IMPACTING STUDENT ACCESS THROUGH FEDERAL POLICY CHANGES:
HOW COLLEGE PRESIDENTS INTERPRET THE COLLEGE SCORECARD

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Abstract

There has been significant growth in the number of regulations placed on colleges and universities in recent years. This type of growth contributes to the complex environment that exists for colleges and universities. The study focuses on the federal government’s consumer information mandate and the release of The College Scorecard. The release of consumer information in the form of rankings has led colleges and universities to make changes to policies and procedures, particularly in new student admissions, in an effort to improve institutional data and increase rankings. These decisions have created unintended consequences that include mission drift, and restricting student access for low-income students. Using institutional theory and the theory of isomorphism as the lens to study this phenomenon, the central question that guided this research was: How do college and university presidents describe the impact of The College Scorecard? The findings suggest that normative pressure, commitment to mission, and how students use and rely on this information are important factors in determining the impact of The College Scorecard.

Keywords: The College Scorecard, college presidents, enrollment, admissions, decision-making, college rankings, isomorphism
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... 3  
List of Tables .................................................................................................................................. 9  
Chapter I: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 10  
  Statement of the Research Problem .......................................................................................... 12  
  Significance of the Research Problem ...................................................................................... 16  
  Positionality Statement ............................................................................................................. 21  
    Researcher’s Background ..................................................................................................... 22  
    Lack of Transparency ........................................................................................................... 23  
    Teaching Institutions ............................................................................................................ 24  
    Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 24  
  Research Question .................................................................................................................... 24  
  Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory ........................................................................... 25  
    Isomorphism ......................................................................................................................... 27  
    Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 29  
Chapter II: Literature Review ....................................................................................................... 30  
  Ranking and Ratings History .................................................................................................... 31  
  Ranking Controversies ............................................................................................................ 37  
  Administrative Responses to Rankings .................................................................................... 41  
  Psychological Impact of Ratings .............................................................................................. 42
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

Purpose of the Study

Research Question

Participant Selection

Research Design

Data Collection

Data Analysis

Case Study Reporting

Case Study – College A

Pressure

Data

Usefulness

Mission

Access

Case Study – College B

Pressure

Data

Usefulness

Mission

Access
Case Study – College C ............................................................................................................ 85
Pressure ...................................................................................................................................... 87
Data .......................................................................................................................................... 88
Usefulness ................................................................................................................................. 89
Mission ...................................................................................................................................... 90
Access ...................................................................................................................................... 91
Case Study – College D ............................................................................................................ 91
Pressure ...................................................................................................................................... 92
Data .......................................................................................................................................... 94
Usefulness ................................................................................................................................. 95
Mission ...................................................................................................................................... 97
Access ...................................................................................................................................... 97
Cross-Case Synthesis ................................................................................................................. 98
Finding 1. Admissions policies and practices are not changing .............................................. 98
Finding 2. The College Scorecard created no coercive pressure .......................................... 100
Finding 3. The College Scorecard data are not considered useful or relied upon .............. 102
Finding 4. There may exist a correlation between student reliance and pressure .......... 104
Finding 5. The College Scorecard does not create pressure to improve outcomes ........... 105
Finding 6. Decision-making is driven by mission .............................................................. 108
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 109
List of Tables

Table 4.1 Summary of Themes and Explanations 70
Table 4.2 Reactions to College Scorecard – President A 72
Table 4.3 Overall Reaction to Usefulness of College Scorecard – President A 75
Table 4.4 Key Characteristics that Influence Student Choice 76
Table 4.5 Reactions to College Scorecard – President B 80
Table 4.6 Overall Reaction to Usefulness of College Scorecard – President B 84
Table 4.7 Reactions to College Scorecard – President C 86
Table 4.8 Overall Reaction to Usefulness of College Scorecard – President C 89
Table 4.9 Reactions to College Scorecard – President D 92
Table 4.10 Overall Reaction to Usefulness of College Scorecard – President D 96
Table 4.11 Responses to Changing Admissions Policies and Practices 99
Table 4.12 Pressures Placed on College Presidents 101
Table 4.13 Reactions to Usefulness of Scorecard Data 103
Table 4.14 Data Concerns Expressed by Presidents 107
Chapter I: Introduction

Colleges and universities face increasing regulatory scrutiny each year and for various reasons, including from federal policy changes intended to protect the government’s funding interests, promote policy agendas, regulate institutions’ non-profit status, and general rules and regulations that may be unique to higher education (Denham, 2010; Mumper, Gladieux, King & Corrigan, 2011). In the fall of 2015, federal policy makers were expected to unveil a new system to rate United States colleges and universities (Riskind, 2014). A December 19, 2014 press release from the U.S. Department of Education delineated several purposes for the new rating system known as the federal post-secondary institution ratings system. The proposed federal rating system was being developed to provide families with better information about colleges and universities for the purpose of making more informed decisions during the college selection process. The rating system was also viewed as a means to improve access to post-secondary institutions for low-income and disadvantaged students. Regulators believed that rating schools favorably on metrics such as the percentage of federal Pell grant recipients at an institution would incentivize schools to enroll these students in even greater proportions in the future. Another expectation of the proposed rating system was to hold colleges and universities more accountable on measures such as affordability, access, and outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Communications & Outreach, 2014).

