Another example, managers of dining services might ask students to complete a satisfaction survey and use the data they collect to make improvements to the dining options available on campus. A third example, in a time of declining resources, a campus recreation staff member may use a cost-effectiveness assessment to assess recreation activities, such as club or intramural sports, by examining the benefits to students based on the cost of the experiences. A final example, divisions of student affairs may use environment assessments to assess student perceptions of the campus climate for women or underrepresented minorities and use data they collect to improve climate through education and/or policy and structural changes.

While each assessment type is relevant and useful to the student affairs profession, this study will focus on learning outcomes assessment, which will be discussed in the next section.

**Learning Outcomes Assessment**
Assessment of student learning outcomes has become the focus of much of the literature on assessment and has been described as the most valid way to demonstrate the impact of student affairs programs on student learning and development (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Student affairs learning outcomes assessment aims to measure what a student should be able to do or know as a result of a program or experience (Sharp et al., 2011; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Assessment of learning moves student affairs assessment beyond understanding student's satisfaction with a program to examining the degree to which a program has contributed to the student's learning. Data gathered from learning outcomes assessment is especially powerful in demonstrating the worth of student affairs and meeting accreditation criteria.

Scholars portray learning outcomes assessment as a cycle and as an iterative process intended to provide useful feedback about what and how well students are learning (Maki, 2004). The process, portrayed in Figure 1, involves identifying learning outcomes, designing programs and experiences to deliver outcomes, developing methods to gather data, gathering data, interpreting data, and the using data to make decisions to improve programs, enhance student learning, inform policies, decision-making, planning, budgeting, policy, and meet accountability demands.

**Figure 1: Learning Outcomes Assessment Cycle**

![Diagram of Learning Outcomes Assessment Cycle](image_url)

Adapted from Maki (2004)
Divisions develop learning outcomes at the program, department, and division level that are ideally aligned with the mission and goals of the division and institution. While learning outcomes will vary from campus to campus, NASPA developed suggested learning outcomes based on the student affairs professionals’ foundational document, *The Student Learning Imperative* (1994). Suggested learning outcomes include:

- **“Complex cognitive skills:** reflective thought, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and intellectual flexibility
- **Knowledge acquisition:** subject matter mastery and knowledge application
- **Intrapersonal development:** autonomy, values, identity, aesthetics, self-esteem, and maturity
- **Interpersonal development:** Understanding and appreciating human differences, being able to relate to others, establishing intimate relationships
- **Practical competence:** career preparation, managing one’s personal affairs, and economic self-sufficiency
- **Civic responsibility:** responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society and commitment to democratic ideals” (Schuh & Upcraft, 1998, p. 3)

Just as learning outcomes will vary from campus to campus, so do models for assessing student learning. The Educational Advisory Board (2011), a for-profit company that provides research and advice to higher education on a variety of topics, published a research brief that outlines three measurement models: campus-wide, division-level, and decentralized. In a campus-wide model, academic and student affairs partner to develop broad institutional learning outcomes that can be measured at various levels. This model establishes a common framework that enables result-sharing across divisions, produces results that demonstrate overall impact on
institutional outcomes, and encourages various units to work towards clear, mutual goals. In a division-level model, divisions create their own division-wide learning outcomes that often complement the institutional mission. This approach can be used to make university-wide learning outcomes more applicable to Student Affairs work or fill a void if the institution has not yet articulated broad learning goals. According to the Educational Advisory Board (2011), most student affairs organizations use this model. Lastly, in a decentralized model, individual student affairs units develop and measure their own learning outcomes. A benefit of this model is that practitioners are empowered. However, a drawback to this model is that outcomes may not be connected to the divisional and institution mission and are difficult to compare across units. (Educational Advisory Board, 2011).

**Measuring Student Learning**

When designing a learning outcomes assessment project, student affairs professionals must make decisions regarding how to best measure student learning. This section provides an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different measures and methods used in student affairs assessment and explains why assessment scholars recommend using multiple measures and methods to understand the complex constructs of co-curricular learning.

**Indirect vs. direct measurement.** In the narrative around assessment, there is often a distinction made between indirect and direct measures of student learning. Direct measures of student learning, according to Suskie (2009), purport to measure what students know and measure them in a fashion that allows for the demonstration of learning. Direct measurement involves assessing student work products that demonstrate that specific learning has taken place. Examples of direct measures include objective tests or using a rubric to score written student work. The strength of direct measurement is that it provides student affairs professionals with
direct evidence of student learning. A possible weakness of direct measurement is that not
everything can be demonstrated in a direct way, such as values, perceptions, feelings, and
attitudes. In contrast, an indirect measure is based upon a report of perceived student learning.
Indirect measures seek to understand what students report they learned, as well as how and
why the students gain knowledge in the areas being measured. The most common example of
an indirect measure is a survey that asks students to report what they have learned or gained as a
result of an experience. Other indirect methods include asking students what they think they
have learned through focus groups and interviews. The strength of indirect measurement is that
it enables student affairs professionals to assess certain implicit qualities of student learning,
such as values, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes. The weakness of this approach is that, in the
absence of direct evidence, assumptions must be made about how well perceptions match the
reality of actual learning. The use of surveys, particularly national surveys used for
assessment purposes, still is the most prevalent form of assessment at colleges and
universities across the United States (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). This
prevalence of indirect measures may be limiting what we know about student learning.

**Qualitative vs. quantitative methods.** There are various methods that student affairs
professionals can choose from to measure learning. The best data collection method(s) depend
on the purpose of the study, but there are three choices: quantitative methods, qualitative
methods or a combination of both. Quantitative researchers assign numbers to objects, events or
observations, use instruments with established psychometric properties to collect data
objectively, and use statistical methods to analyze data. Examples of quantitative data collection
methods include multiple choice tests and survey questions that asks students to rate their learning
on a scale. Qualitative methodology is the detailed description of situations, events, people, and
experiences. Qualitative researchers view themselves as the primary instrument for collecting
data and use their interpretations to understand the meaning of data. In summation a very simple
definition of quantitative methods is that they yield greater breadth of information and more
accurately answer the *what* questions than qualitative methods, and a simple definition of
qualitative methods is that they provide greater depth of information and more accurately
responds the *why* questions than quantitative methods. (Schuh & Upcraft, 1998; Upcraft &
Schuh, 1996)

**Multiple measures.** Because each method has its limitations, an ideal assessment
program combines direct and indirect measures from a variety of sources. Scholars argue that no
single strategy is sufficient in describing gains in terms of student learning and development and
argue that a combination of indirect and direct measures are needed to understand the multiple
dimensions of student learning (Banta, 2002; Middaugh, 2007, 2010; Shulman, 2007; Smith &
Mather, 2000). Using multiple measures and triangulating various data sources can provide
converging evidence of student learning and allows practitioners and researchers to acquire a
more accurate and holistic understanding of student learning (Jones, 2002; Upcraft & Schuh,
1996).

**Conclusion**

Several themes emerged from a review of literature on the concepts and frameworks used
in student affairs assessment. First, scholars described tensions between the goals of assessment
– improvement vs. accountability – as well as data collection methods – quantitative vs.
qualitative and direct vs. indirect methods. These tensions serve as a backdrop for this study.
Second, while there are multiple types of assessment, scholars describe learning outcomes
assessment as the most valid way to demonstrate the impact of student affairs programs on
student learning and development (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). However, as described in the historical roots section, learning outcomes assessment is the assessment type that is most misunderstood and misused. This theme underscores the importance for more research to be done in the area of student affairs learning outcomes assessment.

Another notable finding in this review, which informed the selection of bounded rationality as the theoretical framework for this study, is that several scholars describe the assessment process as a series of complex decisions, ranging from who to assess to what to assess to how to assess to how to use results. If assessment practice is described by scholars as a series of complex and interrelated decisions, then a decision making framework will be helpful in understanding how student affairs professionals are making decisions along the assessment process as well as the context in which they are making assessment-related decisions. Surprisingly, the literature review did not yield any studies that apply a decision making framework to this line of research, and in this way, a study of decision making along the assessment process would fill a gap in the literature.

Fourth, a review of literature on student affairs assessment frameworks suggests that there are many different ways to measure student learning, including direct and indirect as well as quantitative and qualitative methods. However, scholars argue that no single strategy is sufficient in describing gains in terms of student learning and development and argue that multiple measures are needed to understand the multiple dimensions of student learning (Banta, 2002; Middaugh, 2007, 2010; Shulman, 2007; Smith & Mather, 2000). This theme serves as a major underpinning of the action-research conflict under investigation in this study—despite scholarship on the importance of multiple methods, student affairs professionals are relying self-report surveys as their primary or only data collection method. Because self-report surveys are
the most commonly used method for acquiring data on student learning, the following section will review literature on the use and validity of this data collection method.

**Use & Validity of Self-Report Surveys**

The purpose of this section is to examine literature on the use and validity of self-report surveys. The first half of this section will review relevant literature on the use of self-report surveys in student affairs and higher education research. The second half of this section will provide an analysis of empirical research on the validity of self-report surveys designed to measure student learning. This section will conclude with a summary of the major themes identified in the review of literature on self-report surveys and their implications for this study.

**Overreliance on Self-Report Surveys**

While assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of multiple measures to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks of student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), student affairs practitioners are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). In fact, a 2013 national study of learning outcomes assessment practice by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment determined that self-report surveys, particularly national surveys, are the most prevalent form of assessment at colleges and universities across the United States (Kuh et al, 2014).

Not only are student affairs practitioners over-relying on self-reports, but student affairs scholars are also using self-report surveys more than any other data collection method. A search of peer-reviewed journals on ERIC and ProjectMUSE yielded several studies that used self-report surveys to measure student affairs learning outcomes such as leadership, civic engagement
and civic values (Dugan, Bohle, Gebhardt, Hofert, Wilk & Cooney, 2001; Huang & Chang; 2004; Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008; Lott & Eagan, 2011; Roan-Kenyon, Soldner & Inkelas, 2007; Wu, 2011). A search of literature only yielded one study using interviews, another indirect measure, to study perceived student learning through the student conduct system (Howell, 2005). No studies were identified that utilized direct measures of student learning, such as objective tests or assessing student work samples.

Because self-report surveys are the most prevalent assessment data collection method, much of what we know about co-curricular student learning is based on student perceptions. In practice, student self-reported data informs student affairs practice at the institutional and national level, influencing decisions on funding, curriculum, best practices and program structure. Reliance on self-reported data as the primary indicator of student learning is potentially damaging to student affairs research and practice in cases where perceived learning does not accurately reflect actual learning. Student affairs practitioners who place great weight on self-reported data may make political, structural, or financial decisions based on student perceptions rather than actual learning.

**Validity of Self-Report Surveys**

The student affairs profession’s overreliance on self-report surveys as the primary or sole method for collecting data on student learning leads to an important question: can college students accurately report their learning? A search of literature yielded six studies that examine the validity of self-reports of college student learning; these studies will be described in the following paragraphs. Despite the popular use of self-reports surveys by student affairs professionals, only one study was identified that examined the accuracy of student self-reports within the context of student affairs (Turrentine, 2001). However, five studies were identified
that examine the validity of student self-reports of learning in the context of in-classroom learning and on broader college experiences. While these studies were not conducted on student affairs programs specifically, there are many commonalities between academic outcomes and student affairs outcomes (Murray, Naimoli, Kagan & Kirnan, 2004; Bresciani, 2002; Sharp et al., 2011). For this reason, these studies were included in this review.

**Studies that demonstrate the accuracy of self-report surveys.** A literature search yielded three studies that provide evidence of the validity of self-report surveys. First, Turrentine (2001) measures the validity of self-report surveys by comparing student self-reports of leadership behaviors and skills to peer-observant reports. While Turrentine (2001) admits that neither self-reports nor self-assessments were perfectly confirmed by peer observations, peer observations were congruent with self-reports in the majority of cases. Turrentine (2001) asserts that the results of this study, if confirmed with future research, “provide a basis for confidence in students’ accounts of their own behaviors (Turrentine, 2001, p. 371).” Similarly, Chesebro and McCroskey (2000) studied whether students can accurately report how much they learned in a classroom setting by comparing self-reported learning gains to scores on an objective quiz; they found a statistically significant correlation between students’ self-reports and their recall of actual lecture material. Lastly, Douglass, Thomson & Zhao (2012) compared data from a statewide self-report survey to an objective test, called the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and found that self-reports of learning correlated with objective tests. These three studies concluded that self-reports provide accurate data and can be used as a proxy for direct methods.

**Studies that demonstrate the inaccuracy of self-report surveys.** A literature search yielded three studies that question the accuracy of self-report surveys. First, Bowman (2010) compared self-reports to objective tests using data from the 2006 Wabash National Study of
Liberal Arts Education. Bowman (2010) discovered no statistically significant correlations between self-reports and actual progress as measured on objective assessments. Similarly, Bowman and Seifert (2011) also use 2006 Wabash National Survey data to study self-reports of college student learning. Bowman and Seifert (2011) examined student perceptions of the degree to which their interactions with faculty and peers impacted their learning and growth; the researchers found inconsistent patterns between influence and development, which demonstrates that students vary in their ability to accurately identify the extent to which various experiences positively influence their learning and development. Lastly, Grant et al. (2009) conducted a study of U.S. college students’ perceived and actual computer skills by comparing self-reports to an objective computer skill assessment. Findings indicated significant differences between self-reports and performance on Microsoft Word and Excel related skills. These three studies conclude that self-reports are not accurate and are not good proxies for more direct measures. It is also important to notes that in all three studies, students overestimated their knowledge and skills.

**Limitations of Self-Reports**

Scholars have cited several factors that impact the accuracy of student self-reports of learning including social desirability bias, the halo effect, acquiescence bias, intentional and unintentional dishonesty as well as students failing to put effort into the cognitive processes necessary to respond accurately (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Porter, 2011; Turrentine, 2001). These five threats to validity will be described in the following paragraphs.

Much of the literature on self-assessment indicates that students generally overestimate their knowledge, skill, aptitude and performance (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2011; Bowman & Seifert 2011; Grant et al., 2009; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce & Lysy, 2003; Teo, 2012a; Teo, 2012b).
Bowman (2010) indicates two sources of bias that are particularly problematic when measuring college student self-reported learning: social desirability and the halo effect. Social desirability bias, which is the tendency for people to answer questions in a way that will be viewed favorably by others, may influence college students to over-report their growth, especially since much of the learning that takes place outside of the classroom involves socially desirable attributes like leadership, integrity and citizenship (Bowman & Hill, 2011; Gonyea & Miller, 2011). Kulas and Stachowski (2012) and Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) assert that social desirability influences data at different degrees and is not uniform, which creates measurement issues. Kuncel and Tellegen (2009) argue that the degree to which items are contaminated by social desirability often reflect systematic biases, and if better understood may help colleges and universities assess student learning more accurately. Just as challenging, the halo effect, which was conceptualized by Thorndike (1920), occurs when individuals allow their general impressions to influence their judgment on specific items. If a college student feels she has learned immensely from an experience, she may rank herself high on every competency area even though some areas may be higher than others. The halo effect is strongly connected to student satisfaction; the more satisfied a student is, the more she will indicate growth (Gonyea & Miller, 2011).

Bowman and Seifert (2011) and Turrentine (2001) also discuss honesty being an issue, especially on items related to personal behaviors such as alcohol consumption and sexual health. However, Flemming (2012) argues that participants may not be intentionally dishonest. Rather, students could be reporting their non-conscious understanding of their ideal self. In other words, students may describe themselves as how they want to be, rather than how they are.
Bowman and Seifert (2011) also describe acquiescence bias, which they describe as the tendency to agree with statements because they appear to be plausible. It might make perfect sense, and students just agree rather than putting in any cognitive effort.

Porter (2011) argues that students are rarely able to move through the cognitive processes necessary to accurately respond to survey questions. Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski (2000) assert that students that students must successfully move through four cognitive processes in order to respond accurately. First, they must correctly interpret the survey question. Second, they must accurately recall the relevant information. Third, they must integrate the relevant information into an accurate judgment. Fourth, they must correctly map their judgment onto the survey scale. Because of these heavy cognitive demands, students may take mental shortcuts (Krosnick, 1991).

Conclusion

Three themes emerged from the literature on the use and validity of self-report surveys. First, student affairs practitioners, colleges and universities, and student affairs researchers are using self-report surveys more than any other method. This theme suggests that the problem of practice identified by the researcher in her local context is also identified as a problem at the national level and is also a problem of research. Second, the literature on the validity of self-reports indicates disagreement on the accuracy of self-reports. Three out of six of the reviewed studies indicate that students are not able to accurately report their learning and tend to overestimate their knowledge and skills. No patterns existed in terms of which competencies or conditions could be accurately measured and which could not. The lack of consistency in findings demonstrates the need for student affairs to question their current practice of relying on self-report surveys. Third, literature indicates that there are several threats to validity that make
self-report surveys inaccurate, especially social desirability and the halo effect. Such biases make it even more concerning that student affairs professionals are using self-report surveys as their primary data collection method, further evidencing the need for this study.

**Summary of Literature Review**

Through a review of literature, the researcher gained a clearer understanding of the historical and intellectual roots of assessment, the current state of student affairs assessment scholarship and practice, and the concepts, models and methods that inform student affairs assessment practice. This review also expanded the researcher’s knowledge of the use and limitations self-report surveys in student affairs assessment practice and research. The themes that emerged from this literature review and their implications for this study will be described in the following paragraphs.

First, literature on the historical roots of the assessment movement reveal that learning outcomes assessment, which aims to understand what students know or are able to do as a result of an experience, has long been a critical issue in student affairs, but the demand for evidence of student learning has never been stronger. The rising cost of college attendance, soaring student loan debt and mounting unemployment rates amongst recent college graduates have stimulated perceptions of deficits in college student learning. Accrediting agencies, professional organizations, legislators, donors, employers, and parents and students are demanding increased accountability from higher education institutions and student affairs divisions, whose mission statements promise growth in terms of leadership, citizenship and career success, have not been shielded from this scrutiny (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Sharp et al., 2011). Now more than ever, there is pressure on student affairs divisions to provide evidence of the learning and development that occurs as a result of co-curricular programs and to use learning outcomes assessment data to improve programs and services, allocate budgets wisely, and strategically
plan for the future. It is critical that student affairs practitioners evaluate current assessment practices and professional competencies to ensure high quality, accurate assessment of student learning.

A consistent theme across the first three sections of this literature review is that scholars describe assessment in terms of tensions between accountability demands and improvement goals. While there is mounting pressure for accountability, which is often the main driver of assessment, foundational student affairs documents and professional association reports assert that the main function of assessment is to improve student learning and development. As described in Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) conceptualization of the assessment process, the purpose of the assessment will influence all decisions along the assessment process including selection of measures, which is the main focus of this study.

A review of literature also suggests that the student affairs profession has been engaged in assessment for almost a century, yet several authors assert that the student affairs profession has failed to fully engage assessment in practice (Doyle, 2004; Hoffman, 2010; Green 2006; Green et al., 2008; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Several scholars have attempted to explore this problem of practice by examining the perceived assessment skills and competencies of student affairs professionals (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006), while others have examined elements of leadership and culture (Julian, 2013; Kirksky, 2010). Several case studies of effective student affairs assessment programs have also been conducted (Green et al., 2008; Seagraves & Dean, 2009). Nonetheless, Green et al. (2008) assert that very little research exists in the area of student affairs assessment, which has resulted in confusion amongst professionals on how to conduct quality assessment. Existing literature indicates that not much has changed in the last twelve years since Upcraft and Schuh (1996) wrote “among many staff in student affairs,
assessment is an unknown quantity at best, or, at the worst, it is misunderstood and misused (p. 4).” It is clear that more research and new approaches to understanding student affairs assessment practice are needed.

Another notable finding in this review is that assessment scholars describe the assessment process as a series of complex decisions, ranging from who to assess to what to assess to how to assess to how to use results. If assessment practice is described by scholars as a series of complex and interrelated decisions, then a decision making framework will be helpful in understanding how student affairs professionals are making decisions along the assessment process as well as the context in which they are making assessment-related decisions. This finding influenced the selection of this study’s theoretical framework, bounded rationality, which is a decision-making model that can be used to understand the complexity of decision-making as well as the limitations, conditions and contexts (the “bounds”) in which decisions are made. Surprisingly, a review of relevant literature did not yield any studies that apply a decision making framework to this line of research, and in this way, a study of decision making along the assessment process would fill a gap in the literature.

While there are many types of assessments, scholars describe learning outcomes assessment as the most valid way to demonstrate the impact of student affairs programs on student learning and development. Data gathered from learning outcomes assessment is especially powerful in demonstrating the worth of student affairs, improving programs and services, and meeting accreditation criteria. Unfortunately, of all the student affairs assessment methodologies, learning outcomes assessment, is the most misunderstood and misused (Sharp et al., 2011; Tyrell & Fey, 2011; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). This theme underscores the need for more research to be done in the area of student affairs learning outcomes assessment.
A review of literature also reveals that there are many different ways to measure student learning, including direct and indirect as well as quantitative and qualitative methods, yet student affairs practitioners are using self-report surveys more than any other method. Student affairs professionals can choose from several different methods that have been utilized and validated for decades, including surveys, observation, interviews, objective tests, and using rubrics to score student work. Nonetheless, student affairs professionals are relying on a single measure—self-report surveys. Data collected from these surveys is then used for programmatic, budgetary and strategic decision making as well as satisfying accountability requirements, such as presidential reports and accreditation criteria. This practice is concerning because scholars argue that no single strategy is sufficient in describing gains in student learning and argue that multiple measures are needed to understand the multiple dimensions of learning (Banta, 2002; Middaugh, 2007, 2010; Shulman, 2007; Smith & Mather, 2000). This questionable practice serves as the problem of practice under investigation in this study: student affairs professionals are consistently choosing one method (self-report surveys) when they have a number of methods to choose from and scholars recommend using multiple measures.

The student affairs profession’s reliance on self-report surveys as the primary source of data on student learning leads to an important question: can college students accurately report their learning? A review of literature on the accuracy of self-report surveys in student affairs and in-classroom contexts yielded mixed findings. Turrentine (2001), Douglass et al. (2012) and Chesebro and McCroskey (2000) determined that self-report surveys are accurate, while Bowman (2010), Bowman and Seifert (2011) and Grant et al. (2009) demonstrated that self-report surveys do not accurately measure student learning and that students tend to overestimate their knowledge, skill, aptitude and performance (Bowman, 2010; Bowman, 2011; Bowman &
The lack of consistency in findings demonstrates the need for student affairs to question their current assessment practices. Moreover, scholars suggest that there are several threats to validity that make self-report surveys inaccurate, including social desirability bias, the halo effect, acquiescence bias, intentional and unintentional dishonesty as well as students failing to put effort into the cognitive processes necessary to respond accurately (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Porter, 2011; Turrentine, 2001). Such biases make it even more concerning that student affairs professionals are using self-report surveys as their primary data collection method. In sum, a review of literature on the accuracy of self-report surveys suggests that self-report surveys may not be a good proxy for more direct measures, reinforcing the importance of using multiple measures of student learning.

Reliance on self-reported data as the primary indicator of student learning is potentially damaging to student affairs research and practice in cases where perceived learning does not accurately reflect actual learning. Student affairs learning outcomes assessment data is used for accountability, program improvement, campus decision making, meeting accreditation criteria, and demonstrating the impact and worth of student affairs programs and services. Because self-report surveys are the most prevalent assessment method, much of what we know about co-curricular student learning is based on student perceptions. In practice, student self-reported data informs student affairs practice at the institutional and national level, influencing decisions on funding, curriculum, best practices and program structure. Student affairs practitioners that place great weight on self-reported data may make political, structural, or financial decisions based on student perceptions rather than actual learning. The results of these decisions may negatively impact the co-curricular education of current and future students and may impede student affairs from fulfilling its mission of improving society by developing future leaders and engaged citizens.
In conclusion, this literature review suggests that a major discrepancy exists between the research on and practice of student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of multiple measures to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks to student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), and to use data to meet internal and external demands for accountability and improvement. However, student affairs practitioners and researchers are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Adding to this problem, a growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Grant et al., 2009). If researchers and professional organizations recommend mixed-method approaches yet student affairs practitioners and researchers rely on self-reports, which may not be valid, then more must be known about why student affairs professionals decide to use self-report surveys as their primary, and often only, source of data on student learning. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the decision-making processes inherent to selecting measures of student learning for student affairs professionals engaged in learning outcomes assessment.

The research design guiding this study will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The objective of this study was to explore how student affairs professionals make decisions inherent to selecting measures of student learning when conducting learning outcomes assessment and the contexts, limitations and environments that influence their decisions using bounded rationality as a theoretical framework. The specific research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do student affairs professionals describe the complex decision making process associated with selecting measures of student learning?

2. How do student affairs professionals describe the internal and external factors that influence complex decision-making process associated selecting measures of student learning?

These research questions were developed to elicit descriptions of participant’s experiences with assessment-related decision-making and the contexts and situations that have influenced their experiences.

The following chapter presents a qualitative method and transcendental phenomenological approach for conducting this study. To begin, the researcher provides a description of why a qualitative research approach aligned with her research questions as well as an overview of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and the transcendental phenomenological research strategy guiding this study. Next, the study’s participants and procedures will be explained in detail. This chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations, researcher bias, strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of findings, and potential limitations.
Qualitative Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative research design for data collection using a transcendental phenomenological approach. In the following paragraphs, the study’s research design, paradigm and transcendental phenomenological research strategy will be described in detail.

Qualitative Design

Qualitative research was appropriate for answering the study’s aforementioned research questions because it allows for the in-depth exploration of a problem or issue (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is uniquely suited to studying complex phenomena, such as decision-making processes, through the exploration of participants’ descriptions of their “lived experiences” (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers seek to identify the complexities of a phenomenon by discerning common meanings and themes. In this study, a qualitative research design allowed the researcher to understand the “lived experiences” of student affairs professionals engaged in learning outcomes assessment, the complex environment in which student affairs assessment takes place, and the conditions/forces that influence the decisions made during the assessment process.

Constructivist-Interpretivist Paradigm

Complementing a qualitative approach, a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was applied to this study to assist in answering the research questions. Constructivist-interpretivists posit that reality is constructed in the minds of individuals and that meaning unfolds and is extrapolated through deep reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivist-interpretivists and transcendental phenomenologists assume that truth is socially constructed rather than an external entity (Ponterotto, 2005). Rather than identifying a single truth, they seek to make meaning out of phenomena by describing the “lived experiences,” diverse perspectives, and historical-social contexts of the people experiencing it (Ponterotto, 2005). To understand “lived experiences” and
make meaning of phenomena, constructivist-interpretivists and transcendental phenomenologists employ qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation. In alignment with a qualitative approach and a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, interactive dialogue between the researcher and participants, through interviews, led to a greater understanding of the decision-making processes inherent to selecting measures of learning.

**Phenomenology**

The researcher identified phenomenology as the best approach for her study because she aimed to understand several individuals’ shared experiences of a phenomenon (decision-making). Decision-making is an abstract phenomenon that cannot be explored directly, but through one-on-one, in-depth interviews with individuals that have experienced making decisions related to assessing student learning, the researcher was able to induce meaning (Englander, 2012). As a scholar-practitioner, the researcher wanted her study to produce information that will help the student affairs community improve assessment practice. In alignment with this goal, phenomenological research acknowledges that there is a need to seek an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in order to better understand and improve practice (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, specifically the works of Edmond Husserl and those who expanded on his views, such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Sarte, and Merleu-Ponty (Dowling, 2007). According to Dowling (2007), Husserl is credited with developing phenomenology as an empirical philosophy, which is both a descriptive method and a philosophical science derived from a method. According to Smith and Osborn (2007), Husserl described phenomenology as the in-depth examination of a participant’s “life world” (i.e., reality) as it attempts to explore personal experiences regarding the individual’s perception or
account of the phenomenon under investigation. Husserl asserts that “life world” refers to the individual experiences of the participants in their daily setting (as cited in Dowling, 2007, p. 132). As such, the “aim of phenomenology is the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132).

There are several features of phenomenology that make it distinct from other research approaches. First, phenomenology is unique because it is both a research tradition and a philosophy. Creswell (2007) states that researchers conducting a phenomenological study must gain a thorough understanding of the philosophical roots and assumptions of phenomenology prior to commencing their research. Second, the purpose of a phenomenological study is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon into a description of the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). As such, phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon, rather than comparing and contrasting across cases as in other research approaches. Third, phenomenologists treat each participant as a bounded case, which contrasts with general inductive and case study approaches, which treat a group of individuals or site as a bounded case.

There are various types of phenomenology, eighteen according to Caelli (2001), that have different approaches to the position of the researcher, data collection and data analysis (England, 2012). Creswell (2007) identifies three of the most common genres: transcendental, hermeneutical and interpretive phenomenological analysis. Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology focuses on describing the essence of the phenomenon and involves a specific set of data steps. On the other hand, Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutical phenomenology aims to understand the essence of a phenomenon through both description and interpretation, but does not provide clear data analysis steps. Lastly, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a
descriptive and interpretive process through which the researcher aims to make meaning out of how participants make meaning of their experiences with a phenomenon (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Although there are different approaches to phenomenology, Stewart and Mickunas (1990) note that most genres share three common philosophical assumptions. First, all approaches place emphasis on the traditional task of philosophy, which is the search for wisdom and meaning. Also, with the exception of IPA, phenomenologists suspend their judgments and separate biases through a bracketing process called epoch. Lastly, phenomenologists assume that consciousness is always directed toward an object and that the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual. (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990)

While Caelli (2001) categorizes eighteen divergent forms of phenomenology that have subtle differences in regards to the position of the researcher and data analysis process, Englander (2012) argues that one of the most common mistakes of the novice researcher is not understanding the nuances between the varying genres of phenomenology and applying a mixed approach. To avoid confusion and methodological alignment issues, Englander (2012) suggests that researchers identify a single approach or single methodologist within the phenomenological tradition to guide their research. Heeding Englander’s (2012) advice, the researcher selected one genre – Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology – for this study.

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

Aligning with a qualitative and interpretivist-constructivist approach, transcendental phenomenologists strive to describe the essence of a phenomenon through in-depth interviews with individuals that experienced the phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenological study research questions typically follow a two-question
common template that consists of two questions: a. what have participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and b. what context or situations have influenced or affected their experiences? These two questions, which seek to elicit textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon, complement the study’s theoretical framework, bounded rationality, which is used as a framework for understanding how decisions are made and what factors influenced decisions. Together, Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenological recommended research questions and bounded rationality underpin this study’s aforementioned research questions.

Moustakas (1994) prescribes a systematic approach for analyzing interview data and assembling textural (“what” was experienced) and structural (“how” it was experienced) descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon involves the following steps: ephoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variations and synthesis of meanings and essences. Moustakas (1994) recommends that researchers follow the aforementioned steps for each individual transcript, resulting in an individual textural and structural description for each participant. Then, using the individual textural and structural descriptions, the researcher constructs a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience representing the group as a whole. As previously described, according to Husserl (1931), the father of phenomenology, the “essence” is the “condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). In this research, this composite textural-structural description of the essence of the phenomenon was used to answer the study’s research questions.

Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach was selected by the researcher for several reasons. First, she was interested describing the essence of the experience of making decisions inherent to selecting measures of student learning. Using Moustakas’s
(1994) rigorous data analysis process, the researcher constructed textural and structural
descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon, which was used to answer the study’s research
questions. Second, in alignment with Moustakas’s (1994) concepts of textural and structural
descriptions, the researcher was interested in knowing “what” student affairs practitioners
experience when they are making assessment-related decisions (textural descriptions) and “how”
they experience it (structural descriptions). Last but not least, a transcendental approach using
systemic procedures was consistent with the researcher’s philosophical view of balancing both
objective and subjective approaches to knowledge with detailed, rigorous data analysis steps.

Participants
Transcendental phenomenologists seek participants with common life experiences so that
descriptions can be categorized and essences revealed in order to represent the truest nature of
the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). On the same note, Englander (2012) indicates that the
more diversity in a sample, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common
experiences and develop a composite description. As such, a homogeneous sample was
generated and criterion sampling was used to identify participants with common experiences.
Selecting participants who can provide the researcher with the information needed to answer the
study’s research questions is one of the most important decisions a qualitative researcher will
make (Maxwell, 2005). According to Englander (2012), the question qualitative
phenomenological researchers must ask themselves when identifying participants is: “Do you
have the experience that I am looking for?” (p. 19). Because the researcher was interested in
studying decision-making inherent to selecting measures of student learning, it was critical that
solicited participants had significant experience with learning outcomes assessment. For this
reason, the researcher chose to study the experiences of student affairs assessment professionals.
A growing specialization, student affairs assessment professionals are involved in assessment
projects at the program, department, divisional, and often institutional level, and therefore have a
great deal of experience with selecting measures of student learning.

A purposeful sample of eight full-time student affairs assessment professionals that are
responsible for coordinating assessment activities for their student affairs divisions were selected
for this study. To generate this homogeneous sample, the researcher used a criterion approach to
select participants that have significant and similar experiences with assessment-related decision-
making. The following criteria was used to select participants: a. serves as a student affairs
assessment professionals and is responsible for coordinating assessment activities for their
division, b. currently works at a public or private, non-profit higher education institution, and c.
has at least 5 years of experience with student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Individuals
were solicited for participation through the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) national
professional organization listserv, and those that expressed interest and met the criteria for the
study were invited to participate in the study (Participant Recruitment Letter, Appendix A). A
total of nine student affairs assessment professionals participated in this study.

Sample size in phenomenological research is a topic of much debate. Moustakas (1994)
does not provide guidance on this matter, but several other scholars have weighed in. Giorgi
(2008) argues that the minimum number of participants should not be less than three and that a
smaller sample size makes it easier to discern the unique experiences from the more general
understanding of the phenomenon. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that sample sizes be between 5
and 25. Englander (2012) asserts that the question of “how many” is irrelevant, and Kvale
(1994) suggests that researchers should interview as many participants as possible until the
researcher finds out what he or she needs to know. Therefore, the final samples size of nine
participants meets the size criteria of Giorgi (2008) and Polkinghorne (1989). Additionally,
saturation was reached upon completion of the fifth interview, thus meeting the criteria of Kvale (1994)

**Procedures**

This section outlines the procedures used to collect and analyze data to answer the study’s research questions. The first described step is obtaining approval to conduct this study from the Northeastern Institutional Review Board. Next, participant recruitment and the process of collecting data via semi-structured interviews will be described. Third, an overview of the data storage strategies used to protect the identities of participants and keep interview data secure will be provided. Fourth, the transcendental data analysis process will be described in detail. Fifth, the researcher will provide a description of the ethical research principles guiding this study, a discussion of the steps taken to improve the trustworthiness of the study, and an examination of potential researcher biases, also known as a positionality statement, which is an important part of the transcendental phenomenological analysis process known as epoch. This section will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study.

**IRB Approval**

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical research principles and with the approval of Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), and as such, obtaining IRB approval was the first step in the research process. No known risks were associated with this study, so the researcher obtained approval via expedited review. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), a study is eligible for expedited review “if it poses no more risk than participants face in their own normal day” (p. 90). In this study, participants engage in the assessment process and discuss assessment and student learning as part of their professional responsibilities and normal workday.

**Participant Recruitment**
Upon receiving approval from the Northeastern Institutional Review Board, the researcher began her study by soliciting participants. Individuals were solicited for participation through the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) national professional organization listserv, and those that expressed interest and met the criteria for the study were invited to participate in the study (Participant Recruitment Letter, Appendix A). Selected participants were informed of the purposes and ethical principles guiding this study in writing via an unsigned consent document (Unsigned Consent to Participate, Appendix B) as well as orally at the beginning of the interview.

**Data Collection**

The process of collecting information in phenomenological studies involves in-depth interviews with individuals that experienced the phenomenon. Participants participated in one ninety minute, in-depth interview on the details of their experiences with assessment-related decision making. During the interview, the researcher engaged in the research technique of memoing, or taking field notes. Memos consisted of reflective notes, which facilitated the process of Epoche, as well as field notes taken by the researcher recording what was heard, seen, and experienced (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In the following paragraphs, these data collection techniques will be described in detail.

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted online via GoToMeeting according to the Interview Protocol (Appendix C), using a semi-structured interview approach. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen because it: a. aligns with a transcendental approach, b. enables researchers to prompt participants to reflect on a deeper level and to seek clarification on meaning when needed, and c. promotes dialogue between the researcher and participant, which aligns well with a constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm (Groenwald, 2004). The
protocol for the interview included open-ended questions designed to elicit descriptions of the participants background and experience to provide context for the analysis as well as several open-ended questions that aimed to collect descriptions of “what” (textural descriptions) and “how” (structural descriptions) the participants experienced the phenomenon of decision making, which aligns with the study’s research questions (Englander, 2012). This data collection method aligned with the goal of phenomenological research, which is to describe the meaning of a phenomenon for a small number of people that experienced it (Creswell, 2007). Permission to audio record interviews via GoToMeeting and a secondary hand-held recorder was secured prior to the start of each interview. Following the interview, participants were asked to “member-check,” or review transcripts to confirm accuracy, which is a strategy for establishing trustworthiness.

**Memoing.** Memoing is a significant aspect of data collection in qualitative research study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The researcher also used memos to reflect on and set aside her preconceived ideas, experiences and biases in order to remain open to her participants’ experiences. By memoing, the researcher was able to acknowledge and mitigate her biases and experiences as much as possible. For example, she had preconceived notions about how the political aspects of the higher education environment influenced what types of data of were collected and valued. The researcher bracketed these assumptions through memoing and remained open to the experiences of her participants. As such, memoing was a practice the researcher employed in order to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of her study. Credibility and trustworthiness will be later discussed in this chapter.

Through the use of memos, or field notes, the researcher was also able to immerse herself in and engage with the data. According to Birks, Chapman and Francis (2008), memoing allows
researchers to “immerse themselves in the data, explore the meanings that this data holds, maintain continuity and sustain momentum in the conduct of research (p. 68).” During interviews, the researcher noted ideas, hunches, and emerging patterns. She also made notes about important pieces of shared data, diagrams of learning outcomes assessment models, key phrases and terms mentioned by interviewees, as well as body language and emotional reactions emoted by participants. Memos were used to track decisions and trace how the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon developed over time. The researcher continued memoing through the data analysis process to analyze themes, group codes into categories, find meaning and connections between pieces of raw data with the theoretical framework and literature review. Through memos, the researcher extracted meaning from the raw data.

**Data storage**

The researcher took several precautions when storing data and other research materials. Participant names, institution names, and other identifying characteristics were removed from transcriptions and field notes and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure participant confidentiality. Research materials, including electronic recordings, transcribed interviews, and field notes, were downloaded and saved to a password protected computer and backed-up on an external hard drive. Pseudonym keys and original contact lists were saved in hardcopy in a locked personal file cabinet. Only the researcher had access to these files. Research materials will be destroyed 90 days following the researcher’s degree conferral date.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher used Rev.com, a transcription service, to transcribe interview audio files into Microsoft Word files. Once transcripts were received by the researcher, she uploaded the transcribed data into MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, which assisted the
researcher in managing data electronically. Moustakas’s (1994) approach to systematically analyzing interview data and assembling textural (“what” was experienced) and structural (“how” it was experienced) descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon involves the following steps: epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variations and synthesis of meanings and essences. During each step, the researcher engaged in memoing to deeply and critically engage with data and emerging themes and continue to “bracket” her biases; memos were used to track ideas, thoughts, feelings, patterns and hunches. In alignment with Moustakas’s (1994) approach, the researcher followed the aforementioned steps for each individual transcript, resulting in an individual textural and structural description for each participant. Then, using the individual textural and structural descriptions, the researcher constructed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience representing the group as a whole. As previously described, according to Husserl (1931), the father of phenomenology, the “essence” is the “condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This composite textural-structural description of the essence of the phenomenon is presented in Chapter Four and discussed in relation to the study’s research questions, theoretical framework and literature review in Chapter Five. Each of these steps is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

**Epoche.** Epoche, a Greek word meaning to stay away from, is a fundamental and recurring step in the phenomenological reduction process. Just as she did in the data collection process, the researcher continuously set aside, or “bracketed,” her views of the phenomenon and focused on those views reported by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas suggests that “no position whatsoever is taken...nothing is determined in advance” (p. 84). Moustakas (1994) advises engaging in reflective-meditation, by letting the preconceived ideas and biases into one’s
consciousness and then allowing them to leave freely. Another recommended strategy, the researcher used memos to write out and label prejudgments and review them until the hold on her consciousness was released and she felt open and receptive to new possibilities (Moustakas, 1994). As previously mentioned, the researcher practiced epoche through the writing of her positionality statement, assuming an open-minded attitude throughout the process, and through memoing throughout the study to set aside biases and preconceived ideas. In addition to these strategies, the researcher stayed focused on the purpose of the study by reviewing the research questions before and during the data analysis process and kept a hardcopy of the purpose statement, theoretical framework, and research questions next to her while she analyzed the data, which is a practice recommended by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003),

**Transcendental-phenomenological reduction.** Following epoche, the next step in the data analysis process was transcendental-phenomenological reduction. It is referred to as *transcendental* because it moves beyond the everyday to the pure ego in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time. It is described as *phenomenological* because it transforms the world into mere phenomenonon. It is called *reduction* because it leads the researcher and readers “back to the source of meaning and existence of the experienced world” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). The goal of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction process was to delineate *textural descriptions* of the phenomenon for each participant. During this process, each participant’s interview transcript was analyzed separately.

During transcendental-phenomenological reduction, the researcher engaged in the process of horizonalization, in which the researcher highlighted “significant statements” in the interview data that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). These significant statements were then organized into a list so
that a researcher could identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). All significant statements were treated as possessing equal value during the horizontalization process (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

Next, the researcher deleted statements that were irrelevant to the topic and others that were repeated or overlapping. The remaining statements became the “horizons,” or textural meanings. The researcher then carefully examined the identified significant statements then clustered the horizons into themes or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, the researcher organized the themes into a coherent textural description for each participant; in other words, a description of what” was experienced. Textural descriptions included verbatim examples from the transcribed interview.

**Imaginative variation.** The next step in the research process was the process of “imaginative variation,” during which the researcher considered the textural descriptions and identified additional structural meanings by using her imagination to approach the phenomenon from different perspectives, roles and functions (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation is a reflective process in which the consciousness is free to move from “facts and measurable entities and toward meanings and essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). During the process, many possibilities and perspectives were considered in an effort to discover the truth. The researcher assume that there is no single truth and allowed for countless possibilities to emerge that were connected to meanings and essences. The goal of imaginative variation was to identify the essential structures of the phenomenon and the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what was being experienced (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Through this process, individual *structural descriptions* of the experience were constructed for each participant.
Moustakas (1994) outlines four steps of imaginative variation: a. systematically varying possible structural meanings (or “how” it was experienced); b. identifying underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon; c. considering different universal structures, such as time, space, causality, relation to self, and relation to others, that may precipitate feelings and thoughts about the phenomenon; and d. searching for examples that vividly illustrate invariant structural themes.

**Synthesis of meanings and essences.** The final step of the transcendental phenomenological data analysis process involved synthesizing textural and structural descriptions into meanings and essences. First, individual textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon were synthesized into a composite textural-structural description of the phenomenon for each participant through the research process referred to by Moustakas (1994) as “intuitive integration.” This composite description became the structure of ultimate “essence” which captures the meaning ascribed to the experience by each participant (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). From the individual textural-structural descriptions, the researcher developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole. According to Husserl (1931), the father of phenomenology, the “essence” is the “condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This composite description was used to answer the study’s research questions, which are: a. How do student affairs assessment directors describe the complex decision making process associated with the assessment process? and b. How do student affairs assessment directors describe the internal and external factors that influence complex decision-making process associated with the assessment process? (Creswell, 2007).

**Ethical Considerations**
The researcher took several precautions to protect the human subjects in this study. To ensure that participants understood the study, the researcher described the study to participants orally and in writing (Unsigned Consent to Participate, Appendix B). As part of the informed consent process, the researcher communicated the purpose of the study, the minimal risks and benefits of participation, how data would be used, stored and shared, and measures taken to protect confidentiality. The researcher also communicated that participation was optional and participants can drop-out at any time. Participants were provided with a copy of the unsigned consent form so they can review their rights at any time.

In alignment with Rubin and Rubin (2012), the researcher felt strongly that participants should be better off by participating in this study, and certainly not worse off. As previously stated, the study posed no more risk than the participants would face as part of their normal work day. The researcher asked questions about the participants’ experiences with making decisions related to assessment and did not ask questions and will not publish information that would cause harm to the individual. Participants will receive a copy of the final study, which may be useful in understanding shared assessment experiences and developing recommendations for improvement.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical research principles and with the approval of Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to conducting interviews, participants were provided with a consent form (Unsigned Consent to Participate, Appendix B), which describes the purpose of the study and provides contact information for questions about the study. Participation was voluntary and research participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable, and could withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were recorded, with participant consent, and
were conducted according to an approved interview protocol (Interview Protocol, Appendix C). Research participants, who were professional staff members at colleges and universities, were not a vulnerable or high-risk population and were asked questions about their normal day-to-day work responsibilities.

The researcher was intentional about protecting the confidentiality of her participants. The names of participants and associated institutions were given pseudonyms at the point of transcription. The pseudonym key and original contact list were stored in hardcopy in a locked personal filing cabinet to ensure that only the researcher knew the identity of her participants. All other data files, including recordings and transcripts, were stored on a password protected personal computer, and only the researcher and her advisor had access to this information. Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed 90 days following the researcher’s degree conferral date.

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher took several steps to increase the trustworthiness of results. First, the researcher bracketed her bias throughout the study through the process of Epoche in an effort to ensure that the study’s findings reflect the participants’ views, not those of the researchers. Through Epoche, which is a Greek word meaning “stay away from,” the researcher separates out her experiences and biases in order to remain neutral and open to all of the possibilities of the participants’ experiences. The researcher also used memos to reflect on and set aside her preconceived ideas, experiences and biases in order to remain open to her participants’ experiences. By memoing, the researcher was able to acknowledge and mitigate her biases and experiences as much as possible. As such, memoing was a practice the researcher employed in order to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of her study. Second, Creswell (2007) states
that prolonged engagement in the field enables researchers to build trust with participants and more deeply understand the environment in which the phenomenon takes place, enabling them to recognize misinformation or inaccuracies. The researcher’s eight years of student affairs assessment experience and two years of academic affairs assessment experience enabled the researcher to gain credibility with and trust from participants, understand the culture in which the phenomenon is taking place, and equipped the researcher with the knowledge and understanding to recognize distortions or misinformation. Third, the researcher performed member checks with participants to confirm transcript accuracy. Creswell (2007) indicates that member checking is the most critical technique for establishing credibility. The researcher performed a member check with each participant and by providing transcripts via email and asking participants to comment on their accuracy. Fourth, the researcher provided rich descriptions including direct quotes from participants in her analysis. Rich, think descriptions utilizing direct quotes allows the reader to make decisions about the extent to which the information gleaned about the phenomenon can be transferred to other settings.

There were two potential threats to the trustworthiness of this study that were addressed. First, mortality was be reduced by completing the interviews and follow-up within a short period of time and by remaining in contact with participants to update them throughout the process. Second, history was addressed through preliminary informational questions at the beginning of interviews. Information collected included experience (number of years, types of assessment work), academic preparation, professional history, professional development/professional organization engagement in area of assessment, and scholarly activities in assessment.

Based on Creswell’s (2007) five standards for quality phenomenological research, the researcher used the following steps to ensure the quality of her study: a. discussed the
philosophical tenets of phenomenology early in the study; b. clearly articulated and defined the phenomenon to be studied; c. used procedures of phenomenological data analysis, such as those recommended by Moustakas (1994), d. described the overall essence of the phenomenon through rich description of the phenomenon and the context in which it occurs; and e. was reflexive throughout the study.

**Potential Research Bias**

Writing a positionality statement allowed the researcher to reflect on how her personal experiences, values, and expectations influenced her perceptions of and approach to her study. While bias and preconceptions cannot be removed completely, by looking internally and externally, the researcher identified and bracketed her assumptions in order to remain open to all of the possible results of her research (Briscoe, 2005). In phenomenological research, a researcher’s positionality is a significant aspect of the research process. Through the process of Epoche, the researcher reflected on her biases and assumptions and put them aside in order to be open to the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher possesses eight years of experience with assessment in student affairs and academic affairs, and currently leads student affairs assessment efforts at Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a full-time assessment director. Ever since her first exposure to learning outcomes assessment as a college student leader, the researcher has been intrigued by the importance and challenges of understanding the complex learning that takes place on college campuses, both in and outside the classroom. Over the years, she has been instrumental in assessment work at the program, department and division level at a variety of institution types, at the state-level in Massachusetts and at the multi-state level, through her work with the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment. The researchers also completed
coursework in assessment in student affairs, and teaches others about assessment through consultations and trainings. The researcher’s diverse experiences with assessment have provided her with a strong understanding of best practices, challenges and national trends in assessment. Specifically, she has witnessed several of the problems described by other scholars, such as failure to engage in quality assessment, problematic methodological choices, failure to use and share results, lack of collaboration, as well as overall lack of skills and abilities in designing assessments and analyzing data. The researcher’s experience has also provided her with the opportunity to make decisions along the assessment process in various contexts. Through the process of Epoche, the researcher put these experiences aside and remained open to the experiences of others.