After receiving feedback on the proposed plan, the federal government decided in June 2015 to abandon the proposed post-secondary rating plan in favor of providing families information about colleges through an online, customizable data format that would also serve to hold institutions more accountable (Blumenstyk, 2015; Stratford, 2015). In September 2015, the federal government unveiled The College Scorecard to the public. “Higher education
institutions are subject to a massive amount of federal statutory, regulatory, and sub-regulatory requirements, stemming from virtually every federal agency and totaling thousands of pages” (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015, p. 1). Federal policy changes and proposed changes place pressure on institutions to interpret, understand, and react to such changes. There is a tension that develops from federal regulations that results in institutions losing their ability to make independent decisions (Denham, 2010; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Using the recent federal policy proposing a post-secondary institution rating system and the recent federal policy creating *The College Scorecard*, this study examined how federal policies are interpreted and if organizational change occurs as a result. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeastern United States that serve low-income students might interpret and react to *The College Scorecard*.

This study begins with the statement of the research problem and its significance within higher education, with a focus on small private Catholic institutions in the northeast United States. Since authors need to acknowledge bias, a positionality statement is included to alert the reader to any bias the author has identified. A central research question was developed for this study and is described in the introduction. Chapter I concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework used to frame the study. In Chapter II, the review of literature is aligned with other forms of consumer information, in particular, existing college ranking systems and the related actions taken by colleges and universities. Since the original policy change proposed the implementation of a college rating system, the literature review will provide information on current and historical ranking systems and the influence they have had on college decision-making. The literature review includes the history of college rankings and ratings in the United
States, identification of controversies that have surrounded ratings and rankings systems, college actions in light of past and current ranking and rating systems, the psychological impact rankings have on administrators, how rankings are used, particularly by prospective students, benefits institutions enjoy from strong rankings, information on how political intervention contributes to a complex decision-making environment, and an early indication of how college leaders interpreted and reacted to the proposed federal rating system.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

There has been significant growth in the number of regulations placed on colleges and universities in recent years. According to a report released by the task force on higher education, growth in information disclosure requirements were highlighted, “among the many federal rules with which colleges and universities must comply, information disclosure mandates are particularly voluminous” (U.S. Senate Committee, 2015, p. 10). Research released by George Mason University indicates that during the period from 1997 through 2012, colleges and universities encountered a 56% increase in the number of federal requirements (Kirwan & Zeppos, 2015; U.S. Senate Committee, 2015). This type of growth creates a complex environment for colleges and universities to operate in and places a large burden on institutional compliance. These factors can lead to both isomorphic tendencies and less independent decision-making within organizations (Denham, 2010; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The proposed post-secondary institution rating system and *The College Scorecard* were developed to create better information for families to use when making decisions on college attendance. While consumer information already exists in various forms, many families complained that the information was not user-friendly (Stratford, 2015). Existing college ranking systems, such as the *U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges*, provide consumer information about colleges and
then use that information within their ranking calculations. The information is weighted and ordinal ranks are calculated which place institutions in an order from first or best to last or presumably worst, based upon specific criteria. Unlike the previously proposed post-secondary institution rating system (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, *The College Scorecard* will not rank institutions numerically. This new tool will provide informational measures in several broad categories with comparisons to national averages, allowing prospective students and their families to compare colleges while drawing their own conclusions (Blumenstyk, 2015). Although *The College Scorecard* differs in this respect from existing ranking systems, it is unclear at this time if this format will be widely used or completely understood by families (Stratford, 2015).

Interestingly, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings were not widely used or deemed overly important by prospective students when initially released (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Pérez, 1998). In fact, in their infancy, the rankings produced by *U.S. News & World Report* were used mainly by wealthier students attending selective colleges and universities (Espinosa, Crandall, & Tukibayeva, 2014; McDonough et al., 1998). However, the use of ranking and information gathering systems among all students and parents searching for colleges has grown consistently over the past several decades (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Espinosa et al., 2014). In the two decades from the middle of the 1980s until the middle of the 2000s, the number of students indicating rankings were very important to them in the college search process increased over 50% (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Espinosa et al., 2014). College rankings and consumer information have become important tools for many families during the college search process. With rankings and consumer information growing in importance for families, many colleges realized that providing improved information and creating higher
rankings produced tangible benefits for the institution. These benefits included increased admissions applications, more applicants with higher standardized test scores, the ability to lower acceptance rates and become more selective, improvements in perceived reputation, and increased opportunities for fund raising (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Luca & Smith 2013; Meredith 2004).

Although decisions to improve reported data benefited many colleges, there have been unintended consequences related to student access and affordability (Hossler, 2000). The proposed federal policy to implement a post-secondary institutional rating system created concern about how ratings might impact low-income students. Espinosa et al. (2014) note:

Although the administration has tried to quell fears that its plan will become yet another college and university ‘ranking,’ many in the higher education community still believe that the ratings scheme will nonetheless become a de facto ranking, with negative consequences for the very low-income and other underrepresented students whom the administration is looking to serve. (p. 1)

Had the rating plan become a de facto ranking plan, there may have been “a number of consequences to rankings-influenced decision making, some of which can be positive, but most of which have negative implications for low-income student access” (Espinosa et al., 2014, p. 2). The two recently proposed federal policy changes place an emphasis on consumer information and accountability, targeted particularly to lower-income families. Dill and Soo (2005) suggest that in contrast to media-led rankings, government intervention in this type of endeavor is a “more efficient and effective means of achieving the public interest” (p. 523). It is important to understand how policies are interpreted, what impact these government policy changes and
regulations have on organizational behavior, and explore if there may be any unintended consequences, particularly related to student access.

Institutional theory asserts that organizations, in this case colleges and universities, are shaped in part by their external environment and remain concerned with their own viability as an organization (Scott, 1987). Laws and rules, social and professional norms, and cultures all exert pressure on institutions to conform (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Yang & Konrad, 2011). The federal policy creating The College Scorecard is a regulation that may place pressure on institutions to produce highly desirable outcomes to be displayed in the scorecard. Conforming to the scorecard measures may be a way for colleges and universities to gain legitimacy, but at what cost? Institutional leaders believe that the increase in federal regulations “creates negative incentives” for institutions (U.S. Senate Committee, 2015, p 7) and that responsibilities placed on institutions are becoming too complex. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeastern United States that serve low-income students might interpret and react to The College Scorecard.

Although research exists describing how colleges respond to media-led rankings (Bastedo & Bowman, 2009; Hossler, 2000; Meredith, 2004), there is no research on how college presidents perceive or might respond to these new federal policy changes related to consumer information and accountability, more specifically, The College Scorecard. This gap was confirmed by a search of various databases using the Scholar One Search system. A search with keywords of college rating plan, higher education rating plan, federal rating plan, and Obama rating plan, among others, produced no peer-reviewed articles or empirical research reports. This study aims to fill that gap and extend understanding of the impact of the proposed federal policy change on student access.
Through a better understanding of how college presidents perceive and might respond to federal policy change, policymakers may be able to provide revisions to the proposed system to improve the likelihood of reaching the intended goals. Modifications in future years may eliminate potential pitfalls and provide more useful information for the public during the college search process. This research may uncover other potential unintended consequences for students, colleges, and policymakers by better understanding how college presidents perceive and might react to this new policy change. Ultimately, it may lead to the construction of more meaningful consumer information, provide better access for all prospective students, and improve outcomes for American colleges and universities.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Research has shown that in some instances colleges have changed behavior, practices, and policies to improve information being shared with the public and overall rankings within media-led ranking systems (Bastedo & Bowman, 2009; Hossler, 2000). *The College Scorecard* could compel small private Catholic colleges to change their policies in relation to student access as they deal with pressures to improve consumer information, such as graduation rates, being reported. Admissions policy changes designed to improve consumer information such as graduation rates or incoming standardized test scores could impact college access for many low-income students that attend small private Catholic colleges and universities.

Colleges and universities have failed in the past to develop any meaningful system of their own, rating or otherwise, to provide consumers with important information that could be easily read and understood (Myers & Robe, 2009; Schmotter, 1989). This void has been filled for decades by media-led ranking systems, and now the federal government is attempting to provide transparent information that is user-friendly. Current data indicate that lower-income
students do not rely as much on ranking systems as higher-income students, but rather rely on parental support, peers, and other networks (Espinosa et al., 2014). As a result, many of the less selective private institutions where many of these students study have not been overly concerned with the information supplied by existing ranking systems (Hill & Winston, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The possibility now exists that institutions serving low-income students may become much more concerned about their information and how it might reflect upon the institution. Decisions by presidents to improve their consumer information may result in the same unintended consequences that occurred with existing ranking systems. For instance, the decision to increase standardized test scores as part of an institution’s admission requirement could ultimately improve retention and graduation rates, yet reduce access for low-income or first generation students who might have met the previous admission requirements.

In the fall of 2013, there were 21.8 million students enrolled in American colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Approximately 3.3 million students graduated from high school in 2013-14 and contemplated whether college was in their future and, if so, which college they should attend (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While earlier research on college rankings indicate many students did not use the data and corresponding rankings (McDonough et al., 1998), the number of students reporting rankings are important in their college search process continues to grow each year (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Espinosa et al., 2014).

The *U.S. News & World Report* printed its first college ranking issue in 1983, and today the online version of the college ranking issue receives over ten million hits, 20 times the average number of monthly hits other issues receive (Luca & Smith, 2013, p. 59). *The College Scorecard* is designed to reach and inform a larger and more diverse audience than existing
rankings and consumer information tools. Although the latest federal policy shifted the focus away from a college rating system, the purpose remains the same. According to an August 22, 2013, White House press release, the federal government suggested the new rating system would “identify colleges that do the most to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as colleges that are improving their performance” (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). While the ultimate goal is “to present the information about access, affordability, and outcomes in a way that increases transparency and meaningfully informs student choice” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), it is evident that low-income families in particular are targeted for increased awareness and better consumer information. With many low-income students studying at private institutions, predominantly moderately or minimally selective master’s or bachelor’s institutions (Hill & Winston, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2006), understanding how federal policies are interpreted and what impact federal policy changes have on organizational behavior at small private Catholic colleges and universities that serve many low-income students is important.