While phenomenological research involves bracketing one’s assumptions and biases through the process of Epoche, Moustakas (1994) asserts that researcher’s interest in the topic is fundamental. Moustakas (1994) argues that when conducting a study, phenomenological researchers must be personally invested in the problem. The researcher deeply values assessment and the use of data for improving programs, decision making and strategic planning. She has experienced the problem of practice under investigation, and is committed to elevating the student affairs profession’s engagement in quality assessment through her professional and scholarly work. The researcher’s commitment to and experience with assessment enabled her to better listen to, understand and explore the experience of other student affairs assessment directors. Nonetheless, by recognizing her biases, and bracketing them, the researcher increased the credibility and quality of her study.
**Limitations**

Although this study provides insight into the decision-making processes inherent to selecting measures of student learning for student affairs professionals, there are two notable limitations to this study: transferability and subjectivity. First, as a transcendental phenomenological study, the purpose of this study was not to yield findings that are transferable to how all student affairs professionals make decisions regarding measures of student learning. Rather than seek a large sample size, this study was limited to nine participants at nine different institutions, and as a result, does not provide a transferable sample. However, the small sample size enabled the researcher to deeply explore the lived experiences of the participants. Additionally, the researcher’s choice to study student affairs assessment professionals, those most experienced with assessment, may limit transferability of findings. The findings may be different if the researcher had selected a different group of participants, such as new professionals, middle managers, or senior student affairs leaders. Readers should consider the participants’ levels of assessment expertise before applying the findings of this study to his or her own setting. Another limitation to this study is subjectivity. While several rigorous data analysis steps were used to increase objectivity and trustworthiness, the researcher was the main instrument for analysis and she used her judgement to code data and identify themes. To determine if the data can be trusted, the reader should examine the rich, thick descriptions and quoted text and analyze if they are adequately aligned before applying findings to his or her setting.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to describe the decision-making processes inherent to assessing student learning for nine student affairs assessment leaders using bounded rationality as a theoretical framework. Through qualitative inquiry and a transcendental phenomenological research design, the researcher aimed to understand and describe how student affairs professionals make decisions about how to measure the student learning that occurs as a result of co-curricular programs and the contexts, limitations and environments that influence their decisions. Data was collected through in-depth, one-on-one interviews, which yielded rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences with learning outcomes assessment-related decision-making. Following Moustakas’ (1994) rigorous data analysis procedures, the researcher assembled textural (“what” was experienced) and structural (“how” it was experienced) descriptions for each individual participant then constructed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience representing the group as a whole. Four thematic portrayals, or themes emerged. The composite description of the essence of the phenomenon consists of four core themes and twelve corresponding supporting themes: 1. collaborative approach, including a. consulting, b. group work, and c. seeking feedback; 2. strategic process, including a. outcomes, b. experience, c. methods, and d. data usage; 3. internal factors, including a. internal resources, b. internal stakeholders, and c. culture; and 4. external factors, including a. existing knowledge, and b. external stakeholders. The following table presents the four core themes and twelve supporting themes disaggregated by participant.
As revealed by the table above, participant descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation were quite similar, with all core themes and most supporting themes encompassing the experiences of all nine participants. Saturation, which is the point in Transcendental Phenomenological research when no new horizons of meaning, or codes, are identified, was reached by the fifth interview (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Nonetheless, the additional four interviews reinforced that the identified themes truly capture the essence of the phenomenon, which is the goal of Transcendental Phenomenological research, and contributed to the richness and thickness of the data. This chapter will offer an introduction of each core theme, followed by a narrative of the pertinent supporting themes supported by direct quotes from the interview data.
1. Collaborative Approach

Collaborative approach was the first core theme to emerge from the data. All examples of student affairs learning outcomes assessment projects provided by the nine participants involved collaborative decision-making processes. In most examples, participants collaborated by helping groups, departments or committees think through decisions in as an “in-house consultant,” “assessment coach” or “assessment expert.” Participants also described collaborative decision-making in terms of group work; participants discussed group work in the context of cross-functional, university-wide and multi-institutional committees working collaboratively on large-scale learning outcomes assessment projects. Additionally, participants in this study discussed collaboration in terms of informal and formal processes for gathering feedback from stakeholders not directly involved in the assessment project, including senior leaders, assessment committees, colleagues from other institutions, as well as students.

Collaborative approach was not only a way in which participants described how decisions were made, but also as a tactic for enhancing the quality of decisions. Eight of the nine participants described collaboration as a key strategy for effective decision-making. Not only did hearing diverse ideas and perspectives strengthen the outcome of decisions, a collaborative approach enhanced buy-in to the assessment project and its results. Having a greater number of people involved also aided in implementation as groups were able to “divvy-up” tasks and share the workload.

The following sections will provide a discussion of the collaborative approach core theme in terms of the following three supporting themes: a. consulting, b. working in groups, and c. seeking feedback. This section will conclude with a brief summary.
**1a. Consulting.** When describing their roles in the decision-making process, the nine participants described themselves as an assessment “consultant,” “advisor,” “coach,” or “expert” that collaborates through assisting others with making decisions. Karen explained, “People come to us because we're perceived as the experts in that area and we'll help them and support them.” When describing their role as an “in-house assessment consultant” or “assessment expert,” participants discussed how they help groups and departments make decisions by sharing their assessment knowledge as well as their knowledge of the divisional and institutional landscape. They also aid in decision making by facilitating decisions through asking questions that prompt discussion as well as challenging others to consider using data collection methods other than surveys. While participants agreed that they assist with decision-making through consulting, the degree to which participants, in their role as a consultant, have influence over learning outcomes assessment-related decisions varied by participant and by project. As such, this section will highlight how participants described their role as consultant and the degree of influence they have over decisions.

As an “in-house consultant” or “assessment expert,” participants help groups and departments improve the quality of their decisions through sharing their assessment knowledge and experience. All participants have at least five years of experience with learning outcomes assessment, hold a PhD in education, are actively involved in assessment professional organizations, and contribute to assessment scholarship. As such, each participant is keenly aware of assessment literature as well as various data collection methods and techniques. An important part of their role is to share their assessment knowledge with the groups and departments with which they work. In other words, they improve decision-making through building capacity. Not only do they educate others through consulting, they also provide
division-wide professional development opportunities and resources, such as “how-to-guides” and templates.

In addition to sharing their assessment knowledge, consultants aid decision-making by providing groups with knowledge of the divisional and institutional landscape. Student affairs assessment directors are uniquely situated within their organizations, making them aware of the “politics,” “hot button issues,” and assessment activities across the division and institution. All participants possess direct access to senior leaders, often reporting to the Chief Student Affairs Officer. They also move laterally across the division, aiding various functional areas, which provides them with an awareness of assessment activity across the division. Participants also serve on campus-wide committees and are uniquely seated to understand the landscape of the entire institution. Sally referred to her unique positioning as “traveling the border” across all levels of the organization, while Dave earned himself the nickname of “Malcom in the Middle” as his position requires him to advocate for the needs of the departments as well as senior leaders.

Participants often described how they use their unique positioning to improve decisions through “alignment” and “bridge-building.” Peter explained how his positioning allowed him to connect two departments were attempting to measure the same learning outcomes:

Our career services office and our student leadership and involvement office are both trying to focus on career competencies, which I think is great. One is that, they’ve not talked to each other about doing it. They are both doing the same kind of thing. Two, they haven’t identified that each other could be used as resources in such assessment and three, they are both looking at different kinds of methods. My conversations or my
decision-making process with them about doing this is “Why don’t you two use each other?

Peter went on to describe how these conversations led to a collaborative project in which the two offices developed and implemented a leadership rubric that produced useful data for both offices. Another example, Dave discussed how he works with colleagues across campus on the various institutional committees on which he sits and identifies opportunities for the division to align its assessment work with assessment projects across the institution. He explained his role as “making sure that we are aligning with what other areas of campus are doing so that we are not out here on an island doing things on our own, but that we are actually an integrated part of the campus.”

When consulting on assessment projects, one of the roles described by participants was facilitating decision-making by asking questions. As Steve explained, “A lot of times when people ask me “Well, come in and help us design something,” I ask a lot of questions.” When asked what type of decisions need to be made to assess student learning, eight participants described a series of questions they would ask others, including: “what do you want to know?,” “what is your program about?, “what are your goals?,” “do you have learning outcomes?,” “who is going to help?,” “when do you need it by?,” and “what do you want to use the data for?” For the participants, asking questions served two purposes. First, it allowed participants to collect information about all aspects of the project as well as existing resources, opportunities and barriers. Through collecting information, participants were better positioned to help groups make good decisions. Second, asking questions prompted group discussion. For Peter, asking questions was a strategy for having “good conversations” and helping groups “talk through” and build consensus about their priorities and goals. For Karen, asking questions prompted
“brainstorming” different data collection methods and “being creative” when considering the project’s unique opportunities and barriers.

Steve, Peter, Pam and Karen articulated that one of their responsibilities as an “in-house consultant” or assessment “expert” was to challenge others to try new assessment strategies. Steve explained, “my job is to push people to get to new things, particularly if it relates to learning outcomes assessment.” For Pam and Karen, challenging others often means helping others consider data collection methods, other than surveys, that may better align with their goals. As Karen puts it,

When people come in and say, okay, so I need to do a survey, we back them up and say, before you figure that out, let's figure out what it is you want to know and they might want to get, well I want to understand the experiences of this particular group of students with this particular leadership experience and we go, well that's not really a survey topic. That's really more a reflection or an interview or focus group and try and provide those resources for them.

As elucidated in the above quote, Karen believes that an important part of challenging others means providing adequate support and resources. As Karen explains, her colleagues may rely on surveys because they are not aware of other data collection methods. Not only will she challenge them to try new methods, she also educates them on the benefits of other methods and provides guidance and resources for implementing them.

The degree to which participants, in their role as a consultant, have influence over learning outcomes assessment-related decisions varied by participant and by project. Dave explained that departments are the final decision-makers, but he shapes decisions through
providing advice and education. He said, “they are measuring how they think is best with input
from me.” For Karen, although the decision-making power rests with the departments, staff
often lean on her to make the final judgement call because she is considered “the expert.” Steve
and Peter explained that they are a resource for the division, but groups and departments do not
always seek their guidance. Peter wishes that more departments used him as a resource to
improve the quality of their assessment decisions. Steve offered a different point of view,
suggesting that many departments at his institution are skilled at assessment, so they do not need
his assistance. He said, “Somewhat honestly, the departments do a lot of that. I've got really
talented staff that are very good with rubrics. I come in and go, “Oh, you don't need my help.
Good!” While the degree of influence over decision making varied by participant and by
project, participants agreed that they enhance decision-making by serving as a consultant to
others.

In summation, when describing their roles in the collaborative decision-making process,
each participant described him or herself as a “consultant” “advisor” or “expert” that assists
groups with making decisions. Participants discussed how they help groups and departments
make decisions by sharing their assessment knowledge as well as their knowledge of the
divisional and institutional landscape. They also facilitate collaborative decision-making by
building-bridges between groups, asking questions that prompt discussion as well as challenging
others to try new and different data collection methods. While decision-making power often lies
with the sponsoring group or department, participants collaborate with and help others optimize
their assessment decisions through consulting.

In the next section, the second “Collaborative Approach” supporting theme, “Group
Work” will be presented.
1b. Group work. All examples of student affairs learning outcomes assessment projects provided by the nine participants involved working in groups. In most examples, participants were helping a group, department or committee with assessing programs as an in-house consultant. Participants also described group work in the context of cross-functional, university-wide and multi-institutional committees working collaboratively on a learning outcomes assessment projects. Participants in this study described how group work enhances decision-making, eases the burden of implementation and analysis, and is a strategy for increasing buy-in to the assessment projects and its results. When discussing group work, participants described strategies for enhancing group decision-making, including clarifying roles and responsibilities, building relationships, and compromise. In the following paragraphs, the ways in which participants described group work will be presented and supported by direct quotes from the interview data.

Participants agreed that most learning outcomes assessment projects are created and implemented through group work. Participants worked with groups of students, staff, and faculty as well as campus leaders on various types of learning outcomes assessment projects. Most examples provided by participants involved a small group of staff within a student affairs department working with the participant on a department assessment project. For example, Peter discussed a Career Services assessment project, Allison described a student conduct office assessment initiative, and Dave shared an example from an assessment project initiated by his institution’s community service office. In additional to departmental assessment projects, participants also experience working in groups with students as well as staff, faculty and campus leaders across campus. For example, Karen discussed her experience of working with a group of students to assess their first year student orientation camp experience, while Diane shared her
experience working on a large-scale learning outcomes assessment project with staff, faculty and campus leaders from across the institution.

Several participants described how group work improves the quality of decisions. For example, Karen stated, “It always helps to have more brains together than just one” and described how group work enabled her to “put more heads together to develop a better product”. As Karen described, groups can achieve more than individuals working on their own. When considering different assessment approaches, group members share ideas and experiences that assist the group as a whole in making the best decision possible. Similarly, Allison and Pam discussed how bringing more people into the decision making process improves the outcomes of decisions from a logistical and resource allocation perspective. For Pam, implementing assessment projects and analyzing results is a substantial amount of work, so having more staff available to assist is helpful. Pam and Allison both pointed out that some data collection methods require more human resources, so having more people on-board to help gives decision-makers more options to choose from. For example, Allison described how a collaboration between two offices on an assessment project enabled the two offices to employ a more time consuming assessment strategy—using rubrics to score written student work—that might have been too burdensome for one office do on its own.

Not only does group work enhance decision outcomes, Steve, Pam, Sally and Karen explained that involving others in assessment decisions through working in groups enhances “shared-ownership” and “buy-in” into the assessment project and its results. Pam said, I know buy-in is really important for me and so I want as many people to be involved in the early formulation stages because I'm going to need them later on in the process. I want to be able to address any criticisms that may come along at the outset and again
before we get too far along in the process make sure I've picked the best tool possible or
the best method.

Pam further explained that buy-in is important to all stages of the assessment project, from
defining outcomes and goals, to successful administration of the instrument, to effectively
communicating and using results. With buy-in in mind, Sally described how she brings others
into the decision-making process through multiple levels of group work. She said, “It might be
that you have an initial team that comes together that designs the outcomes and measurement.
Then, you have a secondary level team that does a review as well.” As Sally describes,
considering who will be involved in collaborative decision-making processes via group work is
an important consideration that should occur early in the decision-making process.

While there are several benefits to group work, Allison and Pam discussed how group
work can be challenging if roles and responsibilities of group members are not clarified early in
the decision-making process. As such, Allison and Pam indicated that clarifying roles and
responsibilities of group members is an important collaborative decision-making strategy.
Allison explained, “Who's going to be responsible for the various components of it? …That
became the challenge is really working through from a purely logistical standpoint who's
responsibility is this and who has the time and the energy.” By discussing and clarifying roles
and responsibilities at the onset of the assessment projects, Allison and Pam are able to
effectively and efficiently distribute the workload amongst group members.

In addition to clarifying roles and responsibilities of group members, Steve and Allison
described how pre-existing relationships between groups members is an important factor that
influences group effectiveness. When describing strategies that aided in decision-making, Steve
said,
I think it was the relationship component. I think it was that open communication relationship that was already pre-established. I think if we had two partners that were engaging in similar conversations without that relationship already existing, it could have been much more challenging.

As described in the above quote, pre-existing relationships between group members contribute to the effectiveness of groups.

Dave, Allison and Steve described compromise as a group decision-making tactic. As Allison put it, “I think maybe a tool or strategy was compromise, too. I'll give a little here, you give a little there.” Dave described decision-making as a process of negotiation and eventual compromise. He explained, that group members “kind of go back and forth, back and forth, until we have a process that is going to work for everybody involved.” Similarly, when working on an institution-wide assessment project, Steve experienced negotiation and compromise. Steve explained that while academic stakeholders were ready to move forward with the assessment project, student affairs departments did not feel that the project aligned with their current goals or available resources. Departments negotiated saying, “We can’t do this now. Maybe we can next year.” Through dialogue and compromise, they scaled back the project and planned a small pilot project for the following year.

In summation, participants agreed that decisions about how to best assess student learning typically involve group work. Participants work with groups of students, staff, faculty and administrators within and outside of their student affairs division. Participants in this study described how group work enhances decision-making, eases the burden of implementation and data analysis, and is a strategy for increasing buy-in to assessment projects and assessment results. When discussing group work, participants described strategies for enhancing group
decision-making, including clarifying roles and responsibilities, building relationships, and compromising.

In the next section, the third “Collaborative Approach” supporting theme, “Seeking Feedback,” will be discussed.

1c. Seeking feedback. Eight of the nine participants discussed their collaborative approach to decision-making in terms of seeking feedback from others. Although participants in this study agreed that feedback was beneficial to decision-making and improved the outcome of decisions, their experiences differed in terms how and from whom they seek feedback. Participants described both formal and informal processes for collecting feedback as well as the value of collecting feedback from students as well as colleagues. As such, this section will describe the various informal and formal strategies used to gather feedback as well as the sources of feedback described by participants.

Participants seek feedback from colleagues and students through informal and formal strategies. An example of an informal strategy, Pam asks colleagues at her institution and other institutions, as well as students, for feedback on ideas and assessment approaches. In contrast, Peter and Diane discussed formal feedback processes at their institutions. At Peter’s institution, the student affairs senior leadership team reviews and provides feedback on all assessment projects through an institutionalized process, while Diane leads a divisional assessment committee consisting of representatives from each department that reviews and approves all proposed assessment projects.

Participants discussed how they seek feedback at different stages of the process. Pam described the importance of obtaining feedback when writing and mapping learning outcomes to
confirm accuracy. She said “If I'm mapping university outcomes versus divisional outcomes, I'll have a bunch of people look at it kind of like in a reader reliability kind of idea.” Four participants discussed seeking feedback from colleagues once an assessment project plan is developed. Peter explained that feedback on the assessment project plan helps to ensure alignment between the outcomes, learning experience, methods and measures, and intended uses of the results. Pam, Amy, Karen, Dave and Diane discussed the importance of seeking feedback on instruments. Pam believes it is useful to have others “vet” instruments to confirm accuracy and correct any mistakes; she also shared that sometimes gathering feedback is: “Just more for my own peace of mind and making sure that I haven't missed anything along the way.” While participants described the importance of soliciting feedback on different points in the process, participants agreed that seeking feedback enhanced assessment decisions.

For Pam, Amy, Karen, Dave and Diane, students are one of the most useful sources of feedback. Pam and Amy informally ask students for input on the best strategies for improving student participation rates. Pam said,

I really go to the students and say, "What can I do to make you do this?" I really use students as my sounding board for the best way to disseminate or implement some type of assessment. Are you more likely to take a survey? Will you come to a focus group? How long does a survey have to be? The mechanics for me, I really go back to the students.

Pam went on to say, “I really turn to the students and I guess I am relying on them a little too much but they have their pulse on their colleagues a lot better than I do. I do sometimes change my method of deployment or the type of assessment I would use based on the feedback.” As
Pam described, student feedback on strategies to improve student participation rates influences decisions about data collection methods.

Another feedback strategy used by Karen, Pam, Dave, and Diane is to collect student feedback through piloting. For Dave, Pam and Karen, the purpose of piloting is to improve the “validity” or “soundness” of their instruments. Karen asks students, “if we asked you these questions, how would you respond?” According to Dave, “Really, we are just testing the question and making sure that we are going to get back what we hope to get back.” For these four participants, student feedback collected through piloting strongly influences decisions related to methods and measures, specifically question and instrument design.

Three participants described seeking feedback from colleagues at other institutions as a strategy for improving assessment decision making. According to Pam, “I also have colleagues throughout the field that I can pick up the phone and call and I do on a regular basis saying, "Okay does this make sense or do you have a good example?” Likewise, Steve said,

Meeting your colleagues, making phone calls, your own professional development matters, it helps your decisions because at the end of the day when you're trying to decide between one method or another, it's not an easy process.”

When faced with a challenging assessment project, Pam reached out to an assessment colleague at another institution and asked for help. Pam said, “He ended up being able to put an outsider perspective on a lens and a framework that I think I was just too close to see myself.” Pam went on to say that reaching out to assessment colleagues is increasingly important when working in a one-person office. She said, “Had I had a team, my team might have been able to help me with that but again when you're one person you make your team your broader network of colleagues.”

In these ways, feedback from colleagues at other institutions shaped assessment decisions.
In summation, participants seek feedback at various stages of the decision-making process from colleagues and students through informal and formal processes. Feedback helps improve the quality of decisions. Participants collaborate with others outside of the group working on the assessment project through gathering feedback and input.

In the next section, a summary of the “Collaborative Approach” core theme will be provided.

**Collaborative Approach (Core Theme 1) Summary.** Participants discussed using a collaborative approach to making decisions about how to best measure the learning that results from co-curricular programs and services. As such, collaborative approach was the first core theme to emerge from the data. Participants described collaborative approach in terms of helping others make decisions as an assessment consultant or coach. Participants discussed how they help groups and departments make decisions by sharing their assessment knowledge as well as their knowledge of the divisional and institutional landscape. They also facilitate collaborative decision-making by building-bridges between groups, asking questions that prompt discussion as well as challenging others to try new and different data collection methods. While decision-making power often lies with the sponsoring group or department, participants are able to help others optimize their assessment decisions. Participants also described collaborative approach in terms of group work. Participants work with groups of students, staff, faculty and administrators within and outside of their student affairs division. Participants in this study described how group work enhances decision-making, eases the burden of implementation and data analysis, and is a strategy for increasing buy-in to assessment projects and assessment results. Lastly, participants described collaborative approach in terms of seeking feedback at various stages of
the decision-making process from colleagues and students through informal and formal processes. In sum, participants agree that assessment decisions are collaborative in nature.

In the next section, the second core theme, “Strategic Process” will be presented along with its corresponding four supporting themes, “Outcomes,” “Experience,” “Methods,” and “Data Usage,” and supported with direct evidence from the interview data.

2. Strategic Process

The second core theme that emerged from the data was strategic process, which includes the supporting themes of outcomes, experience, methods and data usage. All nine participants described the decision-making process as choosing methods and measures that align best with the intended learning outcomes, the learning experience and the intended use of the data.

Decisions about methods and measures were part of and interrelated to all other decisions along the “assessment process” or “assessment cycle.” When making decisions about how to best measure learning, participants consider all aspects of the project simultaneously, identify barriers and opportunities, and consider various methods simultaneously in order to arrive at the best decision. Referring to the assessment cycle, participants described the process as “cyclical” and “iterative” as they consider various strategies until they find the strategy that aligns best with all components of the cycle.

Participants agreed on what the elements of the strategic process were, but disagreed in terms of the sequence of how elements were considered. Pam and Diane described the process as non-sequential. As Pam explained it as “there’s just so many questions jumping around in my head.” Diane said “I tend to think strategically…Like I'm always thinking what is the big picture, why are we doing it, what's it going to do... I think about all those things simultaneously and I've realized other people might think about them in sequential stacks.” However, most participants
described the elements in the order of the assessment cycle: defining outcomes, designing/implementing the learning experience, choosing methods and collecting data, and using and sharing results.

Sally, Steve, Pam, Diane and Steve described the strategic process as something that comes naturally to them. These five participants described themselves as “strategic thinkers,” or “maximizers.” Sally explained, “Because of my strengths which the top five are strategy, maximizer, ideation, input, and activator. I always say I have ideas, I have a plan to make them the best and let's go.” On a similar note, Steve and Sally described themselves as having “intuition” that helps them naturally align all elements of the assessment project, while Pam described her “internal barometer,” which guides her to the best way to measure learning. Steve described the decision-making process as an art form, in which he uses his strengths, experience and intuition. Steve said, “I do say that there's a little bit of art to this. Sometimes you just know, that survey question is better than that survey question and it's because of art. You just know it. It is intuitive and you learn it over time and you are gifted at it. There's an art to what we do.”

When describing the strategic process, participants described four elements of the assessment cycle that need to be considered: outcomes, the learning experience, possible methods, and the intended use of data. Participants also discussed the strategic thinking needed to also simultaneously consider internal and external factors, such as resources and stakeholders, which will be discussed as separate core themes. The following sections will provide a discussion of the strategic process core theme in terms of the following four supporting themes: a. outcomes, b. experience, c. methods, and d. data usage. This section will conclude with a brief summary.
2a. Outcomes. Participants described defining learning outcomes as a key step in the strategic process of assessing learning. Once determined, outcomes influence all aspects of the assessment process from the learning experience to the selection of measures and methods to how results will be used. Participants in this study often described determining intended learning outcomes as one of the first considerations in the decision-making process. Allison said, “From my perspective, I think one of the first decisions is looking at are there even defined learning outcomes? To me, that's the most important.” Participants shared how they approach defining outcomes, aligning program-level learning outcomes with divisional and institutional outcomes and structures, and prioritizing outcomes. As such, the following section will provide an overview of how outcomes are considered as part of the decision-making process.