When the post-secondary institutional rating system was proposed, concerns about college access for low-income students surfaced. According to a report by the task force for higher education, “regulations serve an important role in ensuring institutional accountability. But requirements that have an excessive reach, or that are… difficult to implement—or worse still, that hinder student access to college and drive costs up—are counterproductive” (U.S. Senate Committee, 2015, p. 2). Some presidents at small private colleges had already publicly discussed the effects the proposed ratings might have on their ability to recruit students and to secure federal financial resources for those students (Riskind, 2014). One anonymous college president decided that in response to the new federal rating system, the institution would increase
the academic admissions requirements for their incoming freshman class in an effort to improve the institution’s graduation rate, a reported metric in the proposed rating system (Stratford, 2014). Although the rating system was ultimately replaced with *The College Scorecard*, pressures placed on institutions by federal policy changes can result in organizational change even though they are simply proposed changes. Research indicates that some colleges respond to existing media-led ranking systems by changing admissions policies and practices or misreporting data to *U.S. News & World Report* to improve their rankings (McDonough et al., 1998; Hossler, 2000). Organizational decisions to successfully improve publicized data by changing admissions criteria can adversely affect both access and affordability for many students. Many small private Catholic colleges serve low-income families as part of their mission. However, there may be a tension that develops between serving this population of student and the expectation to have data in *The College Scorecard* that will meet acceptable levels by policy makers and families. Based on institutional reaction to media-led ranking systems, it is important to understand how presidents will interpret *The College Scorecard* and explore if organizations will consider changes to policies and practices, particularly those related to student access.

*The College Scorecard* is available online at no cost to families, unlike many existing media-led rankings that provide information but charge for access to the data. Unlike ranking systems, *The College Scorecard* does not interpret the data for families; rather, the data of several institutions can be compared, along with comparisons to national averages, allowing families to draw their own conclusions about different colleges and universities. Institutions that previously did not consider the impact of rankings, perhaps because students they attracted did not rely on the data, may now consider it important to compare favorably with other institutions.
How an institution’s data compare with other colleges and universities may not only impact how schools are perceived by prospective students but also donors, board members, government agencies, and other constituents that may now take notice of this data, creating further pressure to perform well in this information game.

The impact of decisions to alter admissions requirements could be significant, particularly for small private colleges serving lower-income and first-generation students. For instance, 35% of the fall 2013 undergraduate student population at a small private Catholic university in the northeast were Pell grant recipients or considered low-income students. As a small private university with a strong liberal arts core curriculum, the university’s mission since its inception has been to serve low-income families in the region. The president and other leaders at this institution had already begun a dialogue about how the proposed rating system and release of new information might impact both the institution and its students. A decision to increase admissions criteria could limit access for as many as 400 undergraduate students at this institution, one that only enrolls approximately 1,300 traditional undergraduate students each year.

Colleges and universities, particularly smaller institutions that serve this student population, could have to contend with issues such as mission drift, lost revenue, or the potential of decreased enrollments. Many small private colleges could find it difficult to remain financially viable should they have to choose between improving accountability measures and enrolling low-income students. According to Harmon and Cielinski (2014),

It is reasonable to imagine that, confronted with the prospect of losing funds, institutions might reduce their focus on Pell grant recipients and other lower income students or
otherwise change their enrollment process in a way that reduces opportunities for lower-income students. (p. 2)

While one intent of this policy change is to improve access and provide better information, it appears, based on some reactions, that some institutions are already considering improving outcomes measures at the risk of limiting access.

Another issue that could be significantly affected by this problem is the federal administration’s goal to restore the United States to one of the most educated countries in the world while increasing opportunities for low-income and disadvantaged students. The reality is that “only 40% of low income students…enroll in postsecondary institutions immediately upon high school graduation…” (Engberg & Allen, 2011, p. 786). America has dropped to 12th among countries in degree completion after previously being ranked at or near the top of this list (Jones, 2010). Ensuring accessibility and affordability for students and understanding how policy changes impact student access present an important research opportunity.

**Positionality Statement**

This study will explore how presidents perceive federal policy changes using the recent policy changes on accountability measures and consumer information as the context. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeast United States that serve low-income students might interpret and react to *The College Scorecard*.

Using data and developing ranking and rating systems have been part of higher education since the late nineteenth century and almost since their inception have been embroiled in controversy (Webster, 1984). The *U.S. News & World Report* has had one of the strongest impacts of all the rankings in the United States (Altbach, 2012; Bowman & Bastedo, 2009).
Now federal policy changes have been introduced to further alter the information available to students and families. My career in higher education, over 24 years, has been spent working at smaller private teaching-based institutions that are primarily tuition-driven. My background and experience with federal policies and regulations will certainly impact my views on this problem of practice and frame my position and biases. Briscoe (2005) reminds us that “one always brings one’s history, experiences, and categories to bear when trying to understand new situations” (pp. 25-26).

**Researcher’s Background.** As a college student, I came from a lower to middle-income family that relied upon financial aid to finance my studies. Financial aid played an important role for me and my family when it came time to select an institution. Without the aid that was made available to me, I could not have studied at the private Catholic university where I earned my bachelor’s degree. At the time, the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking was in its infancy and had little impact on my family’s decision. By the time my career in higher education began in 1991, rankings had already begun to have an impact on higher education. My career started at a small private university serving predominantly local and regional students from lower-income and first-generation families. It was a college that served a wide range of students on the academic preparedness spectrum as well. My role grew from a managerial position in the financial aid office to a leadership role encompassing admissions, financial aid, and marketing of the university. The importance of financial aid to students and families and the role it plays for colleges in enrolling students became very clear. It soon became evident that college reputation, mainly influenced by rankings and the data generating these rankings, became an important driver for many families when making enrollment decisions. Machung (1998) notes that many colleges competitively use rankings to promote themselves to parents, trustees, and other college
administrators in attempts to influence and improve reputation. The institution where I worked became mildly obsessed with both its ranking in *U.S. News & World Report* and overall reputation. Many hours were spent dissecting the calculations used, data elements submitted, and developing strategies to improve the measures within the rankings. Third party affirmation was an important part of the marketing efforts and that included ranking information.