According to participants, learning outcomes should be developed as part of the program planning process; however, if student affairs programs do not already have defined learning outcomes, participants assist staff in developing learning outcomes by prompting them to reflect on the goals of the program and what they hope students will learn and gain from participating in the program. Allison explains, “If there aren't defined learning outcomes, what can we guess about the experience as we know it to be what the learning outcomes are? That becomes I think the first decision making point or the first consideration.” Similarly, Sally said, “If they don't have that language, I always ask, ‘What are you wanting the student to walk away with? What are you wanting the student to know about you or this program or this topic? How do you want the student to change?’ I really want to dig into those kinds of things …”

Several participants described how outcomes are influenced by divisional and institutional structures such as mission, learning outcomes frameworks and strategic plans. Five participants described the importance of aligning outcomes with institutional and divisional
missions. When asked how he makes decisions about learning outcomes, Peter explained, I think the easy answer for me is that whatever ties back up to mission. If it is not mission centric, we shouldn’t be doing it.” Similarly, Steve said, “I always say, go back to your mission, your vision and your values. Who are you? What are you trying to do? What is your program really about?” Six of the nine participants have division-wide learning outcomes framework that identify division-wide learning outcomes, such as “civic engagement,” “intercultural competence,” “teamwork skills,” and “communication skills,” that departments can measure at the program level. Additionally, two participants described how institutional learning outcomes influence the selection of outcomes, while four participant’s described how learning outcomes are defined or selected in alignment with strategic plan goals.

Diane, Steve, Peter, Allison and Karen discussed how selecting outcomes often entail prioritization. When describing decisions about outcomes, Peter said, “I think we have to make sure that we are being most intentional of assessing the things that matter most.” Karen provided an example of an experience when she helped a group narrow their outcomes from 50 to 10 through prioritization. She explained,

We had advisors who came together and said, "Let's brainstorm. What skills do we think student leaders need?" There were about 50 things that came about and through some facilitation and processes we narrowed it down to about 10 things at first. We said, "Okay, these are the top 10 things we're going to focus on.”

Karen further explained, “It goes back to, so what piece of that learning do you want to get at? You can't get at everything. You can't feasibly assess every undergraduate learning outcome that we have so what is it that you're going to focus on and do?” On a similar note, Diane explained
that lack of prioritization can lead to a lack of focus and lack of intentionality. When describing a learning experience with too many learning outcomes, she said,

I would say that the first time I did it, I was not very realistic about what it was that I really expected them to learn. I kind of wanted them to learn way too many things. I wasn't very focused… This time around when I taught it, I started in a more systematic way.

When asked about how to prioritize, Peter explained that priorities are driven by both internal and external factors. Peter said, “I think sometimes priorities are driven by external factors and sometimes they are more internal right, so internally I think prioritizes should be driven by how we fulfill our mission and how we want to demonstrate that.”

Sally discussed how outcomes influence decisions about how to best measure learning because methods and measures are designed to collect data on the degree to which the desired outcome is met. In the following quote, Sally described how she designed survey questions to measure intended outcomes.

When I got their outcomes, I wanted to write an instrument that the student could take and the end result told them where they were with that outcome. For example, if the outcome I think for them for this particular program, they wanted the transfer students to be able to identify at least three buildings on campus, the location of three buildings. I asked something related to name three buildings or three programs. Whatever the outcome was, I asked it.
In this way, the selected outcome will influence decisions about all aspects of the assessment process, from designing learning experiences, to selecting methods and measures to how data will be used.

In summation, participants in this study suggest that considering desired learning outcomes is one of the first considerations in the decision-making process. While learning outcomes should be designed during the early stages of the program planning process, if they are not, participants assist others with developing learning outcomes through conversations about what they hope students will learn and gain from participating in a given experience.

Determining learning outcomes often involves prioritization as it is unfeasible to measure everything a student might learn or gain; narrowing down the list of learning outcomes aids in focusing the program and assessment design. Participants use their institution and divisional mission statements, divisional learning outcomes frameworks, and strategic plans to guide the selection of outcomes. Participants agreed that once learning outcomes are determined, the program or experience should be designed to deliver the intended outcome, the method should be designed to measure the intended outcome, and the resulting data should be used to assess how well the program met the intended outcome. As such, the decision-making process involves strategically considering and aligning outcomes with the other elements of the assessment cycle.

In the next section, the second “Strategic Process” subtheme, “Experience” will be explored.

2b. Experience. All nine participants agreed that the learning experience must be considered when making decisions about how to measure student learning, but the ways in which they described the consideration of the experience varied by participant. Five participants discussed how the learning experience should be intentionally designed to produce the intended
learning outcomes, however, as Peter, Allison, and Sally explained, it is common that learning outcomes are defined after the program is implemented or not at all. Four participants discussed that the intended participants of the experience must be considered. Five participants described how the delivery method or format of the experience influences decisions about measures and methods, while five participants considered ways to integrate assessment into the learning experience. As such, this section will highlight the following ways participants consider the learning experience in decision-making: a. alignment with outcomes, b. audience, c. format, and d. integrating assessment into the experience.

Three participants described the importance of intentionally aligning the experience with the learning outcome. Ideally, outcomes are determined as part of the program planning process and programs are intentionally designed to produce the desired outcome. However, Allison, Sally and Peter point out that this is not always the case. Peter expressed the lack of intentionality around designing programs in alignment with outcomes. He explained, “I think where student affairs folks don’t do a good job with and I am one of them. If we don’t do a good job with this, is that we kind of hope learning happens as opposed to being intentional about making it happen.”

Diane and Karen discussed how the intended level of learning must be considered when designing an experience and determine how to best measure learning. In other words, student affairs professionals should set realistic expectations for how much learning can take place as a result of an experience and to plan the program accordingly. In other words, Diane said “whatever that is, whether it's a program or a workshop or a semester long activity, what the actual level of learning is that you want to have happen.” Diane suggests that the level of learning would be different for a short workshop compared to a semester-long learning
experience. After describing Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning, Diane suggests that a brief, single session workshop may result in students being able to remember or understand a particular concept, but a deeper, more engaging experience is needed for higher level learning, such as being able to evaluate or apply a concept or even create new knowledge, to occur. Similarly, Karen made the following statement,

What their expected level of learning is? How much time are students committing to a particular experience? Also, one, here's workshop that's maybe 3 hours or a presentation that's an hour is certainly going to be very different than I'm student body president for 365 days. The learning is going to be different and the assessment clearly is going to be different based on that.

As discussed by Diane and Karen, student affairs professionals should not only align experiences with learning outcomes, they should also consider the intended level of learning that should occur when designing and assessing co-curricular programs and activities.

Pam, Karen, Peter and Diane discussed how considering the population of students engaged in the experience is an important factor that must be considered in decision-making. Pam said, “I think very broadly a lot of that conversation for me is about the who, who's going to be involved? As in, what is the target population that we're assessing? On a similar note, Peter discussed how larger audiences can present measurement issues while smaller audiences allow for deeper types of assessment. Peter explained,

I mean if it's a one workshop thing, you can assess it one way that has 20 people in a room and there's one person out there talking or there's an interactive kind of thing, that's one. You can assess that one way, very differently than when you have 4,000 people
coming to your lecture, because you're not going to get all 4,000 people to give you some information. That’s what I mean by it depends on the program. Some of them are small and you can do a little bit more very deep kinds of things…

For these four participants, the number of students involved in the experience will shape decisions about how to measure student learning.

Steve, Peter and Allison discussed how the format of the experience influences choices about how to best assess student learning. Steve said, “There may be reasons to ask some types of questions versus other types of questions, depending on whom your participants are, what kind of program, or what kind of intervention is happening.” Allison went into greater detail about the assessment possibilities and opportunities different formats provide. In the following quote, she compares a seminar format to a more experiential learning format in which students are asked to work together to analyze and present a case study. She said, “If we're talking about a workshop seminar type format, that becomes very different for me in making some decisions about how we'll assess. In that space, we can potentially use observation a little bit more than if we're saying a lecture that is purely information transfer.” In the above quote, Allison suggests that traditional lecture-style programs should be assessed differently than more interactive, hands-on, workshop formats, with the latter allowing for more direct assessment methods such as observation.

Diane, Dave and Allison discussed how the format of a program influences decisions in terms of the degree to which students are “captive.” Dave discussed how having a captive audience aids the assessment process because it ensures student participation in the assessment project. He said, “We know then we will get most, if not every single student there, and their responses.” He further explained that it is helpful to build the assessment into the format of the
program in an effort to capture all student responses. He said, “We know we have them captive in a room for an hour, an hour-and-a-half. We are just going to use 20 minutes of that or 15 minutes of that for them to complete what we want them to complete.” Diane discussed “captiveness” slightly differently. She explained how it is often difficult to catch a “captive audience” because co-curricular learning often takes place outside of a structured environment, like the classroom. She said, “What I find is we spend a lot of time in the co-curricular environment, not having caught a captive audience.” Referring to an assessment project aimed at assessing what students learn as a result of living in a residence hall, she said, “Just even how am I going to measure this because they're not in my class from 7 to 8pm?” In Diane’s example, she explains measuring learning outside of the classroom can be difficult due to the lack of a captive audience.

Allison and Dave discussed how the seek opportunities to use an existing aspect of the experience as a data collection method. As an example, Allison said, 

For instance, with an alternative spring break program that I worked for or worked with, they were writing reflection papers when they came back from their experience. That was something that wasn't designed as an assessment tool…Well, that was already part of the learning experience. Now I can collect those and use as an artifact to do document analysis. That's an example of using things that are already part of the learning experience.

Another example, Dave discussed how he used orientation leader group discussions with incoming first years as an informal focus group-style strategy for collecting data on the degree to which students learned. In these examples, shared by Allison and Dave, data collection was integrated into existing aspects of the learning experience.
When considering the learning experience, Amy, Dave, Allison and Diane seek opportunities to integrate assessment into the learning experience in a way that promotes student learning. In other words, they use assessment as a teaching and learning tool. Allison stated that ideally she would like the assessment process to be a learning opportunity for students. Referring to the selected data collection method, she said, “Can that also be an intervention or learning opportunity? Can it be more of a reflective piece than necessarily just a questionnaire?” Participants discussed “formative” assessment strategies that are designed to be both learning tools and data collection methods, such as reflection exercises and providing individualized feedback to students using rubrics. Amy and Diane discussed how they integrate assessment into the learning experience by using Campus Labs’ Student Response System, a mobile device polling tool. Amy described how she used this strategy during a financial management training for student organization leaders. She said, “Throughout the training, which was a 50-minute curriculum training, we would infuse the training with using the student response session to collect data for immediate feedback. Throughout the training, we learned what they were learning.” As described by these participants, seeking opportunities to integrate assessment into the learning experience is an important consideration when making decisions about assessment methods.

Overall, participants in this study agree that the learning experience must be considered as part of the decision-making process and strategically aligned with the other elements of the assessment cycle. Participants discussed the ways in which the learning experience should be considered in nuanced ways, including the program format, the intended level of learning, the audience, and ways to integrate assessment into the program experience. While they
experienced considering the program in different ways, they agreed that the learning experience must be strategically considered when making decisions about how to assess learning.

In the next section, the third “Strategic Process” supporting theme, “Methods” will be discussed.

2c. Methods. For all nine participants in this study, considering different possible methods and measures is an important part of the decision making process. Diane explained, “Another decision is what method are we going to use, is that going to be talking to people, interviews, focus groups, observation, rubric, survey, what are we going to do ... That instrument, whatever that is, is going to actually capture what it is that we said we wanted to measure.” Dave asks, “Are we going to observe it? Are we are going to use a survey? Are we going to use a test? Are we going to do focus groups and interviews? Is it journaling?” As suggested in Diane and Dave’s above statements, there are various ways to measure learning that should be considered as part of the decision-making process.

According to participants, an integral part of the decision making process involves selecting the “best” or optimal method, from a variety of options, that fits best with other aspects of the assessment project as well as internal and external factors, such as resources and stakeholders, which will be discussed as separate core themes. Participants describe the consideration of methods as a sequential process in which a method is examined from multiple angles to determine alignment with other aspects of the assessment project—outcomes, experience, intended use of data—as well as internal and external factors. As part of this process, the purposes as well as strengths and weaknesses of each method are considered. Karen gave an example in which she initially suggested using a rubric as the best method for an
assessment project, but ultimately learning contracts were selected as the best measure based on departmental input.

We created the rubrics like I said and then some people said, the rubrics don't work for me, we said, okay, that's cool. Then we kind of branched out and said, what are some other opportunities? The next thing we tried were learning contracts and so very individualized student learning but that helped students take ownership of their own learning and talk about how, what they wanted to learn in their student organization was going to help them after college or with the particular topic area where they thought they needed to learn more.

Participants discussed how in some cases the ideal or perfect assessment method is not a viable option in practice due to a variety of limitations, such as time, staff competence or stakeholder needs. Pam, Peter and Karen discussed how sometimes staff default to using quantitative methods, like a surveys, when qualitative methods might be more appropriate because they are faster and easier to employ. On the same note, Sally, Karen, Peter and Dave discussed how direct measures are preferred to indirect measures, but are often not a viable option in practice. Due to constraints, especially time, student affairs staff opt to use indirect measures. Similarly, while most participants articulated a commitment to using multiple methods whenever possible, most examples of learning outcomes assessment projects described by participants utilized a single data collection method, suggesting that it is often not realistic to employ more than one data collection method in practice.

When discussing the consideration of various data collection methods and choosing the “best” method, participants described the process in terms of quantitative vs. qualitative
methods. Amy and Steve explained how quantitative and qualitative methods serve different purposes. Amy explained,

Qualitative methods permit us to study selective issues in depth and in detail, approaching the assessment without being constrained, if you will, by pre-determined categories of analysis, allowing us to better contribute the depth, the openness, and the detail of a qualitative inquiry. Then quantitative methods, on the other hand, we contend that they require the use of standardized measures, so they're very perceptive and experiences of our research subjects, our students, faculty, staff, or others, they're perceptions and experiences can be fit into a limited number of pre-determined response categories.

Participants discussed how the selected method should align with the purpose of the assessment project. For example, when Allison and Dave wanted to understand the deep levels of learning that occurred through a community service experience, they used qualitative methods. On the flip side, when Diane wanted to understand the “pulse on our campus and find out where we’re strong and where we’re weak,” she utilized quantitative data.

Steve, Allison and Amy discussed how qualitative data is used to complement and supplement quantitative data. Amy explained, “What we learned from the quantitative survey results was validated from what we gathered at a qualitative research study involving focus groups.” Similarly, Steve explained,

We’ll do a survey that gives us all that quantitative data…. Everything is 5 point scales and 7 point scales and then move on. Then usually that tells us something, and then usually when we start doing the analysis, we’re like okay, well it tells us something, but it
doesn't tell us everything. We’ve probably got to do a focus group or we’ve probably got to go ask some people some questions.

Lastly, Allison articulated, “I know that probably influences my decision making as I create or think about assessing something is I want the numbers to back it, but then I also want to understand it more deeply with the qualitative.”

When considering using quantitative methods, qualitative methods or mixed methods/measures, participants discussed how the best data collection method is sometimes not selected due to a variety of constraints. Specifically, participants discussed how quantitative methods are often selected over qualitative methods not because of their alignment with assessment project goals but because they are quicker and easier to employ. Specifically, Pam, Peter and Karen discussed how sometimes staff default to using quantitative methods, like a surveys, when qualitative methods might be more appropriate because they are faster and easier to employ. When describing surveys, Pam explained, “it's the default, go to assessment method. ‘Let's develop a survey, we can crunch the data with SPSS or whatever it is.’ It's just the default way to go.” Pam further explained, “It's easy to write a couple of questions and send it out and ask students to respond.”

Participants in this study articulated a commitment to utilizing a mixed methods or multiple measures approach measuring student learning. Allison said, “I value both the quantitative and qualitative pieces, and so I know that I'm not drawn, other than sometimes resource kind of time allocations, to one or the other. In fact, I like to combine when possible.” According to Amy, “We are committed to a mixed-method approach. While surveys are often the most efficient method of data collection, we also use a number of other data collection methods.” Amy went on to describe various data collection strategies, including interviews,
focus groups, observation, and archival review of data. While Allison, Amy and Steve discussed a commitment to mixed methods and multiple measures, most assessment projects described by participants in this study involved a single data collection method.

In addition to framing the selection of methods in terms of quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods, four of the nine participants framed their consideration of possible methods in terms of considering indirect vs. direct measures. Sally, Dave, Karen and Peter discussed how direct measures are the best way to measure learning, however Peter also discussed how direct measures are often challenging to implement and indirect methods can be used as a proxy for more direct methods. The nuanced ways in which participants discussed indirect vs. direct methods will be discussed in this section.

Sally, Dave, Karen and Peter discussed how direct measures of learning, which require students to demonstrate or provide evidence of learning, are preferred to indirect measures, which require students to report how much they think they know. Sally explained that direct measures are more robust, rigorous and valid. She explained, “I think if you are going to talk about something robust and rigor is increased with direct measures. To be able to say we know because 78% were able to name those buildings or 78% can identify this and that was our outcome gives more robustness” In agreement, Karen explained,

If your learning outcome is students will be able to effectively communicate orally with a variety of audiences, we would challenge people to say what opportunities are you giving students to do that and how are you giving them feedback versus are you just giving them a survey on a 5 point strongly agree, strongly disagree scale that says I can communicate orally with a variety of audiences? That's not as effective, from our perspective, than you actually having them do something.
On a similar note, Peter discussed how indirect measures are often more efficient, but are less valid than direct measures. He explained, “Now indirect is a little bit easier to get, but we also know that critics have said that there is no real evidence that proves the student is going to really learn it if they basically just say I know how to do this. Sometimes students will overinflate their sense of ability.”

While participants agreed that direct measures of learning may be more valid than indirect measures, Peter and Dave discussed the advantages of indirect measures. First, Peter discussed how indirect measures are easier and more efficient to employ. Second, Peter and Dave discussed how perceptions of learning may yield data about student confidence, which is valuable. Dave explained, “There are some levels of confidence and competence that we want to be able to get from students. We do want to know that they are confident in their abilities.” On the same note, Peter said, “There is some value to asking about self-perceptions. Ideas of self-efficacy for example is if I believe I can do something, I am probably am more inclined to be able to do it.”

Lastly, Peter discussed how and when indirect measures are often a sufficient proxy for more direct measures. “Now I’ll be honest. I think in terms of what we are doing a lot for internal assessment work that's probably fine.” He went on to say, “I think if students were to tell us that we are valuable, and that they think that if we help them in certain ways that can be almost equally meaningful and probably a good proxy to what we really are trying to know and that is what you have learned as a result of these programs.” However, he cautions that, “He also said, If we think the students are convinced that they can do something more as a result of something, some kind of experience, I think we should go with that. We should be careful how we use it.”
In summation, participants in this study discussed how they consider various data collection methods as part of the strategic decision-making process of measuring the learning that results from student affairs programs and services. Participants carefully consider whether a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approach would best suit the goals of the assessment project. Some participants also make decisions about whether they should use direct or indirect measures, with the former being more valid and the latter being more efficient. Throughout the discussion of method consideration, participants discussed how the “best” or optimal method or measure is not feasible in practice due to limitations such as time or staff competence. In sum, participants agreed a key step in the strategic decision-making process is to consider various possible data collection methods and to choose the method that aligns best with the other elements of the assessment cycle as well as the limits and opportunities presented by internal factors and external factors.

In the next section, the fourth “Strategic Process” supporting theme, “Data Usage” will be presented.

2d. Data usage. All nine participants discussed the importance of considering the intended use of data early on in the decision-making process. Amy shared the mantra, “Begin with the end in mind,” while Diane, in agreement, said, “I think the use of the results is a decision that should be made as you're designing at the beginning.” When describing how the intended use of data influences assessment design, participant’s comments fell into two categories: using data for improvement purposes and using data for accountability purposes. A review of examples of assessment projects described by the participants suggests that assessment projects designed to produce data for improvement often differ in terms of method and level of rigor than assessment projects designed to produce data for accountability purposes. This
further evidenced by the following comment made by Peter in which he described how an assessment project designed for improvement would be different from and may not yield the data needed an annual report (accountability purpose). Peter said, “I am not going to use that in our annual report, but if that's going to improve you quality of your program, you should go about doing that.” This section will highlight the nuanced ways in which the participants described how the intended use of assessment results influences the decision-making process.

Dave, Sally and Amy described assessment projects designed to produce data that can be used for accountability purposes. Dave described accountability purposes, such as: “Do you need to tell a story? Do you need to improve your budget? Do you need to convince somebody that your program is great? Is it an accreditation standard?” Similarly Sally discussed designing an assessment project with the end goal of producing data for an annual report, while Amy discussed producing data that will justify the use of resource to internal and external stakeholders. As participants described projects that would meet accountability goals, they described assessment projects that were summative and quantitative in nature, producing numbers that demonstrate the overall impact of the experience on student learning. A specific example, Steve discussed using pre-post test survey design to measure learning before and after an experience in order to demonstrate growth as a result of the experience.

On the other hand, Allison, Karen and Steve discussed producing data that can be used for improvement purposes. Participants described improvement purposes in two ways: program improvement and student improvement. Allison, Steve and Dave described assessment projects designed for program improvement purposes. Allison and Steve described projects using rubrics, while Dave described projects using observation and focus groups, to measure the current state of learning and used results to make improvements to the experience so that it will
produce higher levels of learning in the future. Dave and Karen discussed assessment projects designed as feedback tools to improve individual student learning. Dave described an assessment project in which the recreation department wanted to give individualized feedback to students officiating athletic events and, therefore, chose to design and implement an officiator rubric. Similarly, Karen described a project in which a student organization advisor chose to use a rubric in order to give individualized feedback to student leaders and to assess student organization skill development overall.

Looking at intended data usage from a slightly different perspective, Peter discussed how the intended use of data influences the level of rigor put into an assessment project. He said,

I think that's something I have to answer constantly is okay how will this information be used, who is going to use it. For information for the president sometimes I would work a little bit harder on, particularly since he might use those sound bites in public forums….I think who is asking for the information is going to influence that. I always want to do assessment with integrity and do a good job with it. Sometimes quick and dirty for internal use is probably fine depending on how it is going to be used.

Peter suggests that assessment projects for internal improvement purposes may require less rigor than projects that will be used for accountability purposes, like sharing data in public forums.

In sum, participants discussed how the intended use of data or the purpose of the assessment is a driving factor in assessment decision-making. Participants described assessment projects designed to produce data for accountability purposes, like annual reports, budget requests and sharing data with campus leaders and the public, as well as improvement purposes, such as using data to improve programs and providing individualized feedback to students. A review of examples of assessment projects described by participants suggests that assessment
projects designed to produce data for accountability tend to be summative and quantitative in nature, primarily surveys, while assessment projects designed to produce data for improvement not only used surveys but also utilized focus groups, observation and rubrics. However, it is important to note that there were exceptions to this pattern and that the accountability and improvement categories were not mutually exclusive; some assessment projects served multiple purposes and produced data that could serve both accountability demands and improvement purposes.

In the next section, a summary of the “Strategic Process” core theme will be provided.

**Strategic Process (Core Theme 2) Summary.** Participants described the decision-making process inherent to student affairs learning outcomes assessment as a strategic process. As such, the second core theme became strategic process. When making decisions about how to best measure learning, participants consider all aspects of the project simultaneously, identify barriers and opportunities, and consider various methods simultaneously in order to arrive at the best decision. Referring to the assessment cycle, participants described the process as “cyclical” and “iterative” as they consider various strategies until they find the strategy that aligns best with all components of the cycle, including the learning outcomes, the learning experience, data collection methods and using results. While Pam and Diane described the process as non-sequential, most participants described the elements in the order of the assessment cycle: defining outcomes, designing/implementing the learning experience, choosing methods and collecting data, and using and sharing results. Participants pride themselves on their abilities to strategically align their decisions with outcomes, goals, barriers and opportunities presented by the assessment project and their environment. In sum, assessment decisions are strategic decisions.
In the next section, the third core theme, “Internal Factors” will be presented along with its corresponding three supporting themes, “Internal Resources,” “Internal Stakeholders” and “Culture,” and supported with direct evidence from the interview data.

3. Internal Factors

The third core theme that emerged from the data was internal factors, which includes three supporting themes: internal resources, internal stakeholders and culture. Participants agreed that internal factors must be considered when making decisions about how to best assess learning. All nine participants discussed how internal resources, such as time, staffing, budget, and technology, play an integral role in decision-making and the lack of resources, especially time, heavily influence decisions about measures and methods. All nine participants discussed how internal stakeholders, including students, faculty, colleagues and leaders, must be considered when making assessment decisions; however, the perceived degree of influence over decision making varied by stakeholder group, with students being most influential. Lastly, eight of the nine participants described how cultural aspects, such as values, language, norms, expectations and political relationships, must be considered when assessing student learning. In the following paragraphs, each supporting theme will be described in detail. As such, the following sections will provide a discussion of the internal factors core theme in terms of the following three supporting themes: a. internal resources, b. internal stakeholders and c. culture. This section will conclude with a brief summary.

3a. Internal resources. All nine participants discussed how internal resources play an integral role in decision-making and the lack of resources heavily influence decisions about measures and methods. Pam stated, “The availability of resources, both financial and human can be really instrumental in the direction that I take.” Pam also described how lack of resources can
result in less than optimal decisions. Comparing her institution to institutions with more assessment resources, she said, “The team has me and good will and a little bit of money. There's a huge difference in my ability to assess the level that I feel necessary based on just resources.”

All nine participants discussed human resources, which they described in terms of staff time, staffing, staff willingness, and staff competence. Seven participants described fiscal resources, and seven participants described technological resources, such as survey software. As such, this section will highlight four internal resources discussed by participants: a. human resources, b. financial resources, and c. technological resources.

All nine participants discussed how human resources must be considered when making decisions about how to assess student learning. For participants in this study, the availability of human resources improved the quality of decisions and eased the burden of implementation, while the lack of human resources, especially staff time, served as a significant barrier. The following paragraphs will provide an overview of the following four ways participants described human resources: a. staff time, b. staffing, c. staff willingness, and d. staff competence.

Staff time was listed by eight of the nine participants as an important internal factor that must be considered when making decisions about assessment. When considering possible methods, Peter and Dave consider the amount of staff time needed for implementation and analysis and make decisions based on efficiency. For example, when describing an assessment project, Steve explained that he chose to use a survey to assess student learning because, “The survey was something we felt we could get the most amount of information in the most efficient way possible.” Similarly, Peter explained how time considerations influence his selection of indirect measures of student learning over direct measures, which tend to take more time to implement. Peter explained,
One thing I haven’t talked about much this morning is choosing indirect over direct methods for learning. I think we need to pick the ones that are going to be most time efficient than will give us the best evidence of what we need to know. They are not always the same right? Sometimes it is a lot harder to do a portfolio, which could be more of a direct method than it is to do a survey.

On a similar note, Allison emphasized the importance of considering the time needed for data analysis. She discussed the amount of time needed for data analysis differs for quantitative and qualitative projects. She said,

This is where we come down to some of the quantitative versus qualitative in my designing a tool that I can very easily throw into some kind of statistical software, or even Excel to get some basic descriptive statistics around it, or am I going to design something where I'm actually going to have to be coding or be somewhere in between with some kind of rubric type of situation. That informs the methodology for sure, is really thinking about the back end and the data analysis portion.

Dave and Peter described staff time as the most significant barrier to learning outcomes assessment. For Dave, the amount of staff time needed is an important consideration, especially when staff and students are already overburdened. He said, “The time piece. That is just a challenge that has to be overcome. By that I mean there is no way around it. People are busy.”

On a similar note, Sally, Steve, Peter and Pam discussed how lack of time and tight deadlines influence assessment decisions. Pam explained,

Good assessment takes time and often I feel like I'm put on an accelerated time frame because of somebody's burning desire to have answers or get this information. There's
this constant tug and pull between delivering the best assessment possible and the time frame in which people want it done.

Similarly, Sally described how lack of time influenced her decision to use a survey to collect data rather than explore other, more time-consuming methods, when an office asked for her help one week prior to their workshop.

Looking at staff time from a different perspective, Peter explained that staff perceive that they do not have enough time for good assessment and do not have enough time to even think about intentional program design or assessment design. Peter went on to explain that lack of time results in less than ideal decision making in assessment as well as other areas of student affairs work. He said, “It influences decision-making because you don’t take the time in order to think through the process.” Lack of time or rushing prevents student affairs professionals from being intentional about their intended outcomes, program design, and assessment plan.

Peter also discussed how lack of perceived time results in staff choosing methods that are fast and easy to implement as well as duplicating assessments used previously for the sake of time. As such, Peter suggests that lack of perceived time results in staff “defaulting to surveys” because they are faster and easier to implement.

In addition to lack of time, Peter, Dave and Pam described how not having enough staff is a barrier to assessment decision-making and often leads to less than optimal decisions. Peter explained that his division is understaffed; he said, “We are a very under resourced division. I am not sure a lot of student affair divisions would say to you they are over resourced, but it really has manifested itself very negatively in some ways for us.” Pam also discussed how lack of staffing is a barrier to assessment. She said, “Sometimes I end up wanting to be able to do X and I have to scale back because staff availability, I don't have grad students to help with things, I'm
a party of one.” As described by Pam, lack of staffing is a significant limitation that results in less than optimal decision making.

Looking at staffing from a different perspective, Steve, Dave and Sally discussed human resources in terms of staff willingness, and described lack of staff willingness as a major barrier to assessment. Sally discussed staff willingness in terms of resistance from staff to engage in learning outcomes assessment because they do not perceive themselves as educators. She explained: “I've got a director of health center who says, ‘I don't do learning. I'm just a nurse.’” Steve discussed staff willingness in terms of assessment being one of many competing responsibilities that student affairs professionals that often falls to the bottom of the priority list. He shared, “There’s also a reality of that they have a million things to do and assessment is not an add-on. They know that. It's not what they do every day. It is what I do every day. I have to sometimes balance that. They're doing other things.” Lastly, Sally also described staff willingness in terms of fear. She explained, “We have other directors who are afraid. They would never say that they are afraid, but there's a fear of assessment there. The further I stay away from them, the happier they are.” While these participants described staff willingness in nuanced ways, they agreed that lack of staff willingness is a major hurdle to learning outcomes assessment that must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure learning.

In addition to staff willingness, seven of the nine participants discussed staff competence as an important factor that must be considered when assessing student learning. Allison, Dave and Sally discussed how they consider staff competency or capacity to employ different assessment methods, while Peter, Steve and Sally discussed how staff perceptions about their lack of competence serves as a barrier to good assessment practice. Lastly, Pam and Diane discussed how varying degrees of staff competence across departments presents challenges to
assessment decision-making. The following paragraphs will present the varying ways participants discussed the staff competence as it relates to learning outcomes assessment decision-making.

Allison and Dave discussed staff capacity and competence as an important factor that should be considered when assessing student learning. Allison said, “I think for me, as I think about it from a division perspective, it's also the capacity or competency of the individual department or staff members who are going to be having to execute or employ the strategy or plan.” Sally also discussed the consideration of staff competency and how she must consider the level of competency and the level of education needed when considering methods. She explained,

I think one of the key components is taking the person who is going to use your assessment by the hand and walking through the landmines that you can step on… ‘Okay, the best approach for them is going to be qualitative’ and then, educating them on qualitative takes this much time. We are going to need to do this and helping expand that knowledge base at the same time…

As elucidated in the above quote, Sally discusses how identifying how much staff education is needed is an important consideration in assessment planning.

Peter, Steve and Sally discussed staff competence in terms of staff perceptions of their assessment competence, or lack thereof. Peter stated, “I think people are also questioning of their confidence. We've done some assessments on assessment and found that most people feel it is very important to do assessment, but they don’t feel they are competent to do it. Steve discussed how he addresses staff that are not confident in assessment:
I always get a lot of staff tell me, I'm not an assessment person, I can't do assessment, I can't do this assessment. I have this thing that I call the grocery store model of assessment and I basically say, yes you are an assessment person because you do it every time you go to the grocery store. You go, you make a list, you buy food, you make food, you eat food, you decide if you like food or not and then you make it differently the next time. Guess what you just did? You did an assessment cycle.

As discussed by Steve, part of his role as an assessment director is to boost staff confidence in their assessment abilities.

Participants also discussed human resources and staffing in terms of varying levels of preparedness across departments. Pam and Diane discussed how some departments in their division are more competent and experienced in assessment than others. Pam explained: “You've got some areas that think about it very intentionally and others that are like, "What are you talking about?" Similarly, Diane explained, “We have some areas like student activities and leadership programs where they're really far ahead and they've been using sophisticated learning outcome measures in all of their programming for a long time. Then we have our student employees in our union or our fitness classes where there's nothing.” To increase preparedness, Diane is using a divisional assessment framework and professional development to help departments get to the same level. Diane said, “We're trying to get everyone to the same level playing field by using the [divisional assessment] framework. We're actually devoting a bunch of our professional development to writing learning outcomes, embedding them, tying unto your strategic priorities…” Diane’s commitment to improving staff competence and confidence across departments through education and professional development was shared by all nine participants.
It should be noted that all nine participants discussed how providing education and professional development to the division is an important part of their roles and responsibilities.

Seven of the nine participants in this study discussed internal resources in terms of financial resources. Participants discussed financial resources in terms of costs related to purchasing assessment tools and software as well as sunken or incurred costs. The following paragraphs will provide a discussion of the ways in which participants described the influence of financial resources on decision-making.

Allison, Dave, Pam and Diane described the financial costs of purchasing assessment tools and software. Allison and Dave discussed how financial resources must be considered when contemplating the purchase of external instruments or participation in national survey projects, such as the National Student of Student Engagement (NSSE) or Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Similarly, Steve discussed financial resources as influencing the selection of data collection method. He explained: “focus groups can be cheaper because you're only talking to 10 people and it’s a couple hours and I buy $20 worth of pizza versus a survey where I might either have to borrow, pay for a national study or spend $500 on incentives and all that stuff.” Pam and Diane discussed the financial costs of assessment software, such as Qualtrics and Campus labs licenses. Pam stated, “The first thing I did when I got to [my institution] I was like, ‘Hey can I get a Qualtrics license?’ …I ended up getting that approved but it was a little like pulling teeth…It costs $3,000.00. $3,000.00 is not a drop in the bucket for a college like mine.” As described by these participants, assessment can be a costly enterprise and financial resources must be considered when making decisions about data collection methods and how data will be stored and analyzed.
Looking at financial resources from a slightly different angle, Dave discussed financial resources in terms of sunken costs. “There's costs associated with this, whether it is an incurred cost or a sunk cost, an assumed cost. All of the staff time is a sunk cost we are paid for but when we are doing this [focus groups]…it means I am not doing something else. I am not doing my ‘day job.’” As Dave describes, the division must consider what it is paying its staff to do and when and if assessment is a priority over other job responsibilities.

Seven of the nine participants discussed internal resources in terms of technological resources. Participants described the following technology tools: Campus Labs Assessment Software, SurveyMonkey and Qualtrics Survey Software, Clicker polling technology, videotaping for observation, Teleform scanner for scanning paper-based surveys, SPSS and excel for data analysis, and recorders for focus groups and interviews. Peter explained that these technological tools serve as valuable resources to decision making; he stated, “We have tools such as Campus Labs that I mentioned or SurveyMonkey , Qualtrics, they all have tools such as rubrics development. There's a lot of resources out there in order to help make a decision about what kinds of assessment we are going to do.”

Of all the technological resources described by the participants, Campus Labs was mentioned most frequently and its value was described in the most detail. Seven participants described Campus Labs online assessment software as a vital assessment resource to their division. Peter commented on the survey builder functions, while Steve highlighted the rubric builder. Diane and Amy described the new Campus Labs Baseline feature “Student Response System,” and how it can be used as an assessment and educational technology tool during programs, classes and workshops. Allison, who uses Campus Lab’s Collegiate Link product, explained how she currently uses the product for student organization registration but hopes to
use it as an assessment and learning tool through the creation of co-curricular transcripts. As described by these participants, technological resources, like Campus Labs, facilitate assessment and should be considered in decisions about how to best measure student learning.

In summation, participants in this study discussed how internal resources present barriers and opportunities that must be strategically considered when making decisions about how to assess the learning that results from student affairs programs. Limited human resources, such as lack of time, staffing, staff competence, and staff willingness, serve as the most significant barriers to assessment decision-making. To a lesser extent, financial barriers to purchasing software or national survey memberships can be a burden to some. On the same note, costs of implementation as well as sunken costs related to staff time must also be considered. While human resources and financial resources were described as significant barriers to assessment, participants in this study described how technological resources, especially CampusLabs, are valuable tools that aid assessment decisions and ease implementation. Altogether, participants agreed that internal resources must be considered as part of the strategic decision-making process.

In the next section, the second “Internal Factors” supporting theme, “Internal Stakeholders” will be presented.

3b. Internal stakeholders. All nine participants discussed how internal stakeholders must be considered when making assessment decisions. Eight of the nine participants discussed students as significant internal stakeholders; participants consider the impact of the assessment on student time and learning while also contemplating how to best share results with students. Participants also described staff and faculty as well as campus leaders as catalysts for assessment as well as audiences for sharing results. When considering internal stakeholders as recipients of
assessment results, stakeholder interests, needs and preferences influence decisions about methods, especially the choice between quantititative and qualitative methods. Karen explained,

I think it goes back to who are stakeholders and what do they need to know? How do they want to know that? Some stakeholders are quantitative driven so was there an improvement from the beginning of the year to the end of the year on a 5 point scale? Other stakeholders want to know about that individual story or what was the reflection and so much more qualitative.

Considering stakeholders in a slightly different way, Allison contemplates the potential negative impact results can have on stakeholders in the early stages of the decision-making process. Allison discussed how she carefully considers how she assesses programs that may have substantial dedicated resources, a historical tradition tied to it, or is the pet project of a donor. Allison said, “If it comes back that they're not in fact learning X, Y, Z that we've been saying for 20 years that they've been learning, what is that going to mean for the program, what does that mean for the stakeholder, etc?” Elucidated by this quote, Allison suggests that student affairs professionals must carefully consider the potentially negative consequences of results on stakeholders when deciding to assess student learning. While participants agreed that internal stakeholders should be considered in decision-making, the perceived degree of influence over decision-making varied by stakeholder group. As such, the following stakeholder groups will be discussed in this section: a. students, b. staff and faculty, and c. campus leaders.

All nine participants described students as internal stakeholders that need to be considered when making decisions about how to best measure learning. Participant comments on the influence of students as stakeholders fell into two categories, which will be highlighted in this section: a. impact of assessment on student and b. sharing results with students.
Participants consider the impact of assessment on student stakeholders in two ways. First, Allison, Peter, Pam, Steve and Karen discussed how they consider the impact of assessment on students in terms of time and energy. For example, Steve discussed not wanting to “overtax” students or “bother students.” Second, Diane and Allison discussed how participating in the assessment project will impact student learning. As such, the following paragraphs will outline how participants consider the impact of assessment on student time and learning.

Allison and Pam discussed how considerations of student participation time influence selection of methods and measures. Pam said, “I think the problem with a lot of qualitative questions is the more you're asking students to put into them, as in content, the longer the survey takes, the more likely that they are to step out.” Allison suggests that in an effort to reduce the time burden on students, surveys are often selected. She said, “The other time consideration is the time for the student to complete whatever assessment we're talking about. We know that questionnaires can be quick, some of them can be really lengthy depending on how they're designed.”

Pam and Peter discussed creative ways to reduce the burden on students and to make assessment a more enjoyable and engaging experience for students. Peter said, “I do use a lot of the survey methodology but I try to really tailor it to this generation in a way that doesn't make it feel like as much of a survey.” Peter uses CampusLab’s student response system to administer short polls throughout an experience that students can complete on their smartphones. He said, “It doesn't feel like a survey if you're answering one or two questions here.” In agreement, Pam said, “Anything that makes it a little more engaging to the students is really important for me in the survey design…I might go with a quantitative question over a qualitative because there's a
way I can engage them better with the question.” Thus, for Peter and Pam, student engagement in the assessment is an important factor in decisions about how to best measure learning.

Looking at student participation from a different perspective, Diane and Allison consider how participating in the assessment project will impact student learning, and seeks, whenever possible, ways in which the assessment can be integrated into the teaching and learning process. Diane said,

While we're assessing them, are they actually getting benefit from being assessed because they're learning about how far along they are at the same time and they can go, "Aha! I used to be a 3.4 and now I'm a 5.2. That's great, I learned something." If they can also benefit from the assessment, to me, that's a positive. If we can come up with a win-win like that, to me, that's the best use of assessment.

As described in the above quote, Diane and Allison consider ways in which participating in an assessment project can positively impact student learning.

When making decisions about assessment design, Diane, Pam, Steve, Sally and Peter consider how they will share results with students. Referring to the assessment cycle diagram, Diane and Steve discussed their desire to “close the loop” by sharing assessment results with students. Diane said, “We're going to bring them all back in and share … and basically feed it back to them. I think including the students, by closing the loop either in person or in some really particular way is a design decision.” Similarly, Steve said, “We do a lot of closing the loop back to the students. We do a whole campaign every 2 or 3 years called, We’ve Heard Your Voice and use flyers and … newspaper articles or, you told us X, we did Y kind of thing.” Lastly, Allison discussed how considering students as recipients of assessment data may influence her selections of methods. She explained, “if I know that I want to be sharing information out with students,
I'm usually going towards some kind of quantitative.” She further explained, “We know they're into infographics right now. That's a main way of how they're consuming information. If I don't have numbers, I can't produce that easy snapshot for a student stakeholder.” In sum, considering how to share results with students is an important consideration in the decision-making process for these five participants.

Four of the nine participants described campus constituents, such as faculty and staff outside of student affairs, as stakeholders that must be considered when making decisions about how to measure learning. Pam and Karen described campus constituents as recipients of assessment results that have high expectations for assessment quality, while Steve, Amy and Karen discussed faculty and staff as potential partners in assessment. This section will highlight the nuanced ways in which participants described how participants considered faculty and staff as stakeholders.

Pam and Karen described staff and faculty stakeholders as recipients of assessment results that have high expectations for assessment quality. These stakeholders scrutinize over the validity of assessment methods and their results. Karen and Pam also discussed how these stakeholders question the ability of student affairs professionals to produce quality research. Because of this pressure, Karen and Pam are intentional about choosing methods that will be credible amongst campus constituents. Referring to sharing assessment results with campus constituents outside of student affairs, Karen explained, “Any time that I've taken student assessment data and shared it with the population there's a level of scrutiny of: ‘Is this valid data?’ Is this data we can use for decision making? How have you gone about this?” In agreement, Pam discussed how she “really had to be careful in what I developed because I knew that any findings that I would have that would inform the university decision making would be
scrutinized,” and how she ended up “spending a lot of time justifying the decisions and everything that we did.” As Pam notes, she must be intentional and careful about making decisions that will be credible amongst campus constituents because she will need to justify her decisions to these stakeholders when presenting results.

Karen and Amy further explained what campus constituents consider “credible” and how these stakeholders influence decisions about methods. Amy suggests that campus constituents consider quantitative methods to be more credible than qualitative methods. Amy further explained, “When we participate in qualitative research studies, we have to have quantitative data to support the results of any qualitative research study findings. I can't speak to whether they understand qualitative research, but I can tell you that they have very little respect.” As such, campus constituents’ preference for quantitative data may influence the selection of quantitative methods over qualitative data.

Karen agreed that campus constituents may influence the selection of methods, but her experience was slightly different. Karen considers campus constituent influence on methods in terms of adopting methods used by other areas of the institution. For example, Karen explained that she chose to use AAC&U’s integrative learning VALUE rubric as an assessment tool because the rubric was adopted by other areas of the university.

Amy, Karen and Steve discussed campus constituents as stakeholders in student learning and as potential partners in assessment. Karen and Steve discussed the importance of being aware of faculty and staff stakeholder efforts in the areas of learning outcomes assessment and seeking opportunities to collaborate, if possible. Karen discussed the benefit of institution-wide collaboration on measuring learning outcomes that are taught across the curriculum and co-curriculum. She said, “At the university level, when someone wants to know every assessment
that's going on that focuses on the ability to work in teams, we've checked that box and anyone can open that document and say, oh here look, here's what the division of student affairs is doing.” As described by Karen, collaborating with campus constituents to measure institutional-outcomes is beneficial because it allows student affairs to demonstrate its impact on institutional learning goals.

Karen, Amy, Allison, Pam, and Peter discussed campus leaders, including chief student affairs officers, presidents, vice presidents and board of trustees, as noteworthy stakeholders in student affairs learning outcomes assessment. The following paragraphs will highlight the nuanced ways campus leaders are considered in the decision-making process.

Campus leaders, especially chief student affairs officers, have a significant stake in learning outcomes assessment because assessment results can be used to demonstrate the worth of student affairs divisions. According to Dave, “when the chancellor says to the vice chancellor for student affairs, "You need to demonstrate the learning that is happening in your division," because we need to show that students aren't just having fun but that they are actually learning and still graduating in 4 to 5 years.” As describe by Dave, chief student affairs officers share assessment results with other leaders on campus to justify their decisions and demonstrate the impact of their divisions.

For Peter and Amy, campus leadership is an important stakeholder group because they are often making decisions about resource allocation. Peter said, “obviously the president of the university, key decision makers that are going to determine where resources are located. We are right now defending our budget and student affairs doesn’t have a lot of money on our campus. We are a 4.5 million dollar enterprise.” For Amy, campus leaders are an important stakeholder because assessment results can be used for budget requests. According to Amy, “We've been
rather successful, albeit not to my satisfaction, in presenting our budget request to the President's cabinet and being given resources based on our ability to provide justification.”

Participants disagreed on the degree to which campus leaders influence decisions about what is assessed and how it is assessed. Dave and Pam discussed how campus leaders are a driving force in decisions about what is assessed and how it is assessed. According to Dave, “If what we are doing is not on line with what the chancellor wants, with what the commissioner wants, with what my vice chancellor wants, then we are not going to be doing it anymore. Similarly, according to Pam, “I often get asked to do crazy assessment because the president has this inkling at 2 o'clock in the morning.” Similarly, Pam said, “I think the pressure's coming from anyone having anything to do with the university and usually accountability at the university level. President, vice president, board of trustees.” Amy disagreed, explaining that campus leaders care less about the details and more about whether or not student affairs is engaging in assessment and using data to guide decision-making. Amy explained,

I think the bottom line is, all they care about is that we are in alignment with the institute mission, that we can demonstrate accountability and liability, and that we measure programs effectiveness to improve what it is that we do, and let data guide and improve our programs and services, and that we were able to validate funding requests, and that we can provide evidence that shows that we actually incorporate assessment results into a variety of entities.

Allison and Amy discussed how it is important to consider campus leader preferences when selecting measures and methods. For example, Allison said, “How does our vice president best receive information and then how does our vice president best share that information forward?” For Allison, campus leader preferences for quantitative or qualitative data will
influence her selection of data collection methods. On the same note, Amy suggests that campus leaders prefer quantitative data. Amy explained, “It’s been my experience that they can dismissive of qualitative results and focus more on quantitative results from our assessment project.” As with other stakeholders, campus leader preference for quantitative data may influence selection of quantitative over qualitative methods.

In summation, all nine participants discussed how internal stakeholders, including students, staff, faculty and campus leaders, must be considered when making assessment decisions. Participants discussed how they consider the impact of participating in assessment on student time and learning; they also consider ways to “Close the Loop” and share results with students. Pam and Karen described campus constituents as recipients of assessment results that have high expectations for assessment quality, while Steve, Amy and Karen discussed faculty and staff as potential partners in assessment. Participants consider campus leaders to be important stakeholders because they use assessment results to make decisions and demonstrate the worth of student affairs programs; participants also discussed campus leaders as catalysts for assessment work. Overall, when considering internal stakeholders as recipients of assessment results, stakeholder interests, needs and preferences influence decisions about methods, especially the choice between quantitative and qualitative methods.

In the next section, the third “Internal Factors” supporting theme, “Culture,” will be presented.

3c. Culture. Eight of the nine participants described how cultural aspects, such as values and expectations, language and politics, must be considered when assessing student learning. Six of the nine participants discussed how assessment culture can facilitate or impede assessment, two participants discussed language, while four participants discussed culture in
terms of politics. In the following paragraphs, the culture supporting theme will be discussed in terms of: a. assessment culture, b. language, and c. politics.

Six participants described assessment culture as an internal factor that influences learning outcomes assessment decisions. Peter defined assessment culture in the following quote, “Ultimately culture is created by kind of this coalescence of beliefs and morals and values and actions. When I use that term assessment culture, I am really using the term like what are the attributes of the environment that demonstrate that assessment is valued here.”

When discussing divisional and assessment culture, Peter, Amy, and Steve described their chief student affairs officer as the driving force behind creating a culture conducive to assessment. According to Amy, “I think that our former Vice President did a really good job of embracing and mandating assessments to the extent that a couple of years ago, he incorporated assessments into the job responsibilities for every position in the division at a coordinator level and above, and then incorporated it into the annual performance evaluation. Similarly, Peter explained, “Our vice president of student affairs has certainly created a culture in which assessment is expected.” On the same note, Sally is hopeful that her new chief student affairs officer will help improve the culture of assessment. She explained, “With this new vice-president, I think that we are going to see a change in that culture so there will be accountability. She is asking questions like, "What are the learning outcomes for this?"