In 2005 I started as vice president for enrollment at a small private Catholic college serving low-income and first-generation students. This college was ranked fairly high within its institutional category in *U.S. News & World Report*. While this college did not obsess about the rankings, concern grew when the college’s category within the rankings changed from baccalaureate colleges to regional colleges and universities, and its ranking declined considerably. This institution even chose to boycott the rankings for several years by refusing to share information publicly although that position has changed under new leadership. At both tuition-driven institutions, although to varying degrees, there was pressure from faculty, trustees, and others to improve the quality of students, graduation and retention rates, and other measurements that form the basis of the ranking systems and also the latest proposed accountability measures.

**Lack of Transparency.** Accountability measures are important as long as they are meaningful, easily understood, and transparent. In my own experience, I am aware of colleagues changing policies to inflate reported data or changing admissions policies to attract students with higher standardized test scores. Some of my past experiences raise concerns about whether colleagues will be transparent when providing consumer information. However, it is important as a researcher to objectively understand how others, specifically college presidents, perceive this new policy change and how they might respond to changes as a way to limit my own bias.
Fennel and Arnot (2008) explain that within the concept of positionality, we develop our own realities, and a position within that becomes the reality for us. Understanding that there are different views and realities will remind me to remain objective throughout the research process.

**Teaching Institutions.** I realize that my experience at small private teaching institutions creates a lens for me that is narrowly focused. There are many types of institutions of higher education that may or may not benefit from this new policy change. My lens has been shaped by my experience as a student and mostly as an administrator at two small private tuition-driven institutions. Providing useful information about teaching institutions is often difficult and largely ignored as Altbach (2012) notes that research dominates existing rankings and “teaching is largely ignored in all of the rankings” (p. 28). My work experience has shown me that teaching colleges play a vital role in higher education and for the students they educate. When evaluating how new policy changes might impact teaching institutions, it is important to consider this narrow lens within which my work currently occurs.

**Conclusion.** My interest in these new accountability measures and consumer information has developed over a long career in higher education and through my own dealings with federal policies, enrollment challenges, and media-led ranking systems. My background creates opportunities for researcher bias and positionality, and only a few have been addressed in this paper. Through continued introspection and recognition of my own researcher bias, further identification of other biases may be discovered and will be acknowledged so as to not impact the research of this subject.

**Research Question**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeast United States that serve low-income students, might
interpret and react to *The College Scorecard*. There has been no empirical research conducted on these federal policies, specifically *The College Scorecard*, to date. Concerns have been expressed about the unintended consequences that could occur if institutions were to alter their admissions process and shift focus away from low-income and first-generation students (Harmon & Cielinski, 2014). While *The College Scorecard* is not a rating or ranking system, some may still consider *The College Scorecard* a rating system without ratings. If considered a rating system in some form, “many in the higher education community still believe that the ratings scheme will nonetheless become a de facto ranking, with negative consequences for the very low-income…students whom the administration is looking to serve” (Espinosa et al., 2014, p. 1).

Ranking systems have provided consumers with information about colleges and universities for years. Research on institutional behavior in relation to existing ranking systems indicates that decisions to change admissions policies have been made in an effort to improve ordinal rankings and attain benefits associated with higher rankings and perceived stronger legitimacy (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Hossler, 2000; McDonough et al., 1998).

Considering the implementation of *The College Scorecard*, a central question and sub question have been developed to frame this study:

Q1: How do college and university presidents describe the impact of *The College Scorecard*?

S1: How will college and university presidents react to *The College Scorecard* in relation to new student enrollment and admissions?

**Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory**

In reviewing literature on the topic of consumer information, media-led rankings, and the impact on leaders, many researchers studied these phenomena through the lens of institutional
theory. Institutional theory is a sound choice in studying organizational behavior and has been used to study diverse areas such as consumerism in the fashion industry, diversity in management practices, school district complexity, and relocating business internationally (Evans, 2004; Meyer, Scott, & Strang, 1987; Yang & Konrad, 2011). In higher education it has been used to study diverse areas including college ranking systems and globalization (Gernhart, 2009; Vaira, 2004). In 1957 the seminal author of institutional theory, Richard Selznick, described organizations as being shaped not only by their participants but by the external environment in which they exist (Scott, 1987). According to Scott one of the greater contributions of Selznick was that he distinguished institutions as not only “technically devised instruments” but as communities concerned with their own self-preservation (p. 2). Organizations were previously viewed as structures with a business purpose, not as communities having an intrinsic value.

Institutional theory advanced through the work of Scott and Meyer when they determined that institutional environments “are characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy” (as cited in Scott, 1987, p. 498). Scott notes that it is important for organizations to gain legitimacy, which is defined by Kostova, Roth, and Dacin as “whether or not organizational actions are accepted and approved by internal and external stakeholders” (as cited in Yang & Konrad, 2011).

Organizations, in this case colleges and universities, want to remain sustainable and viable while also generating social approval and legitimacy (Manning, 2013; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The need for legitimacy leads organizations to review and incorporate the practices of other successful organizations into their own organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Manning (2013) states that “organizational actors rarely perform in entirely new and inventive ways. Instead, they fashion their actions on the existing examples of what behavior is acceptable, what
has been used in the past, and the tried and true approaches to success” (p. 21). While these actions may not work or be the best alternative for each organization, they are followed, which leads to isomorphic tendencies within the industry or field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

**Isomorphism.** An influential study by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) led to the seminal work on institutional isomorphism which further advanced the work on institutional theory. Numerous other research reports on existing college ranking systems and related institutional behavior have cited this seminal work when discussing the theoretical framework for their research (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sauder & Nelson-Espeland, 2009). DiMaggio and Powell studied multiple organizations and concluded that institutions tend toward homogeneity, especially in times of uncertainty or as industries become more mature (pp. 147-148). DiMaggio and Powell define isomorphism as a “constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p.149).