The degree to which assessment is embedded in the culture varied for participants. The stronger the assessment culture, the fewer challenges and barriers to good assessment decision making. Steve describes his division as having a strong assessment culture. He said, I think in some ways, I'm fortunate compared to a lot of my peers. We’ve been doing this for a long time at [institutions]. I think culture happens over a period of time. You convince people it's a good
thing. You get the right people at the table. You get a supervisor, Mike is a vice chancellor who has been doing this forever. That matters. There’s an expectation from day one when we hire staff that assessment is going to be what you do. It's in your job description.” In contrast, Sally described a lack of assessment culture at her institution, which created barriers to good assessment. She explained that learning outcomes assessment is not valued and many professionals do not perceive themselves as educators. Sally said, “I don't know that a lot of the student affairs practitioners even could tell you about their learning. In my institution, they are struggling. I've got a director of health center who says, "I don't do learning. I'm just a nurse." In this way, assessment culture can support or serve as a hurdle to assessment decision-making.

Two participants discussed culture in terms of language. Pam discussed her institution has its own language, words, phrases and values that share a common meaning to members of the community. When considering a theory, framework or existing instrument, Pam makes modifications toward alignment with her institution’s language. In the following quote, Pam describes how she modified a nationally normed instrument to better reflect her institution’s language by changing a survey item from “human construct” to “campus interactions.”

I took the essence of what they were trying to say. I think one was like human, something, something and I made it ... I took their language and captured the essence of it in [my institution’s] language. Knowing that the study normed this but I was like, "They're not even going to know what human construct is." I think I called it campus interactions.

By aligning the survey language with her institution’s language, Pam hopes to help both the survey participant and the recipients of results better understand the learning that is being measured.
Four participants discussed the role of politics in assessment decision making. Three participants described considering politics in terms of “hot-button” or politically-charged issues, while one participant described politics as the informal-relationships through which work gets done. As such, the following paragraphs highlight how participants experienced considering politics in decision-making.

Dave, Steve, and Diane described the importance of considering politically charged, sensitive or “hot button issues” within the culture. For example, Dave advised that, “You have to look at the politics surrounding what it is you are trying to assess. Is it a hot button issue? Is it sensitive?” Similarly, Steve said, “What’s controversial? What might get you into hot water? … I have to be careful. As much as I would love for my departments to do all of this stuff all the time, there are other things that are in play that I had to be cognizant of.” As described by Dave and Steve, when making decisions about student learning, it important for decision-makers to consider politics in terms of “hot-button” or politically-charged issues and to move forward cautiously when assessing a controversial topic.

Looking at politics through a different lens, Sally described politics in terms of formal and informal systems for how work gets done. Sally described, “There were two systems at the university….There's the formal system that the memo goes to these people and then there's the we go to church together and so we'll do these favors. That was a very and still is a very strong system within the university.” For Sally, formal and informal work systems must be considered when making decisions about how to assess learning, especially implementation decisions.

In summation, participants in this study consider culture when making decisions about how to best measure student learning. Eight of the nine participants described how cultural aspects, such as values and expectations, language and politics, must be considered when
assessing student learning. Six of the nine participants discussed how assessment culture can facilitate or impede assessment, two participants discussed language, while four participants discussed culture in terms of politics. In addition to internal resources and stakeholders, culture is another internal factor that influences assessment decisions.

In the following section, a summary of the “Internal Factors” core theme will be provided.

**Internal Factors (Core Theme 3) Summary.** Participants in this study agreed that internal factors must be considered when making decisions about how to best assess learning. As such, the third core theme that emerged from the data was internal factors, which includes three supporting themes: internal resources, internal stakeholders and culture. All nine participants discussed how internal resources, such as time, staffing, budget, and technology, play an integral role in decision-making and the lack of resources, especially time, heavily influence decisions about measures and methods. All nine participants discussed how internal stakeholders, including students, faculty, colleagues and leaders, must be considered when making assessment decisions; however, the perceived degree of influence over decision making varied by stakeholder group, with students being most influential. Lastly, eight of the nine participants described how cultural aspects, such as values, language, norms, expectations and political relationships, must be considered when assessing student learning. In sum, participants in this study agree that the barriers and opportunities presented by internal factors, including resources, stakeholders, and culture must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure the learning that results from student affairs programs and services.
In the next section, the fourth and final core theme, “External Factors,” will be discussed along with two corresponding supporting themes, “Existing Knowledge” and “External Stakeholders,” and will be supported with direct evidence from the interview data.

4. External Factors

The fourth core theme that emerged from the data was external factors, which includes two subthemes: external knowledge and external stakeholders. Seven participants described external resources, such as national instruments, models used by other institutions, literature and theory as well as professional organization standards. Six participants described external stakeholders, such as accreditors, the public, and state and federal government, which must be considered when making decisions about how to best assess student learning. As such, the following sections will provide a discussion of the external factors core theme in terms of the following two supporting themes: a. external knowledge and b. external stakeholders. This section will conclude with a brief summary.

4a. External knowledge. Eight of the nine participants described external knowledge as a factor that must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure student learning. Participants described external knowledge as existing tools, professional standards, research, theory and practices used by other institutions. Participants explained that collecting information on the existing state of knowledge of a construct they were attempting to measure was an important step that they took early on in the decision-making process. For example, Dave said, “The process there is: what exists if something exists? Are we studying a construct that has been widely studied and for which there are normed, reliable measures?” Participants also described the usefulness of obtaining existing frameworks and instruments that can be mimicked or modified to suit their needs. Specifically, Pam and Karen discussed how using
existing tools and frameworks was beneficial from an efficiency perspective; it was quicker and easier to have a model to work off of rather than “starting from scratch.” Pam explained, “I think we're all trying to do more with less so the more we can save time and energy figuring out what other people have done.” Another benefit of considering external knowledge in the decision-making process, Pam, Dave, Karen, Steve, and Sally discussed how using existing tools or grounding assessment in theory or literature gave their assessment more credibility and validity.

While eight of the nine participants agreed that collecting information about existing tools, frameworks, standards, and research was an important part of the assessment decision-making process, there were subtle differences in how they accessed external knowledge. The following paragraphs will highlight the three sources of external knowledge described by participants: a. professional organizations; b. other institutions; and c. literature and theory.

Seven of the nine participants described professional organizations as sources of external knowledge. This section will highlight the professional organizations described by the participants as well as the ways in which professional organizations influenced decision-making.

Participants described several different professional organizations that serve as sources of external knowledge. Diane described the NASPA/ACPA Professional Competencies, NASPA’s Learning Reconsidered (2004) learning outcomes, as well as the NASPA Assessment & Evaluation Knowledge Community, which was also mentioned by Steve. Dave and Diane also discussed attending professional organization conferences, specifically the NASPA annual meeting, which took place one week prior to the interviews, as a strategy for improving decision-making via professional development. Steve, Pam and Peter described the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) professional organization as a resource for connecting with colleagues, accessing existing tools and model, and learning about practices and strategies
employed by other institutions. Diane, Karen and Allison mentioned the Association of American Colleges and University’s (AAC&U) Liberal Education & America’s Promise (LEAP) framework and corresponding Valid Assessment of Liberal Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics. Peter and Diane described the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), especially CAS standards on learning outcomes, as useful. Lastly, Diane discussed the National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE), which defines learning outcomes most desirable to employers.

Participants described how professional organizations provide standards and frameworks that can be used to define and measure learning outcomes. For example, Diane described how her division synthesized several professional organization frameworks in order to formulate division-wide learning outcomes. She said,

The last year, we started more deliberately on learning outcomes. What we did is we took four different areas: the LEAP framework, L-E-A-P, from AAC&U; the CAS, competencies and learning outcomes that are listed in the CAS standards; the NASPA ACPA learning reconsidered framework that has an articulation of learning outcomes; and the NACE skills, the skills that employers want. We took the four of those and we cross-walked them against each other and looked for commonalities.

Similarly, Diane, Karen and Allison described how they used AACU’s LEAP framework to define their learning outcomes and used the corresponding VALUE rubrics as measurement tools.

Dave and Diane mentioned attending professional organization conferences, specifically the NASPA annual meeting, as a strategy for improving decision-making through professional
development. Through conference participation, Dave and Diane were exposed to the most current assessment research and practices. For example, a conference session on equity in assessment challenged Dave to think differently about assessing students. Another example, Diane described a conference session on the neuroscience of learning, which challenged student affairs professionals to think about the complexities of measuring learning.

The second source of external knowledge described by participants was other institutions. For Steve, Pam, Sally and Peter, gathering information from other institutions is a useful strategy that aids in decision-making. When developing learning outcomes, Pam examines models and language used by peer institutions, while Peter examines instruments used by other institutions. Pam and Sally discussed reaching out to institutions directly for information, while Peter uses Campus Labs, an online assessment software package, to examine instruments developed by other schools. Peter explained,

When you use the [Campus Labs] Baseline product you actually have a whole library of what other campuses are doing too. Basically if you are running LGBT programs or you are running a career services or student activities office, there are surveys in there that you can go and steal.

Similarly, Steve, Pam and Peter described the Student Affairs Assessment Listserv as a useful resource for learning about practices and tools used by other institutions. These three participants commented that the closely monitor the listserv, using phrases such as “watching the traffic” and “trolling the listserv.” Pam explained, “I think that’s a really valuable tool. People are saying, "Have you done this? What have you used?” …That list serv alone is a huge tool for me that I can either ask colleagues for materials they have used or their own experiences.”

While these four participants discussed different strategies for acquiring existing knowledge
from other institutions, all of them agreed that other institutions are an invaluable resource for accessing external knowledge.

The third source of external knowledge described by seven of the nine participants is literature and theory. Steve discussed assessment literature, such as Collins and Robert’s (2012) “Learning is Not a Sprint: Assessing and Documenting Learning in Co-Curricular Involvement” as well as Bingham, Bureau and Duncan’s (2015) Leading Assessment for Student Success: Ten Tenets That Change Culture and Practice in Student Affairs, both of which have chapters on assessment culture and politics, as useful tools for those making assessment decisions. Dave and Karen described student development theories, such as “Chickering,” “Perry” and “Baxter-Magolda,” being useful when attempting to measure development. Peter discussed literature on understanding and building the culture of assessment, and described the work of George Kuh, a national leader in higher education research. However, Dave cautioned that many of the foundational student development theories were developed based on studies of white men at affluent institutions and may not be generalizable. Diane described Bloom’s Taxonomy as a framework for designing intentional learning experiences, specifically the expected level of learning. Altogether, examining literature and theory was an important step in the decision-making process for these seven participants.

In summation, eight of the nine participants described existing knowledge as a factor that must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure student learning. Participants described external knowledge as existing tools, professional standards, research, theory and practices used by other institutions. Participants explained that collecting information on the existing state of knowledge of a construct they were attempting to measure was an important step that they took early on in the decision-making process. Participants also
described the usefulness of obtaining existing frameworks and instruments that can be mimicked or modified to suit their needs. Specifically, Pam and Karen discussed how using existing tools and frameworks was beneficial from an efficiency perspective; it was quicker and easier to have a model to work off of rather than “starting from scratch.” Another benefit of considering external knowledge in the decision-making process, Pam, Dave, Karen, Steve, and Sally discussed how using existing tools or grounding assessment in theory or literature gave their assessment more credibility and validity. In sum, when available, existing knowledge aided participants in decision-making and improved decision outcomes.

In the next section, the second “External Factors” supporting theme, “External Stakeholders,” will be presented.

4b. External stakeholders. The nine participants in this study stated that external stakeholders influence student affairs learning outcomes assessment decisions. Participants described external stakeholders, such as regional accreditation agencies, the public, employers, donors, higher education research centers and foundations, parents, board of trustees, board of regents, the state government, and the federal government. While all nine participants agreed that these external stakeholders contribute to the pressure on student affairs to assess student learning and demonstrate their worth as a field, participants disagreed on the extent to which these stakeholders influence decisions about measures and methods. As such, this section will consist of two subsections: a. accountability demands, and b. degree of influence.

When discussing the role of external stakeholders in assessment decision-making, participants described how external stakeholders put pressure on student affairs, and higher education institutions, to do assessment. The following paragraphs will highlight the ways in which participants described external accountability demands.
Participants described external pressure as “external noise” and “the era of accountability.” According to participants, external stakeholders expect student affairs, and higher education institutions in general, to provide data that demonstrates their value and justifies the use of resources. Pam acknowledged that “I think assessment in general has emerged from all of this national noise right? This demonstration of, are we as institutions of higher education delivering what we're promising to the American population.” Amy explained that external stakeholders expect her and her colleagues to provide data that demonstrates, “How the Division of Student Life adds to the student experience. We’re compelled accordingly to document what we discover about our program and services in ways that other people can interpret how we have used the resources entrusted to us.” On the same note, Peter said, “I think broadly the public wants to know that there is a return on investment in higher education.”

Of all the external stakeholders described, participants described regional accreditors as the greatest source of external pressure. Specifically, Sally, Steve, Dave, Pam, Karen, Diane and Sally described accreditors as a significant source of external pressure; however, they experienced the degree of pressure differently. Sally explained that accreditors are not yet requiring documentation of student learning from student affairs, but she predicts that this expectation is not far off. She said, “There’s going to come a time where the documentation of learning is required for student affairs.” In contrast, Steve commented that accreditors are requiring higher education institutions and that student affairs divisions to document learning more than ever before. He said, “They’re making us document a lot more than they used to.” The perceived differences in accrediting body expectations suggests that regional accreditation bodies may have different standards for student affairs learning outcomes assessment or that participants/institutions interpret standards differently.
While participants agreed that external stakeholders put pressure on student affairs divisions to assess student learning, they disagreed on the degree to which external stakeholders influenced assessment decisions, with regional accreditors being most influential. The following paragraphs will highlight the ways in which participants described the influence of external stakeholders.

Pam felt strongly that external stakeholders do not influence decisions about methods and measurements. She said, “I never really let that noise shape the product.” On the other hand, Sally and Karen discussed how external stakeholders should be considered when selecting methods and measures. After discussing how internal stakeholder preferences influence decisions, Allison discussed how external stakeholder preferences influence her choice between quantitative or qualitative methods. She said, “Then the same comes true for anyone external, like I said, a donator or a legislator or whoever that might be. Again, it's in the design of the assessment, we've got to figure out, is it going to be the qualitative, is going to be the quantitative.” Karen explained,

I think it goes back to who are stakeholders and what do they need to know? How do they want to know that? Some stakeholders are quantitative driven so was there an improvement from the beginning of the year to the end of the year on a 5 point scale? Other stakeholders want to know about that individual story or what was the reflection and so much more qualitative.

On the same note, Sally and Amy discussed how most external stakeholders prefer quantitative data and may dismiss qualitative methods. Sally said, “Right now, I still think we are very quantitative in America and American Higher Education. I think that we have to utilize language
that they understand.” In this way, external stakeholders’ preferences may influence what methods are selected.

Of all the external stakeholders discussed, regional accreditors seem to have the greatest influence on assessment decision making. For Steve, accreditation criteria was a significant consideration when designing his division’s integrative assessment and planning cycle. Rather than assessing the same learning outcomes each year, departments measure learning outcomes on a cycle that is aligned with the accreditation process timeline. Steve provided the following example of how accreditation influences assessment planning:

My tutoring center for example may have, this year they're going to measure writing skills, next year they're going to measure communication skills, next year we're going to measure usage and they have a cycle. They have different learning outcomes as they go. They do want a trend every 2 or 3 years rather than doing them every year. That all goes into that package of, here's what SAACs wants every 10 years.

Similarly, for Diane, accreditation influenced decisions related to a university-wide learning outcomes assessment project. She explained, “I co-chair a university-wide committee, it's a co-curricular portfolio thing. It's huge. It's complex. It's our quality initiative for our accreditation.” As elucidated in the above quote, external stakeholders, especially regional accreditors, not only influence the decision to assess student learning but also influence how learning is assessed.

In summation, the nine participants in this study stated that external stakeholders influence student affairs learning outcomes assessment decisions. Participants described external stakeholders, such as regional accreditation agencies, the public, employers, donors, higher education research centers and foundations, parents, board of trustees, board of regents, the state government, and the federal government. While all nine participants agreed that these external
stakeholders contribute to the pressure on student affairs to assess student learning and
demonstrate their worth as a field, participants disagreed on the extent to which these
stakeholders influence decisions about measures and methods. Pam felt strongly that external
stakeholders do not influence decisions about methods and measurements, while Sally, Karen
and Allison discussed how external stakeholder data preferences should be considered when
selecting methods and measures, especially choices between quantitative and qualitative
methods. Of all the external stakeholders discussed, regional accreditors seem to have the
greatest influence on assessment decision making.

In the next section, the “External Factors” core theme will be summarized.

**External Factors (Core Theme 4) Summary.** Participants in this study discussed how
external factors, including existing knowledge and external stakeholders, must be considered
when making decisions about how to best assess the learning that occurs as a result of student
affairs programs and services. As such, the fourth core theme became external factors, which
includes two subthemes: external knowledge and external stakeholders. Seven participants
described existing knowledge, such as national instruments, models used by other institutions,
literature and theory as well as professional organization standards. Existing knowledge in the
form of literature and professional standards informed decisions, while existing knowledge in the
form of frameworks and normed instruments provided credible models that could be mimicked
or modified. Participants also described external stakeholders, such as accreditors, the public,
and state and federal government, which put pressure on student affairs divisions, and higher
education institutions in general, to provide evidence of student learning. While participants
disagreed on the degree to which external stakeholders influence assessment decisions,
accrediting agencies seem to be most influential.
The next section will briefly highlight the conclusions drawn from the Transcendental phenomenological analysis of the interview data presented in this chapter, setting the stage for deeper analysis in Chapter Five.

**Chapter Four Conclusion**

A transcendental phenomenological analysis of interview data from nine participants revealed the meanings and essences of the phenomenon of making decisions about how to assess the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs. The composite description of the essence of the phenomenon consists of three core themes and twelve corresponding supporting themes: 1. collaborative approach, including a. consulting, b. group work, and c. seeking feedback; 2. strategic process, including a. outcomes, b. experience, c. methods, and d. data usage; 3. internal factors, including a. internal resources, b. internal stakeholders, and c. culture; and 4. external factors, including a. existing knowledge, and b. external stakeholders. The four core and twelve supporting themes suggest that student affairs assessment professionals strive to make the best decisions possible using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while remaining cognizant of the influences of internal and external factors.

The thematic portrayals that emerged from the interview data reveal answers to this study’s research questions. The first research question, How do student affairs professionals describe the complex decision making process associated with selecting measures of student learning?, is answered by the first and second core themes, “Collaborative Approach” and “Strategic Process.” Student affairs professionals describe the complex decision-making process associated with selecting measures of student learning as a collaborative and strategic process. The second research question, How do student affairs professionals describe the internal and
external factors that influence complex decision-making process associated selecting measures of student learning?, is answered by core themes three and four, “Internal Factors” and “External Factors.” Student affairs professionals describe internal factors in terms of internal resources, internal stakeholders and culture and external resources in terms of existing knowledge and external stakeholders. The participants in this study agreed that internal and external resources influence assessment decisions and must be considered as part of the collaborative and strategic decision-making process. Participants discuss how they consider the various opportunities and barriers presented by internal and external factors, and agreed that internal and external factors can negatively and positively influence decision-making and outcomes. For example, technological resources (Internal Factor Supporting Theme C), such as Campus Lab, support assessment decision-making and implementation, while lack of human resources (Internal Factor Supporting Theme A), such as lack of time, staffing and staff competence may result in less than optimal decisions. Another example, existing knowledge (External Factor Supporting Theme A) in the form of literature or normed instruments are valuable resources for informing and guiding assessment decisions, while external stakeholder (External Factor Supporting Theme B) preferences for quantitative data may dissuade professionals from exploring other methods.

The four core and twelve supporting themes suggest that student affairs assessment professionals strive to make the best decisions possible using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while remaining cognizant of the influences of internal and external factors. As such, the findings of this study align with the notion of bounded rationality, this study’s theoretical framework, by suggesting: a. decision-makers strive to make the best decision possible given the circumstances of the situation, and b. optimal decisions are not always viable in practice due to a variety of internal and external
factors. The “Collaborative Approach” core theme also suggests that bounded rationality, which was originally conceptualized based on individual decision-making processes, can be applied to group and organizational decision-making processes. The core and supporting themes also reflect aspects of this study’s literature review, including guiding principles for assessment practice and the learning outcomes assessment cycle. Most significantly, the thematic portrayals suggest that assessment decision-making moves beyond Maki’s (2004) conceptualization of the assessment cycle and Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) assessment process to include consideration of the opportunities and barriers presented by internal and external factors.

Chapter Five will further explore the thematic portrayals as they relate to the study’s research questions, literature review and theoretical framework as well as provide an analysis of the implications of this study for theory, research and practice.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to describe the decision-making processes inherent to assessing student learning for nine student affairs assessment professionals using bounded rationality as a theoretical framework. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher aimed to understand and describe how student affairs assessment professionals make decisions about how to measure the student learning that occurs as a result of co-curricular programs and the contexts, limitations and environments that influence their decisions. This study was guided by the following research questions: 1. How do student affairs professionals describe the decision-making process associated with selecting measures of student learning?, and 2. How do student affairs professionals describe the internal and external factors that influence decision-making process associated selecting measures of student learning? Data was collected through in-depth, one-on-one interviews, which yielded rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences with learning outcomes assessment-related decision-making.

Following Moustakas’ (1994) rigorous data analysis procedures, the researcher assembled textural (“what” was experienced) and structural (“how” it was experienced) descriptions for each individual participant then constructed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience representing the group as a whole.

The composite description of the essence of the phenomenon consisted of four thematic portrayals, or themes. The four core themes and twelve corresponding supporting themes were: 1. collaborative approach, including a. consulting, b. group work, and c. seeking feedback; 2. strategic process, including a. outcomes, b. experience, c. methods, and d. data usage; 3. internal factors, including a. internal resources, b. internal stakeholders, and c. culture; and 4. external factors, including a. existing knowledge, and b. external stakeholders. The four thematic
portrayals answered this study’s research questions by suggesting that student affairs assessment professionals strive to make the best decisions possible using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while simultaneously considering the influences of internal factors, including internal resources, internal stakeholders and culture, as well as external factors, including existing knowledge and external stakeholders.

This chapter presents the thematic portrayals of the decision-making process inherent to student affairs learning outcomes assessment and highlights how they relate to the study’s literature review and theoretical framework. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study for theory, research and practice.

**Discussion of Thematic Portrayals in Relation to the Literature**

A transcendental phenomenological analysis of interview data revealed four thematic portrayals, or themes, that capture the essence of the phenomenon of student affairs learning outcomes assessment decision-making for nine student affairs assessment professionals. The thematic portrayals consist of the four core themes, “Collaborative Approach,” “Strategic Process,” “Internal Factors,” and “External Factors” as well as twelve corresponding supporting themes. The thematic portrayals of student affairs learning outcomes assessment decision-making align with and extend the current literature on student affairs assessment. In this section, each thematic portrayal will be presented and discussed in relation to existing scholarship.

**Collaborative approach.** As revealed by the core theme, “Group Approach” and its corresponding supporting themes, participants in this study described their approach to decision-making as collaborative in nature. Evidenced by the first supporting theme, “Consulting,” participants described their collaborative approach in terms of helping others make decisions as an assessment consultant or coach. As student affairs assessment professionals, participants
assist groups and departments with making decisions about how to assess learning by sharing their assessment knowledge as well as their knowledge of the divisional and institutional landscape. They also facilitate collaborative decision-making by building-bridges between groups interested in measuring similar outcomes, asking questions to facilitate discussion, mutual-understanding and idea generation, as well as challenging others to try new and different data collection methods. While decision-making power often lies with the sponsoring group or department, participants are able to help others optimize their assessment decisions through consultation. Participants also described collaborative approach in terms of “Group Work,” which is the second “Collaborative Approach” supporting theme. Participants work with groups of students, staff, faculty and administrators within and outside of their student affairs division. Participants in this study described how group work enhances decision-making, eases the burden of implementation and data analysis, and is a strategy for increasing buy-in to assessment projects and results. Lastly, as revealed by the third supporting theme, “Seeking Feedback,” participants described collaborative approach in terms of seeking feedback at various stages of the decision-making process from colleagues and students through informal and formal processes. In sum, participants agreed that assessment decisions are collaborative in nature. In the following paragraphs, the “Collaborative Approach” core theme will be discussed in relation to the existing scholarship on assessment.

The “Collaborative Approach” core theme and corresponding supporting themes align with professional standards for assessment practice and guiding principles set forth by professional organizations and assessment “how-to” books described in the historical roots section of this study’s literature review. Assessment scholars and professional associations agree that student affairs educators must collaborate through all stages of the assessment process
(AAHE, 1992; Astin, Banta, Cross, El-Khawas, Ewell, & Hutchings, 1996; Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1996; Schroeder, 1999; AAHE, et al., 1998; Banta & Kuh, 1998; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999; Kuh & Banta, 2000; Green, Kirkland, & Kulick, 2002; Maki, 2002; Kezar, 2003; NASPA & ACPA, 2004). In alignment with the literature, participants agreed that they collaborate throughout the assessment process, from the selection of outcomes and methods to analyzing and using data. As such, the “Collaborative Approach” core theme provides empirical evidence that the guiding principle of collaboration is valued and applied in practice.

This study further complements the literature on assessment collaboration by revealing the specific ways student affairs professionals apply the principle of collaboration in practice. Participants in this study agreed that collaboration occurs through consultations with student affairs assessment professionals, group work on inter and intra department and institution-wide projects, as well as informal and formal feedback processes. In addition to identifying ways in which collaboration occurs, participants also discussed how they use collaboration as a tactic for enhancing the quality of assessment decisions. Not only did hearing diverse ideas and perspectives strengthen the outcome of decisions, a collaborative approach enhanced buy-in to the assessment project and its results. Having a greater number of people involved also aided in implementation as groups were able to “divvy-up” tasks and share the workload.

The “Collaborative Approach” core theme both confirms and diverges from the empirical research on collaboration in assessment practice discussed in the historical roots section. Specifically, Green et al. (2005) defined collaboration as a superordinate theme in their case study of high quality student affairs learning outcomes assessment practices, but found that while participants were able to describe areas of program collaboration among units, very few participants were able to provide examples of collaboration on learning outcomes assessment
projects. In contrast, participants in this study described several cross-functional area learning outcomes assessment projects, such as a collaborative effort between Career Services and Student Activities to assess leadership development, and institution-wide learning outcomes assessment projects, such as a Co-Curricular Transcript initiative.

The “Collaborative Approach” core theme and three supporting themes also add to the literature on the role of student affairs assessment directors, specifically their role as an “in-house consultant.” In a case study analysis of high quality learning outcomes assessment practices, Green et al. (2008) found that student affairs divisions with student affairs assessment directors are more likely to be successful. New scholarship on the role of the student affairs assessment director suggests that collaboration is a key aspect of their role (Green et al., 2008; Yousey-Elsner et al., 2015). Participant descriptions of their roles as “in-house consultants” add to the dialogue about the roles and responsibilities of student affairs assessment directors and the ways in which they collaborate with others. When describing their role as an “in-house assessment consultant,” participants discussed how they help groups and departments make decisions by sharing their assessment knowledge as well as their knowledge of the divisional and institutional landscape. They also aid in decision making by facilitating decisions through asking questions that prompt discussion as well as challenging others to consider using data collection methods other than surveys. In alignment with Green et al (2008), participants also articulated that although they facilitated decision-making as consultants, the selection and implementation of assessment methods was a department-level decision.

In summation, the “Collaborative Approach” core theme and corresponding supporting themes align with professional standards for assessment practice and guiding principles set forth by professional organizations and assessment “how-to” books described in the historical roots
section of this study’s literature review. As such, this study provides empirical evidence to support that this guiding principle is being applied in practice. This study further contributes to the literature by revealing the specific ways student affairs professionals collaborate in assessment decision-making in practice; collaboration occurs through consultations with student affairs assessment professionals, group work including inter and intra department projects and institution-wide projects, as well as informal and formal feedback processes. Lastly, the collaborative approach core theme adds to the literature on the role of student affairs assessment directors, specifically their role as an “in-house consultant.”

In the next section, the second core theme “Strategic Process” will be discussed in relation to relevant literature.

2. Strategic process. As revealed by the second core theme, “Strategic Process,” and its four supporting themes, “Outcomes,” “Experience,” “Methods” and “Data Usage,” participants in this study describe decision-making as a strategic process in which they consider all elements of the assessment project simultaneously, identify barriers and opportunities, and consider various methods in order to arrive at the best decision. Participants also discussed the strategic thinking needed to also simultaneously consider internal and external factors, such as resources and stakeholders, which will be discussed as separate core themes. Referring to the assessment cycle, participants described the process as “cyclical” and “iterative” as they consider various strategies until they find the strategy that aligns best with all components of the cycle, including the learning outcomes, the learning experience, data collection methods and intended use of results. While some participants described the process as non-sequential, most participants described the elements in the order of the Maki’s (2004) assessment cycle: defining outcomes,
designing/implementing the learning experience, choosing methods and collecting data, and using and sharing results. In sum, assessment decisions are strategic decisions.

The “Strategic Process” theme aligns with and extends existing literature on student affairs assessment frameworks, specifically Maki’s (2004) conceptualization of the assessment cycle. Maki (2004) portrays learning outcomes assessment as a cycle and as an iterative process intended to provide useful feedback about what and how well students are learning (Maki, 2004). The cycle involves the following elements: a. identifying learning outcomes; b. designing programs and experiences to deliver outcomes; c. developing methods to gather data; d. gathering data, interpreting data; and e. using data to make decisions to improve programs, enhance student learning, inform policies, decision-making, planning, budgeting, policy, and meet accountability demands. Participant descriptions of the elements of an assessment project that must be considered when making decisions about how to assess student learning aligned perfectly with Maki’s (2004) assessment cycle, as evidenced by the “Strategic Process” supporting themes: “Outcomes,” “Experience,” “Methods,” and “Data Usage.”

While Maki’s (2004) conceptualization of the learning outcomes assessment cycle was designed to be a process model, participants discussed how they used a strategic process to consider all elements of the cycle in order to make the best decisions. The “Strategic Process,” “Internal Factors” and “External Factors” thematic portrayals also extend the work of Maki (2004) by suggesting that internal and external factors must also be considered as part of the assessment decision-making process. As such, this study suggests that assessment decision-making does not place in a laboratory in which all elements of the assessment process can be controlled and perfectly aligned; instead, decisions take place within the context of a complicated and dynamic higher education environment. In alignment with the notion of bounded rationality,
this study’s theoretical framework, decision-makers must consider a variety of limitations, contexts and environments (the “bounds”) presented by a host of internal factors, such as resources, internal stakeholders and culture, as well as external factors, including existing knowledge and external stakeholders. As such, the perfect or ideal data collection method may not be viable in practice. While Maki’s (2004) depiction of the assessment cycle provides a useful framework for decision-making, the thematic portrayals suggest that a variety of internal and external factors must also be considered when choosing how to best measure the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs.

The “Strategic Process” supporting themes, “Outcomes,” “Experience,” “Methods,” and “Data Usage,” also converge with and diverge from existing literature on assessment practice. In the following paragraphs, these four supporting themes will be discussed in relation to the existing scholarship on assessment.

2a. Outcomes. Participant descriptions of how learning outcomes are considered in the decision-making process align with scholarship on student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Consistent with Sharp et al. (2011) and Upcraft and Schuh (1996), participants in this study define learning outcomes as what a student should be able to do or know as a result of a program or experience. Additionally, participant discussions of how they determine outcomes aligns with The Educational Advisory Board’s (2011) conceptualization of the three student affairs learning outcomes assessment measurement models: campus-wide, division-level, and decentralized. One participant described a campus-wide model in which institutional learning outcomes are measured, six of the participants discussed the use of a divisional learning outcomes assessment model, while two participants described a which individual student affairs units develop and measure their own learning outcomes. Regardless of the model, participants agreed that
outcomes are influenced by institutional and divisional missions as well as program goals, which aligns with guidance provided by Maki (2004) as well as Schuh and Upcraft (1998).

2b. Experience. Participant discussions of how they consider the learning experience in the assessment decision-making process align with Maki’s (2004) notion of the assessment cycle, but diverge from other assessment process frameworks. For example, as described in the “Student Affairs Assessment Frameworks” section of this study’s literature review, Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) Assessment Process, which has been cited in over 340 studies and has been endorsed by national student affairs professional associations, lists twelve key assessment process steps, but considering the program or experience is not included in the framework. In this study, however, participants agree that the learning experience must be considered as part of the decision-making process and strategically aligned with the other elements of the assessment cycle. While the “Experience” supporting theme did not converge with Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) model, participants’ descriptions of how they consider the learning experience align with Maki’s (2004) discussions of instructional design and using assessment as a teaching and learning tool. Specifically, participant discussions of the nuanced ways they consider the program format, the intended level of learning, the audience, and ways to integrate assessment into the learning experience align with Maki’s (2004) emphasis on using assessment as a vehicle to improve student learning.

2c. Methods. According to participants, an integral aspect of the decision-making process involves selecting the “best” or optimal method, from a variety of options, which aligns best with other aspects of the assessment project as well as internal and external factors. Participants describe the consideration of methods as a sequential process in which a method is examined from multiple angles to determine alignment with other aspects of the assessment project—
outcomes, experience, intended use of data—as well as internal, such as resources, internal stakeholders and culture, and external factors, including existing knowledge and external stakeholders. Consistent with the types of data collection methods presented in the “Intellectual Roots” and “Student Affairs Assessment Frameworks” sections of this study, participants described a number of different data collection strategies, including surveys, polls, quizzes, focus groups, observations, document reviews, and interviews and scoring student work using rubrics. While several participants discussed how student affairs professionals default to using surveys, participants described a number of learning outcomes assessment projects that utilized other methods.

Participant discussions of choice of methods and measures are consistent with literature on indirect and direct methods and quantitative and qualitative methods. Congruent with Suskie (2009), participants framed their consideration of possible methods in terms of direct vs. indirect measures. Participants discussed how direct measures, which require students to demonstrate their learning, are preferred to indirect methods, which require students to self-report what they think they have learned. Participants also described the process in terms of quantitative vs. qualitative methods. Consistent with Schuh and Upcraft (1998) and Upcraft and Schuh (1996), participants agreed that quantitative methods yield greater breadth of information while qualitative methods provide greater depth of information.

Participants in this study articulated a commitment to using multiple measures of student learning. Several assessment scholars argue that no single strategy is sufficient in describing gains in terms of student learning and development and agree that a combination methods and measures are needed to understand the multiple dimensions of student learning (Banta, 2002; Middaugh, 2007, 2010; Shulman, 2007; Smith & Mather, 2000). Using multiple measures and
triangulating various data sources can provide converging evidence of student learning and allows practitioners and researchers to acquire a more accurate and holistic understanding of student learning (Jones, 2002; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). While participants in this study discussed a commitment to mixed methods and multiple measures, most assessment projects described by participants in this study involved a single data collection method.

Participant remarks about the process of choosing data collection methods shed light on the problem of practice under investigation driving this study: While assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of multiple measures to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks of student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), student affairs practitioners are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). When considering using quantitative and/or qualitative methods and indirect and/or direct measures, participants discussed how the best data collection method is often not selected due to a variety of constraints, such as time, staff competence or stakeholder needs. Specifically, participants discussed how staff often “default” to using quantitative methods over qualitative methods and indirect methods over direct methods due to lack of time because they are faster and easier to employ. In this way, participant discussions of how they consider methods align with this study’s theoretical framework, bounded rationality, which suggests that the ideal or perfect decision is often not a viable option in practice due to a variety of limitations.

2d. Data usage. Participant discussions of how they consider the intended usage of data as part of the strategic decision-making process align with the paradigms of assessment described in this study’s literature review. Ewell (2008) describes two different conceptions of
what assessment is and how it should operate—an improvement paradigm and accountability paradigm. In alignment with Ewell’s (2008) conceptions of the two assessment paradigms—the improvement paradigm and the accountability paradigm—participants described assessment projects designed to produce data for accountability purposes, like annual reports, budget requests and sharing data with campus leaders and the public, as well as improvement purposes, such as using data to improve programs and providing individualized feedback to students. A review of examples of assessment projects described by participants suggests that assessment projects designed to produce data for accountability tend to be summative and quantitative in nature, primarily surveys, while assessment projects designed to produce data for improvement not only used surveys but also utilized focus groups, observation and rubrics. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there were exceptions to this pattern and that the accountability and improvement categories were not mutually exclusive; some assessment projects served multiple purposes and produced data that could serve both accountability demands and improvement purposes.

**Strategic Process Summary.** In summation, participant depictions of the “Strategic Process” core theme and its four supporting themes aligned perfectly with Maki’s (2004) assessment cycle, as evidenced by the strategic process supporting themes: outcomes, experience, methods and data usage. While Maki’s (2004) conceptualization of the learning outcomes assessment cycle was designed to be a process model, participants discussed how they used a strategic process to consider all elements of the cycle in order to make decisions. The thematic portrayals also extend the work of Maki (2004) by suggesting that internal and external factors must also be considered as part of the assessment cycle. The individual supporting themes, “Outcomes,” “Experience,” “Methods,” and “Data Usage,” also converge and diverge
from existing scholarship. Participant descriptions of how learning outcomes are considered in the decision-making process align with scholarship on student affairs learning outcomes assessment. Participant discussions of how they consider the learning experience in the assessment decision-making process align with Maki’s (2004) emphasis on using assessment as a vehicle for improving learning, but diverge from other assessment process frameworks, like Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) assessment process. Participant descriptions of how they choose methods and measures are consistent with scholarship on data collection method types, choosing between quantitative and qualitative methods, the differences between indirect and direct methods, and using a multiple measures approach to holistically measure learning. Most importantly, participant descriptions of how they choose the best method from a variety of options also shed light on the problem of practice driving this study (overreliance on self-report surveys) and converge with the principles of bounded rationality, by suggesting that student affairs professionals “default” to surveys due to a variety of internal and external factors. Finally, participant descriptions of how they consider the intended usage of data as part of the strategic decision-making process align with the two paradigms of assessment described by Ewell (2008); assessment for improvement often looks and operates differently from assessment for accountability.

In the following section, the third core theme “Internal Factors” will be discussed in relation to existing scholarship.

3. Internal factors. As revealed by the third core theme, “Internal Factors,” and its three supporting themes, “Internal Resources,” “Internal Stakeholders,” and “Culture,” participants in this study agreed that internal factors must be considered when making decisions about how to assess learning. Participants discussed how internal resources, such as time, staffing, budget, and
technology, play an integral role in decision-making and the lack of resources, especially time, heavily influence decisions about measures and methods. Participants agreed how internal stakeholders, including students, faculty, colleagues and leaders, must be considered when making assessment decisions; however, the perceived degree of influence over decision making varied by stakeholder group, with students being most influential. Lastly, eight of the nine participants described how cultural aspects, such as values, language, norms, expectations and political relationships, must be considered when assessing student learning. Specifically, participants discussed how strong assessment cultures support assessment decision-making, while cultures in which assessment is not valued or understood serves as a barrier to assessment decision-making. In sum, participants in this study agree that the barriers and opportunities presented by internal factors, including resources, stakeholders, and culture must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure the learning that results from student affairs programs and services. In the following paragraphs, each supporting theme will be discussed in relation to existing scholarship.

3a. Internal resources. Participants in this study discussed how internal resources present barriers and opportunities that must be strategically considered when making decisions about how to assess the student learning that results from student affairs programs. Participant discussions of internal resources, which include human, fiscal, and technological resources, align and diverge from existing literature on assessment practice. As participants in this study describe, good assessment requires time, competence, willingness and funding, and a lack of these resources, especially time and staff competence, results in less than optimal decisions. Participant descriptions of human and fiscal resources converge with assessment scholarship, which suggests that student affairs professionals lack time, knowledge, staffing, funding, and
tools, to perform quality assessment (Green et al., 2008; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman, Aloi & Jones; 2003). Participant descriptions of technological resources also converge with and diverge from existing scholarship. While a number of assessment scholars discuss how student affairs professionals lack the tools to perform quality assessment, participants described a number of technological resources, such as Campus Labs and other types of survey software, as tools that support assessment practice (Green et al., 2008; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman, Aloi & Jones; 2003). However, more recent literature on student affairs assessment practice suggests that assessment technology is more prevalent and widely used in supporting assessment practice, which is more consistent with the experiences of the participants in this study (Yousey-Elsner et al., 2015).

3b. Internal stakeholders. Participants in this study discussed how internal stakeholders, including students, staff, faculty and campus leaders, must be considered when making assessment decisions. Participant discussions of how internal stakeholders are considered in the decision-making process align with and add to the existing scholarship in three ways. First, the consideration of internal stakeholders’ preferences and needs as part of the decision-making process align with depictions of the assessment process in literature. A synthesis of assessment process frameworks suggests that considering how results will be shared with is a crucial step in the assessment process (Bauer, 2003; Bresciani et al., 2009; Huba & Freed, 2000; Maki, 2004; Polomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Second, participant discussions of how internal stakeholders, especially faculty and campus leaders, have high expectations for assessment quality, aligns with literature on the age of accountability and the intense scrutiny student affairs divisions are under from internal and external stakeholders to demonstrate the worth of their programs and services (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Sharp,
Third, participant comments on internal stakeholders also complement existing research by offer a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways internal stakeholders are considered in decision-making. For example, while some participants described campus constituents as recipients of assessment results that have high expectations for assessment quality, while others discussed faculty and staff as potential partners in assessment. Participants consider campus leaders to be important stakeholders because they use assessment results to make decisions, allocate resources and demonstrate the worth of student affairs programs to others.

**3c. Culture.** As revealed by the third “Internal Factors” supporting theme, “Culture,” participants in this study consider elements of culture when making decisions about how to best measure student learning. Eight of the nine participants described how cultural aspects, such as values and expectations, language and politics, must be considered when assessing student learning. Six of the nine participants discussed how assessment culture can facilitate or impede assessment, two participants discussed language, while four participants discussed culture in terms of politics. In addition to internal resources and stakeholders, culture is another internal factor that influences assessment decisions. In the following paragraph, the supporting theme, “Culture,” will be discussed in relation to assessment literature.

Discussion of culture in terms of values and expectations for assessment and the notion of “assessment culture” align with existing scholarship. Several studies have described assessment culture as a culture in which assessment in practiced and identified aspects of culture that support high quality assessment practice (Green et al., 2008; Julian, 2013; Kirksky, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2009). For example, Green et al. (2008) and Seagraves and Dean (2009) identify several divisions with strong assessment cultures and, using a multi-case study approach, explore the
conditions and practices that are conducive to supporting high quality assessment practice. Other scholars suggest a significant barrier to the field of student affairs is that assessment is not valued in practice (Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Shutt et al., 2012). Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, Dean (2012) argue that many student affairs professionals conduct assessment simply to include statistics in their end-of-year-report. Low priority level amongst senior student affairs officers is listed as the most significant factor for the low level of student affairs commitment to assessment (Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Shipman et al., 2003; Smith & Rodgers, 2005). More recent scholarship on student affairs practice also provides guidance on how to navigate the politics around assessment (Roberts et al., 2014; Yousey-Elsner et al., 2016)

**Internal Factors Summary.** The “Internal Factors” core theme and three supporting themes, “Internal Resources,” “Internal Stakeholders,” and “Culture” are harmonious with scholarship on assessment practice. Participant discussions of internal resources, which include human, fiscal, and technological resources, align with scholarly depictions of barriers to assessment practice, including lack of time, staff willingness, staff competence, and fiscal resources. As participants in this study describe, good assessment requires time, competence, willingness and funding, and a lack of these resources, especially time and staff competence, results in less than optimal decisions. Participant discussions of how they consider internal stakeholders is consistent with the recommended steps in assessment process literature as well as scholarship that discusses the accountability demands on student affairs. Lastly, participant depictions of culture are consistent with studies of the role of culture in high quality assessment practice as well as more recent publications on student affairs assessment, which outline navigating politics as a key feature of student affairs assessment.
In the next section, the fourth core theme “External Factors” will be discussed in relation to relevant literature.

4. External factors. As revealed by the fourth core theme, “External Factors,” and its two supporting themes, “Existing Knowledge” and “External Stakeholders,” participants in this study discussed how external factors, including existing knowledge and external stakeholders, must be considered when making decisions about how to best assess the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs and services. Seven participants described existing knowledge, such as national instruments, models used by other institutions, literature and theory as well as professional organization standards. Existing knowledge in the form of literature and professional standards informed decisions, while existing knowledge in the form of frameworks and normed instruments provided credible models that could be mimicked or modified. Participants also described external stakeholders, such as accreditors, the public, legislators and government agencies, which put pressure on student affairs divisions, and higher education institutions in general, to provide evidence of student learning. While participants disagreed on the extent to which external stakeholders influence assessment decisions, accrediting agencies seem to be most influential. In sum, participants in this study agree that the barriers and opportunities presented by external factors, including existing knowledge and external stakeholders, must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure the learning that results from student affairs programs and services. In the following paragraphs, the two “External Factors” supporting themes, “Existing Knowledge” and “External Stakeholders” will be discussed in relation to student affairs assessment literature.

4a. Existing knowledge. Participants described existing knowledge as a factor that must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure student learning. However,
literature on assessment process frameworks does not include collecting information on existing knowledge as a feature of the assessment process (Bauer, 2003; Bresciani et al., 2009; Huba & Freed, 2000; Maki, 2004; Polomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In this way, this study diverges from existing literature by suggesting that consideration of existing knowledge is an important step in the assessment decision-making process.

Participants described external knowledge as existing tools, professional standards, research, theory and practices used by other institutions. While Green et al. (2008) states that the scarcity of research on student affairs learning outcomes assessment has contributed the lack of skills and competency in the field of student affairs, participants in this study suggest that there is an abundance of scholarship and guiding frameworks that can inform assessment practice.

Participants cited a number of publications described in this study’s literature review, from the ASK standards, to Maki’s (2004) assessment cycle, to Yousey-Elsner et al.’s Coordinating Student Affairs Assessment (2015).

4b. External stakeholders. Participants in this study stated that external stakeholders influence student affairs learning outcomes assessment decisions. Participants described external stakeholders, such as regional accreditation agencies, the public, employers, donors, higher education research centers and foundations, parents, board of trustees, board of regents, the state government, and the federal government. All nine participants agreed that these external stakeholders contribute to the pressure on student affairs to assess student learning and demonstrate their worth as a field. Participant descriptions of pressure to assess from external stakeholders are consistent with the literature. Literature on the historical roots of the assessment movement reveal that learning outcomes assessment has long been a critical issue in student affairs, but the demand for evidence of student learning has never been stronger (Hoffman &
Bresciani, 2010; Sharp et al., 2011). The rising cost of college attendance, soaring student loan debt and mounting unemployment rates amongst recent college graduates have stimulated perceptions of deficits in college student learning. Accrediting agencies, professional organizations, legislators, donors, employers, and parents and students are demanding increased accountability from higher education institutions and student affairs divisions, whose mission statements promise growth in terms of leadership, citizenship and career success, have not been shielded from this scrutiny (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Sharp et al., 2011). Participants agree that now more than ever, there is pressure on student affairs divisions to provide evidence of the learning and development that occurs as a result of co-curricular programs and to use learning outcomes assessment data to improve programs and services, allocate budgets wisely, and strategically plan for the future. In this way, the experiences of the participants add to the understanding of the pressure on student affairs assessment from external stakeholders.

While participants agreed that externals stakeholders contribute to the pressure on student affairs to assess learning, participants disagreed on the extent to which these stakeholders influence decisions about measures and methods. One participant felt strongly that external stakeholders do not and should not influence decisions about methods and measurements, while several others discussed how external stakeholder data preferences strongly influence their selection of quantitative over qualitative methods. Of all the external stakeholders discussed, regional accreditors seem to have the greatest influence on assessment decision making.

**External Factors Summary.** Participant discussions of the external factors that influence decision-making align with and deviate from the barriers to assessment practice identified in existing assessment literature. Participants described existing knowledge as a factor that must be considered when making decisions about how to best measure student learning, but existing
assessment process frameworks do not include collecting information on existing knowledge as a feature of the assessment process. In this way, this study adds to the literature on the steps taken in the assessment process. Participant descriptions of the pressure and scrutiny from external stakeholders are consistent with the literature. Literature on the historical roots of the assessment movement reveal that learning outcomes assessment has long been a critical issue in student affairs, but the demand for evidence of student learning has never been stronger. Participant experiences with pressure from external stakeholders provides a deeper more nuanced understanding of how this pressure is experienced by student affairs professionals and how it influences assessment decisions.