Organizations face three types of pressures that, working together or individually, lead institutions toward isomorphic tendencies. The first is coercive pressure which occurs when other organizations exert pressure on them; this could occur through new rules or government mandates (p. 150). The second is mimetic pressure which can occur during times of uncertainty and cause organizations to copy or model themselves after more successful and legitimate organizations (p. 151). The final type of pressure is normative pressure placed on organizations to professionalize within their industry (p. 152). Vaira (2004) studied pressures placed on higher education institutions related to globalization and found that normative pressures, along with mimetic pressures, led to isomorphic tendencies among institutions.
In this study, coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure on colleges and universities shape the focus of the research. Federal policy change is an example of an external force that creates coercive pressure leading to isomorphism in an industry as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Mimetic pressures are created when an industry, like higher education, is in a period of great uncertainty. The environment for higher education has changed dramatically as it enters a more volatile economic climate, operates in a complicated policy environment, experiences heightened social expectations, and offers complex management conditions (Manning, 2013, p. 135). This type of environment is a “powerful force that encourages imitation” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 151). The association colleges and universities have with one another through professional organizations and networking produces normative pressure for institutions. New policy change coupled with the large increase in the number of federal policies over time, in this case related to higher education, is a major factor that leads organizations toward homogenous states (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Higher education is an industry that meets the circumstances that DiMaggio and Powell would consider perfect for isomorphism since it is both in a period of uncertainty and a very mature industry.

While isomorphism is a likely result based upon the pressures considered, there are other alternatives, such as defiance, manipulation, avoidance, and compromise, which are also potential results (Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2008). While government rules and regulations are usually classified as coercive powers that lead to isomorphic tendencies, regulatory change happens quickly and can lead to manipulation and gaming instead of compliance (Scott, 2008). Some organizations may structure themselves in a way that indicates they have become isomorphic, but they do so purely in a ceremonial way while not actually adopting the ways of others in their industry (Westphal & Zajac, 1994).
Conclusion. Viewing the new federal policy change through the lens of institutional theory and more specifically isomorphism will provide a strong basis for this study. Coercive pressures are at work through federal policy changes, and mimetic pressures are present due to the uncertainty that exists in higher education. It is important to determine if the new federal policy changes might lead some smaller private colleges to manipulate or game the new regulations. Perhaps mimetic pressure may force smaller institutions to search for solutions used by larger and more successful institutions. Manning (2013) indicates that “smaller organizations are 'institutionalized' when interaction, adaptation, and ways of operating coalesce into structures modeled after the all-encompassing institutional structures that exist in the environment” (p. 21). Research has indicated that some colleges have made changes in policies and practices to produce stronger consumer information resulting in improved rankings and the benefits derived from those improved rankings ( Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Machung, 1998; Meredith, 2004). Using institutional theory and isomorphism as the lens for this study considers the need for legitimacy and sustainability of small private Catholic colleges and recognizes the pressures the environment places on these organizations.

A review of various qualitative research reports (Hazelkorn, 2008; Locke, 2014; Sauder & Nelson-Espeland, 2009) that studied institutional behavior in relation to existing ranking systems, in particular the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, revealed institutional theory was the theoretical framework used most often. Institutional theory and isomorphism remain a strong fit for this problem of practice considering the coercive and mimetic pressures, the maturity and uncertainty of higher education, and the congruence with prior studies related to consumer information in higher education.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review focuses on existing college ranking systems, particularly the *U.S. News & World Report*, as a form of consumer information. Rating and ranking systems have been part of higher education in varying forms since the late nineteenth century (Webster, 1984). Since the inception of ranking systems, controversies have existed over the methodology used to calculate the rankings and the way in which colleges have reacted to these ranking systems. Changes to admissions policies, misreporting data, and attempting to influence peers who respond to ranking surveys represent some of the actions taken by colleges, all in an effort to increase their ranking and improve their reputation (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Hossler, 2000; McDonough et al., 1998). Increasingly students are using rankings as a determinant for college reputation, with almost 80% of students enrolling at private not-for-profit colleges in 2003-2004 considering reputation before enrolling (Radford & Tasoff, 2009, Table 3).

Research also indicates that measurable benefits exist as a result of high rankings. Benefits experienced by colleges as a result of strong rankings include increased admissions applications received, reduced acceptance rates, more grant funding, and other positive reputational benefits (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Machung, 1998, Meredith, 2004). College administrators believe they are compelled to react to the various ranking models and not necessarily in ways that advance the mission of the institution (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). The proposed federal policy to create a college rating system and subsequent policy to create *The College Scorecard* have the potential to impact organizational behavior at more colleges and influence a broader audience of college-seekers than existing ranking systems. How presidents at small private Catholic colleges perceive these federal policy changes and how they react to the
consumer information measures reflected in these policies could impact important areas within higher education, including student access, student choice, outcomes measures, and affordability.