In the following section, a discussion of the thematic portrayals in relation to bounded rationality, this study’s theoretical framework, will be provided

**Discussion of Thematic Portrayals in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

Bounded rationality, which is rooted in the seminal work of Simon (1957), serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Bounded rationality can be situated within the framework of rational choice theory, an economic theory, which posits that “rationality” is a “style of behavior that is appropriate to the achievement of given goals, within the limits imposed by given conditions and constraints” (Simon, 1972, p. 161). Together, the “Strategic Process,” “Internal Factors” and “External Factors” themes align with the notion of bounded rationality by suggesting: a. decision-makers strive to make the best decision possible given the circumstances of the situation, and b. optimal decisions are not always viable in practice due to a variety of internal and external factors. Additionally, the “Collaborative Approach” theme advances the study of the applicability of bounded rationality to group and organizational decision-making. In
the following paragraphs, the thematic portrayals will be discussed in relation to bounded rationality.

A central assumption of bounded rationality is that perfectly rational decisions are often not feasible in practice due to a variety of internal and external limitations or “bounds.” Participants in this study discussed how in some cases the ideal or perfect assessment method is not a viable option in practice due to a variety of limitations, such as lack of time, low staff competence, or stakeholder preferences for certain types of data. Participants discussed how staff often “default” to using quantitative methods, like surveys, when qualitative methods might be more appropriate due to lack of time, lack of understanding of other methods, or based on internal and external stakeholder preferences. Participants also discussed how direct measures more valid measures of student learning compared to indirect measures, but are often not a viable option in practice. Due to constraints, especially time, student affairs staff opt to use indirect measures. Similarly, while most participants articulated a commitment to using multiple measures or mixed methods whenever possible, most examples of learning outcomes assessment projects described by participants utilized a single data collection method, suggesting that it is often not realistic to employ more than one data collection method in practice.

Simon (1972) posits that in an effort to compensate for limitations, individuals will seek out information and alternatives in order to make the best decision possible. Evidenced by the “Collaborative Approach” supporting themes, “Group Work” and “Seeking Feedback,” participants in this study discussed gathering information from others through group work and informal and formal feedback processes. Additionally, as revealed by the “Existing Knowledge” supporting theme, participants collect information about existing tools, frameworks and practices from professional organizations, other institutions, and literature. Participants also discussed
considering alternative assessment approaches as part of the decision-making process. As evidenced by the “Consulting” and “Methods” supporting themes, participants discussed how they challenge others to consider various data collection techniques beyond surveys, including focus groups and using rubrics to score written work. Thus, in alignment with the central assumptions of bounded rationality, individuals in this study arrive at the decision that is most optimal based on collecting information and examining alternatives in order to make the best decision possible.

Simon’s (1972) conceptualizations of optimizing and satisficing, the two overarching approaches to rational choice, are also evidenced in this study’s thematic portrayals. Optimizing involves adopting a strategy to select the best possible solution from the available options. Because it is virtually impossible for actors to optimize decision-making given the universe of possible choices and outcomes, they instead engage in satisficing behavior. Satisficing, as a decision-making strategy, allows actors to choose conduct that is adequate even though it is not necessarily optimal. Actors must make choices that they can live with: satisficing permits them to do this (Jacobs & Wright, 2010). Several participants provided examples of satisficing behavior. For example, one participant referenced “good enough” assessment when he discussed how assessment for internal use only need not be as rigorous as assessments designed to produce data that would be shared outside of the division. A review of interview data also suggests that the overutilization of surveys in student affairs assessment, which served as the catalyst problem of practice for this study, may be a result of satisficing behavior; participants discussed how individuals “default” to surveys, which are easy and efficient to implement, due to “bounds” such as lack of time, low staff competence or
willingness, and stakeholder preferences for quantitative data, as evidenced by the “Internal Factors” and “External Factors” core themes.

One of the primary criticisms of Simon’s (1972) notion of bounded rationality is that it only applies to individual decision-making, not organizations (March, 1978). However, the thematic portrayals reveal that bounded rationality can also apply to group-decision making. In this study, participants describe how they use a collaborative approach to strategically consider all elements of the assessment cycle while simultaneously considering the limitations and opportunities presented by internal and external factors. As evidenced by the “Collaborative Approach” core theme, assessment decisions are group decisions that involve consulting, group work and informal and formal feedback processes. In alignment with the principles of bounded rationality, groups strive to make the best decisions possible given the internal and external limitations or “bounds” of a situation. In this way, this study advances the applicability of bounded rationality to group decision-making.

In the next section, the implications of this research for theory, research and practice will discussed.

Implications

Theory. This research advances the study of bounded rationality in three ways. First, the thematic portrayals that emerged from the interview data support Simon’s (1972) conceptualization of bounded rationality by suggesting: a. decision-makers strive to make the best decision possible given the circumstances of the situation, and b. optimal decisions are not always viable in practice due to a variety of internal and external factors. Second, this study contributes to the study of bounded rationality in fields beyond economics. While bounded rationality emerged in economics, it has been used as a framework for studying decision making
in other disciplines, including criminology, nursing and education (Carfang, 2014; Jacobs & Wright, 2010; Wu et al., 2014). Such studies used bounded rationality as a theoretical framework for exploring how participants make decisions and describing the external and internal limitations (the “bounds”) that influence participants’ decisions. More specifically, this research adds to the study of bounded rationality in higher education administration, extending the work of Carfang (2014), who explored how college presidents describe the decision-making processes inherent to internationalization. Third, this study contributes to the research on bounded rationality within group and organizational decision-making contexts. Critics of bounded rationality argue that Simon’s (1972) conceptualization does not take group decision-making into account. However, as the first core theme, “Group Approach,” suggests, bounded rationality can be extended to group decision-making processes. Nonetheless, future research on the applicability of bounded rationality to group-decision-making is warranted.

While this study employed a decision-making theory as its theoretical framework, assessment theories also informed this research. Assessment process theories, such as Upcraft and Schuh’s (1994) assessment process and Maki’s (2002) learning outcomes assessment cycle frameworks were discussed in this study’s literature review as informing student affairs assessment decisions. The “Strategic Process” supporting themes, “Outcomes,” “Experience,” “Methods,” and “Data Usage,” are congruent with depictions of the assessment process and aligns seamlessly with Maki’s (2002) assessment cycle. In this way, this study provides evidence that these two theories accurately represent assessment in practice. However, the thematic portrayals of the decision-making process revealed in this study move beyond conceptions of the assessment cycle/process to include internal and external factors. This study suggests that assessment decision-making does not take place in a laboratory in which all elements of the
assessment process can be controlled and perfect aligned; instead, decisions take place within the context of a complicated and dynamic higher education environment. As such, this study reveals the need for a modified assessment cycle, which includes elements previously not included in earlier conceptualizations.

**Research.** This study contributes to and extends the literature on student affairs assessment in two ways. First, a review of student affairs assessment literature suggests that this is the first study to apply a decision-making framework to understanding student affairs assessment practice; studies have focused on examining the perceived assessment skills and competencies of student affairs professionals (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006), while others have examined elements of leadership and culture (Green et al., 2008; Julian, 2013; Kirksky, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2009). Additionally, this study fills a gap in the research; a literature search yielded no studies that use a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of student affairs professionals conducting assessment; other studies have predominantly used survey research (Hoffman, 2010; Timm, 2006) or a case study approach (Carter, 2014; Green et al., 2009; Seagraves & Dean, 2010).

This study suggests the need for future research in four areas. First, because this study was limited to student affairs assessment directors, who possess a great deal of experience with assessment and have a unique position within the student affairs organization, the thematic portrayals may not be transferable to other groups of student affairs professionals. Thus, it may be beneficial to replicate this study with student affairs professionals whose primary job function is not assessment. Second, this research revealed several internal and external factors that influence decision-making but the weight or degree to which these factors influenced decisions varied by participant, by project or was unclear. An in-depth study of these factors may be a
welcome addition to this line of research. Third, this study’s literature review revealed that the student affairs assessment director position is an emerging field, and as such, has not been the subject of much study. This growing field may benefit from additional research on the role and impact of student affairs assessment directors. Fourth, the thematic portrayals suggest several promising practices that may warrant future research, such as the creation of divisional learning outcomes assessment frameworks to guide assessment practice, the use of meta-rubrics, such as AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics as tools to directly assess authentic student work, as well as the utilization of assessment as a teaching and learning tool within the co-curricular environment.

**Practice.** This study has several implications for practice at the local and national level. In the following paragraphs, the researcher will discuss how the thematic portrayals of the phenomenon of student affairs learning outcomes assessment decision-making that emerged from this study provided her with a deeper understanding of the problem of practice driving her study as well as the phenomenon under investigation. This deepened understanding of the problem and phenomenon enabled the researcher to develop action steps to improve student affairs assessment practice at her institution. The researcher will discuss how she created a visualization of the findings of her research that aids her in helping others make more strategic and intentional assessment decisions. Plans to develop practical, efficient and use-friendly data collection tools for her division will also be presented. Not only were the thematic portrayals useful in the researcher’s local context, the findings of this research may be useful at the national level to organizations and professionals looking to better understand and improve student affairs assessment practice. Given the intense scrutiny student affairs divisions are under to demonstrate their impact on student learning, it is crucial that the field of student affairs gain a deeper understanding of how learning outcomes assessment decisions are made and the factors
that influence less than optimal decision-making in order to improve practice and meet accountability demands. In the following paragraphs, these implications for practice will be discussed in greater detail.

A meaningful practical implication of this study was the deepening of the researcher’s understanding of the problem of practice driving her study: assessment scholars and professional organizations encourage the use of “multiple measures” to assess the complex constructs that are hallmarks to student affairs work, such as leadership, ethical-decision making and citizenship (Bresciani et al., 2004; Maki, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), yet student affairs researchers and practitioners are using locally developed self-report surveys more than any other data collection method (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Green et al., 2008; Pike, 2006; Seagraves & Dean, 2010); adding to this problem, a growing body of research suggests that students are largely unable to accurately report their learning (Bowman, 2010; Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Grant et al., 2009).

The researcher’s fascination with this problem of practice stems from her efforts to measure the learning that takes place as a result student affairs programs at the program, department and divisional level at four institutions. The researcher has witnessed countless attempts at measuring student learning through self-report surveys that have been thwarted by social desirability, which is the tendency to respond to questions in a favorable way, as students consistently rate themselves high on all items regardless of their previous experience and program type. Moreover, these experiences opened her eyes to the potential flaws in making financial, programmatic or strategic planning decisions based on students’ perceptions of learning rather than their actual learning.

Through this study, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of this problem of practice. When considering using quantitative methods, qualitative methods or mixed
methods/measures, participants discussed how the best data collection method is sometimes not selected due to a variety of constraints, such as time, staff competence or stakeholder needs. Specifically, participants discussed how staff often “default” to using quantitative methods over qualitative methods and indirect methods over direct methods because they are faster and easier to employ. In this way, participant discussions of how they consider methods align with this study’s theoretical framework, bounded rationality, which suggests that the ideal or perfect decision is often not a viable option in practice due to a variety of limitations. This finding sheds light on the problem of practice identified by the researcher in her local context and has helped her understand why student affairs professionals are relying on less than optimal methods. On a more positive note, participants were able to provide ample examples of assessment projects that employed a number of different methods and many participants articulated a commitment to a mixed-methods approach whenever possible. These remarks inspired hope that the problem of practice is not as rampant as the researcher imagined.

Not only did this study advance the researcher’s understanding of the problem of practice, it helped her better understand the phenomenon of student affairs learning outcomes assessment decision-making. The thematic portrayals suggest that student affairs professionals strive to make the best decisions possible using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while simultaneously considering the barriers and opportunities presented by internal and external factors. The following diagram provides a visual of how participants describe the decision-making process.

Figure 3: Visualization of Thematic Portrayals
As depicted in the above diagram, not only do participants use a group approach and strategic process to consider all of the elements of the assessment cycle, they must also consider various internal factors, such as resources, stakeholders and culture, as well as external factors, including existing knowledge stakeholders, as part of the decision-making process.

A deeper understanding of the problem of practice and phenomenon under investigation enabled the researcher to develop strategies to improve assessment decision-making at her institution. Prior to this study, the researcher utilized Maki’s (2004) conceptualization of the learning outcomes assessment cycle to assist herself and others make decisions about how to best assess learning. The thematic portrayals have emphasized the importance of strategically considering additional elements beyond the assessment cycle, including avenues for collaboration as well as the barriers and opportunities created by internal and external factors. Using the above diagram as a tool, conversations with staff about their assessment projects now include discussions of who to bring into the process, available resources and stakeholder preferences, as well as
additional efforts to identify existing knowledge in the form of literature, theory and existing tools. Additionally, conversations about possible learning outcomes assessment methods now include substantial discussion about how to minimize limitations and maximize the opportunities presented by internal and external factors. Prior to this study, some of these elements may have been considered as part of the decision making process, but now they are identified and strategically considered in a more structured and intentional way. As such, decision-making in the researcher’s local context has become much more strategic.

The thematic portrayals, and the above visualization, have also been used by the researcher as a diagnostic tool to better understand assessment decision-making at the researcher’s home institution. The researcher is new to her role and has spent the first year of her tenure listening, learning and building relationships with her colleagues. Applying the thematic portrayals as a framework for understanding the state of assessment decision-making in her division, the researcher has identified possible barriers and opportunities influencing each department and the division as a whole. For example, when identifying “External Stakeholders” by department, she identified alumni as a major influencing factor for several offices; in future assessment conversations with these offices, the researcher will encourage them to consider alumni needs and preferences and identify ways to bring them into the assessment process to ensure buy-in to the project and its results. Another example, when looking at her division through the “Internal Resources” supporting theme, it is clear that all offices have access to technological resources, in the form of Campus Labs, but in some areas, staff willingness to use this resource is low. Participant comments on staff willingness encapsulated by the “Culture” theme suggest that additional professional development and efforts by senior leaders to hold staff accountable for engaging in assessment may be warranted. A final example, it appears that staff rarely consider
“existing knowledge” as part of the decision-making process; this is an area for improvement that the researcher can focus on in the future to improve assessment decision-making in her division.

Consistent with the “Internal Factors” core theme, time as well as staff competence and willingness are the most significant barriers to good assessment in the researcher’s local context. In addition to providing consistent professional development in the area of assessment and working with senior leaders to hold staff accountable for engaging in assessment, the researcher has identified action steps to provide practical, time-effective and user-friendly data collection tools as resources for the division. Specifically, the researcher has begun to collaborate with members of the division to create a divisional learning outcomes assessment framework, which emerged as a best practice amongst professionals in this study, that consists of shared learning outcomes and common data collection tools, such as a bank of indirect and direct survey, focus group and interview questions as well as common rubrics. Not only would these resources reduce barriers related to time and staff competence, such a model would ensure assessment efforts align with the divisional and institutional missions, employ rigorous methods and enable the division to demonstrate its overall impact using common measures.

The thematic portrayals of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon of making decisions about how to best measure the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs and services also have implications at the national level. Given the intense scrutiny higher education is facing, the profession as a whole needs to better understand current assessment practice in order to develop strategies for improvement. Exploring the decision-making processes of student affairs professionals conducting learning outcomes assessment will help the profession understand the assessment process in practice and the limitations and contexts in which assessment-related decisions are made. Awareness of the factors that influence decision-making
may be useful in providing guidance, support and resources to professionals. In this way, this document and any subsequent publications may be useful for professional organizations, student affairs assessment directors and chief student affairs officers seeking to improve assessment practice. On the same note, student affairs professionals across functional areas and at all levels of their organization may benefit from a deepened understanding of how learning outcomes assessment decisions are made and the contexts, environments and limitations that influence decisions. As discussed in this study’s literature review, student affairs professionals across functional areas assess learning at the program, department, divisional and sometimes institutional level. As such, professionals at all levels of the organization may benefit from a guidance on how decisions are made and strategies for improving decision-making. Lastly, this study’s thematic portrayals of learning outcomes assessment decision-making may also be useful to student affairs graduate preparation programs that are designing assessment coursework to prepare emerging student affairs professionals to be successful in practice.

In the next and final section, concluding thoughts on the findings of this research and their implications for theory, research and practice will be offered.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to describe how student affairs professional make decisions about how to assess the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs and services. This was achieved by describing the meanings and essences ascribed to the decision-making process by nine student affairs assessment professionals. A Transcendental Phenomenological analysis of the interview data revealed the meanings and essences of the phenomenon of making decisions about how to assess the learning that occurs as a result of student affairs programs. The composite description of the essence of the phenomenon consisted of four core themes and twelve corresponding supporting themes: 1. collaborative approach,
including a. consulting, b. group work, and c. seeking feedback; 2. strategic process, including a. outcomes, b. experience, c. methods, and d. data usage; 3. internal factors, including a. internal resources, b. internal stakeholders, and c. culture; and 4. external factors, including a. existing knowledge, and b. external stakeholders. The four core and twelve supporting themes suggest that student affairs assessment professionals strive to make the best decisions possible using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while remaining cognizant of the influences of internal and external factors.

The thematic portrayals of the phenomenon that emerged from the interview data reveal answers to this study’s research questions. The first research question, How do student affairs professionals describe the complex decision making process associated with selecting measures of student learning?, is answered by the first and second core themes, “Collaborative Approach” and “Strategic Process.” Student affairs professionals describe the complex decision-making process associated with selecting measures of student learning as a collaborative and strategic process. The second research question, How do student affairs professionals describe the internal and external factors that influence complex decision-making process associated selecting measures of student learning?, is answered by core themes three and four, “Internal Factors” and “External Factors.” Student affairs professionals describe internal factors in terms of internal resources, internal stakeholders and culture and external resources in terms of existing knowledge and external stakeholders. The participants in this study agreed that internal and external resources influence assessment decisions and must be considered as part of the collaborative and strategic decision-making process.

The thematic portrayals of the decision-making process inherent to student affairs learning outcomes assessment reflect aspects of this study’s literature review, including guiding
principles for assessment practice, the learning outcomes assessment cycle, barriers to assessment practice, and the mounting pressure on student affairs to assess student learning from internal and external stakeholders. A review of literature also suggests that this study contributes to the study of student affairs assessment by employing a decision-making theoretical framework and using a phenomenological approach to understanding assessment practice. This study suggests the need for future research in four areas, including replicating this study with student affairs professionals whose primary job function is not assessment as well as further exploration of: a. the internal and external factors that influence assessment decisions; b. the roles and responsibilities of student affairs assessment directors; c. promising practices identified by study participants, including the use of divisional learning outcomes assessment frameworks, metarubrics and using assessment as a teaching and learning tool in addition to an accountability tool.

The thematic portrayals that emerged from the data also have implications for theory. The four core themes and twelve supporting themes align with the notion of bounded rationality, this study’s theoretical framework, by suggesting: a. decision-makers strive to make the best decision possible given the circumstances of the situation, and b. optimal decisions are not always viable in practice due to a variety of internal and external factors. This research extends the study of bounded rationality to the field of higher education administration and advances its application to group and organizational decision-making processes. The thematic portrayals of the decision-making process also have implications for student affairs assessment frameworks. The core and supporting themes revealed in this study suggest that assessment decisions move beyond conceptions of the assessment cycle (Maki, 2004) and the assessment process (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) to include the consideration of internal and external factors. This study suggests that assessment decision-making does not take place in a laboratory in which all elements of the
The assessment process can be controlled and perfectly aligned; instead, decisions take place within the context of a complicated and dynamic higher education environment. As such, this study reveals the need for a modified assessment cycle, which includes elements previously not included in earlier conceptualizations.

The meanings and essences encapsulated in the thematic portrayals presented in this study have positively impacted the researcher and assessment decision-making in her local context in several ways. First, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of how decisions are made and internal and external factors that need to be considered in order to make better decisions. The thematic portrayals revealed that the researcher can improve her decision-making processes by using a collaborative approach and strategic process to align all elements of the assessment cycle while also considering the opportunities and barriers presented by internal and external factors. Second, the findings of this study also enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the problem of practice driving her research (overreliance on self-report surveys in student affairs learning outcomes assessment) by suggesting that student affairs professionals often “default” to surveys due to a variety of internal and external factors, especially lack of time, lack of staff competence, and internal and external stakeholder preferences for quantitative data. Third, the findings of this study have aided the researcher in helping her colleagues make better assessment decisions. The researcher has used the visualization of the thematic portrayals of learning outcomes assessment decision-making to help others make decisions by not only considering all elements of Maki’s (2004) cycle, but also intentionally considering various internal and external factors. As such, discussions about learning outcomes assessment methods include substantial discussions about how to minimize limitations and maximize the opportunities presented by
internal and external factors. Thus, decision-making in the researcher’s local context has become much more intentional and strategic as a result of this research.

The thematic portrayals of the phenomenon of learning outcomes assessment decision-making also have implications at the national level. Given the intense scrutiny higher education is facing, the student affairs profession needs to better understand current assessment practice in order to develop strategies for improvement. Exploring the decision-making processes of student affairs professionals conducting learning outcomes assessment contributes to the profession’s understanding of assessment practice and the limitations and contexts in which assessment-related decisions are made. Awareness of the factors that influence learning outcomes assessment decision-making may be useful in providing guidance, support and resources to student affairs professionals who must make decisions about how to best measure the learning that occurs as a result of their programs and services. By understanding the internal and external factors that influence assessment decision-making, student affairs professionals can be more strategic and intentional in their approach. In this way, findings from this study may be useful for professional organizations, graduate preparation programs, student affairs assessment directors, and chief student affairs officers seeking to improve assessment practice.
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http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_2/pdf/moerercreswell.pdf


Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Student Affairs Assessment Leaders,

My name is Elizabeth Green, and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, in Boston, Massachusetts, and also Senior Project Director for Assessment at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, MA. I am conducting a study in collaboration with my Principal Investigator, Dr. Kimberly Nolan, entitled Exploring the Decision-Making Processes Inherent to Selecting Measures of Student Learning.

I am currently seeking 8 student affairs assessment professionals that meet the following criteria to participate in my study:
   a. currently work as full-time student affairs assessment directors (or similar position) that are responsible for coordinating assessment activities for their student affairs divisions,
   b. currently work at a private, non-profit institution, and
   c. have at least 5 years of experience with student affairs learning outcomes assessment.

In this study, participants will be interviewed and asked questions regarding their experiences with learning outcomes assessment. Specifically, study participants will be asked about their experiences with selecting measures of student learning. Participants will participate in a 90 minute interview that will be conducted remotely via Skype or GoToMeeting. Interviews will be recorded. Participants will also be asked to review interview transcripts to confirm accuracy. The total time for participating in this study is less than two hours.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason.

I would be truly grateful if you would consider participating in my study. I would be more than happy to answer any questions you have about participation or the research under investigation at any time. If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please contact me at green.el@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Elizabeth Green
Appendix B: Unsigned Consent Form

Northeastern University, Doctor of Education
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Kimberly Nolan; Student Researcher, Elizabeth Green
Title of Project: Exploring the Decision-Making Processes Inherent to Selecting Measures of Student Learning

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to explore the decision-making processes associated with choosing how to assess student learning and the factors that influence these decisions.

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research project.

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to be interviewed regarding your experience with assessing student learning. You will be interviewed for 90 minutes on one occasion via Skype or GoToMeeting. The interview will be audio-recorded. After the interview, the researcher will send you a copy of the interview transcript via email and will ask you to confirm its accuracy. The total time for participating in this study is less than two hours.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about how student affairs professionals make decisions about how to assess student learning and the factors that influence these decisions.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you or your institution as being part of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Elizabeth Green, the person mainly responsible for the research, at green.el@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Kimberly Nolan, the Principal Investigator, at k.nolan@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Kimberly Nolan Ed.D., Elizabeth Green
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Topic: Exploring the Decision-Making Processes Inherent to Selecting Measures of Student Learning

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee #:
Position of Interviewee #:

Ask permission to begin recording. (Turn on recorder) Review Unsigned Consent Document.

Introduction/Description of Project
• Interviewer/Interviewee Introductions
• Provide an approximation of how long the interview will take
• Explanation of the purpose of the study
• Explanation of the sources of data being collected
• Explanation of what will be done with the data to protect the confidentiality of the participant

Interview Questions:
• What experiences led you to the field of student affair assessment?
• Could you please tell me about your roles and responsibilities in your current position?
• Could you please tell me about some of the assessment efforts your student affairs division has engaged in?
• Can you please tell me about the learning outcomes assessment model/framework your division uses?
• Can you please describe the type of decisions that need to be made in order to determine how to assess student learning?
• Can you please describe a situation in which you experienced having to make a decision about how to assess learning?
  o Can you please describe any challenges you had to confront in order to make that decision?
  o Can you please describe any tools or strategies that assisted in making that decision?
• Can you please describe any internal or external factors that have to be considered when making decisions about how to assess learning?
  o Did one factor play a more significant role than others? In other words, how do you weigh all of the factors that drove your decision?

Prompts to be used during interview
• Can you tell me more about that?
• Can you provide an example?
• Can you provide any documentation I can take with me?

Thank the individual for their cooperation and participation in this interview. Assure them of the confidentiality of the responses and inform the individual the interviewer will send an email to confirm the accuracy of transcripts within 5 business days.