This literature review begins with an historical perspective on rankings and ratings in American higher education from their beginnings in the late nineteenth century through today. Controversy surrounding rankings including methodologies, the dominance of research institutions over teaching institutions, and the challenges that self-reporting data create are all considered. Following the topic of controversy will be an analysis of how colleges react to college ranking systems and then information on the psychological impact rankings have on administrators at colleges and universities. The next section will indicate how ranking and consumer information use has increased over the last few decades and how much importance students place on this information. Following this section is an analysis of the benefits colleges and universities receive when rankings are improved. How government intervention impacts the decision-making process is described, followed by information on the proposed rating system, and The College Scorecard. This information is presented to provide a framework that identifies how consumer information and rankings influence college administrators and attempts to explain why so many colleges react to rankings.

Ranking and Ratings History

The purpose of the proposed rating system and The College Scorecard is to provide better consumer information for prospective families to help them determine which schools provide the best value, as well as hold colleges more accountable for areas such as access, affordability, and outcomes. Colleges will provide information on several metrics including, but not limited to, graduation rates, graduates’ post-graduation earnings, loan performance outcomes, and the percentage of Pell grant recipients attending the institution (The White House, Office of the
Press Secretary, 2014). This is not the first, and probably will not be the last, iteration of accountability measures to be developed in the United States. Accountability measures and consumer information take many forms, and ranking and rating systems represent one form that has been used in higher education for some time.

Many scholars attribute the earliest published rankings of higher education institutions to Raymond M. Hughes, who was the president at Miami University in the early 1920s (Brooks, 2005; Meredith, 2004; Stuart, 1995; Webster, 1984). Hughes surveyed distinguished scholars from 20 disciplines and created a reputational rank of the top Ph.D.-granting institutions in the United States (Brooks, 2005; Myers & Robe, 2009). Webster (1984) reported that rankings of colleges actually preceded Hughes’ published list by many years. The U.S. Bureau of Education had been experimenting with rankings and groupings of colleges since the late nineteenth century (p. 500). The first experimentation with rankings focused on women’s colleges and divided the colleges into two groups based upon their perceived quality (Webster, 1984). This practice continued until 1911, when a new, more complex five-level stratification system was developed (Myers & Robe, 2009; Webster, 1984). Soon after the development of this more complex and more inclusive system, the concept of ranking colleges encountered its first controversial moment as presidents denounced the results of this ranking when it was inadvertently leaked publicly (Myers & Robe, 2009; Webster, 1984).

The 1911 ranking system was initially developed to help graduate schools evaluate applicants to their programs. The ranking was designed “to evaluate the colleges from which students applied to graduate school. From this information schools could supposedly predict how well prepared these students… were likely to be; whether they should be admitted…under regular or probationary status” (Webster, 1984, p. 501). Webster indicates that more than half of
the colleges and universities that existed in 1911 were grouped into one of the five classifications developed by the Bureau’s specialist in higher education. Although it was never officially released, the report generated enormous outrage from college deans and presidents and was ultimately suppressed by the Bureau after the controversy developed. To this point, rankings were predominantly developed from outcomes-based information (Myers & Robe, 2009). After the ensuing controversy, very little work was done to rank colleges. However, in 1924, Raymond Hughes began to develop one of the first reputational rankings of colleges at the request of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (Myers & Robe, 2009). In 1934, Hughes expanded his work, while chairman of the American Council on Education, by covering 35 disciplines and soliciting responses from a more diverse population of responders than in his first surveys in 1924 (Myers & Robe, 2009). Reputational rankings remained scarce until 1959 when rankings seemed to reemerge (Myers & Robe, 2009; Stuart, 1995).

Although reputational rankings began to reemerge, interest in rankings of colleges and undergraduate programs began to wane (Myers & Robe, 2009). Graduate programs began to be evaluated and rated by the American Council on Education in the early 1960s (Brooks, 2005). The result of the council’s evaluation was particularly interesting. Although it included a broader range of respondents and reviewed many more institutions beyond those considered to be the top or best institutions, the resulting top 25 colleges remained largely unchanged from Hughes’ work in 1925 (Brooks, 2005, p. 5). The primary reason for these rankings remained as an internal tool for colleges and universities for both decision-making and assessment purposes. The purpose of rankings and those who used them would change during the 1980s, first by researchers and then later by mass media.
In 1982, the National Research Council (NRC) developed a ranking system that not only relied on reputational surveys, but also adopted quantifiable measures of quality (Brooks, 2005, p. 5). Two areas of concern quickly developed from this new methodology. The first was that these quantifiable measures were criticized for not having any relation to academic quality, and the second was that the research prepared by the NRC was available for review by others outside of higher education. This was the first time that the results of educational rankings were readily available to those outside educational institutions. In later years, the NRC began to rank order institutions, which has been a source of concern for many colleges ever since. Research has shown rank ordering has a positive impact on how schools are perceived (Luca & Smith, 2013). However, oftentimes the differences between institutions being ranked can be so miniscule that the rankings create artificial distinctions (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Martins, 2005). While rank ordering does create concerns for colleges, another change occurred in 1983, one that has had a lasting impact on higher education. In 1983 the *U.S. News & World Report* published its first rankings of undergraduate institutions.

The 1980s were a critical time for higher education. Much like the higher education environment today, colleges were faced with enrollment shortfalls while families were concerned about rising tuition and receiving value for their investment (Meredith, 2004, p. 444). Families were making large investments in college educations for their children and were concerned about the high and growing cost of tuition. These conditions set the stage for the need for information families could use to make better informed decisions during the college search process. For many families, the attending college is “an intangible, expensive purchase perceived to be fraught with risks” (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 515). Under these conditions it is more likely that families would search out rankings to reduce their risks when considering this type of
purchase (p. 516). The *U.S. News & World Report* rankings helped to fill a void in the marketplace and provided families with a simple display of data that allowed them to easily review and compare multiple schools. The results were astounding, “compiled by editors and published in a highly circulated news magazine, the *U.S. News* rankings became the most widely read and more influential than any that had come before them” (Myers & Robe, 2009, p. 17).

In 1983, the rankings in *U.S. News & World Report* were constructed similarly to prior rankings in that they relied mainly on reputational surveys (Myers & Robe, 2009). However, in 1987, the methodology behind the rankings began to change. Rankings began to incorporate objective and measurable data to supplement the reputational analysis (Meredith, 2004; Myers & Robe, 2009). In addition to changes occurring in the metrics used to rank colleges, new ranking systems began to reach the marketplace. Today, there are many ranking systems that exist, and most are sponsored by media and publishing companies. Altbach (2012) identified some of the most popular media sponsored ranking systems around the world:

- *U.S. News & World Report* in the United States
- *Maclean’s* in Canada
- *Der Spiegel* in Germany
- *Asahi Shimbun* in Japan
- *Good University Guide* in the United Kingdom

It is during the 1980s that the audience for the ranking system began to change in earnest. Not only were colleges reviewing rankings to assess performance and evaluate themselves against other institutions, but now prospective students, their families, and policymakers all began to take notice of the rankings (Meredith, 2004; Myers & Robe, 2009). Stuart (1995) notes that at this time, “the popular press has greatly expanded the audience to include anyone who reads *U.S.*
News & World Report, Money, Kiplinger’s…or USA Today (p. 16).” It is also during this period that those outside of higher education began to pay more attention to rankings and that rankings began to be equated with the quality of an institution.

Rankings began as a process for colleges to assess and benchmark their own academic programs with similar programs at other institutions. The use of rankings has been transformed from a practice used within the educational community to a consumer obsession. Brooks (2005) notes that “this interest in quality originated inside the academy, with studies conducted by and for university leaders; but many contemporary assessments take the form of rankings and ratings designed by commercial media, driven by profit motives…” (p. 1). There is no denying that the media and publishing companies have developed ranking systems of higher education institutions that are extremely popular with families and policy makers. In response, publishers continue to develop variations in their methodologies that change the order of schools within the rankings ever so slightly each year which helps to generate continued interest in the rankings of colleges and universities (Hossler, 2000).

The new federal policies are aimed at delivering consumer information to a wider audience than existing ranking systems reach. When considering the impact of a federal policy change, such as new consumer information or in the case of a new rating system, Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education, in an article in Inside Higher Education wrote that “it is extremely important to note that a federal rating system will carry considerably more weight and authority than those done by others” (Lederman, Stratford & Jaschik, 2014, para. 4). By reaching an additional audience, primarily disadvantaged and low-income families, and carrying more weight, there will now be more families potentially considering the new consumer information when selecting a college.
Ranking Controversies

Rankings have attempted to measure the quality of an institution using several different metrics over time. Some have measured quality based upon student outcomes in life, which would include income earned after graduation, type of occupation, or various honors and awards students achieve in their lifetime. Other measures have been based upon the strength of the faculty at an institution as determined by research accomplishments, scholarly publications, academic awards or scholarly reputation (Myers & Robe, 2009; Webster, 1984). Beyond quality measure concerns, Altbach (2012) identified several problems with current media-related ranking systems. In his review of rankings, Altbach indicates that “teaching – is largely ignored in all of the rankings, since we have yet to develop comparable measures of its quality and impact” (p. 28). At many small private colleges that are considered teaching, not research, institutions, this is an important factor that is largely ignored when rankings are tabulated.

In a study performed by Schmidt, Burroughs, Cogan and Houang (2011), the researchers measured the learning outcomes of students in teacher preparation programs, focusing on how much additional knowledge students attained in a specific academic program, math education, at various colleges and universities. Students’ entering math SAT scores were measured against their scores on the future teacher Mathematical Content Knowledge (MCK) test which measures mathematical knowledge after completing their college program. Schmidt et al. concluded that if they were to “define a ‘high quality’ teacher preparation program as one whose students score higher than their entrance examination scores would predict…then there is very little relationship between the college selectivity and program quality” (p. 9). This study provides a good example of how teaching, when able to be measured, can provide valuable insight into the quality of the education being offered. It also provides evidence that quality teaching is occurring at colleges.
that are not necessarily highly ranked, further complicating the validity of many ranking calculations.

Research is often measured in various ways and whether that includes scholarly publications, research grants received, or honors and awards, this is a measure that favors research institutions over teaching institutions (Altbach, 2012; Brooks, 2005). It would be difficult to assess faculty in the fine arts or humanities based on research criteria “due to the limited frame of reference inherent in the measures” (Brooks, 2005, p. 16). Another area of concern is reputational surveying, where it is not possible for respondents to have enough knowledge to accurately reflect on quality at other institutions (Altbach, 2102; Astin & Solmon, 1981). Altbach (2012) poses the question, “what detailed knowledge can any random group of respondents be expected to have concerning the relative excellence of academic institutions…?” (p. 29).

Astin and Solmon (1981) conducted a study of faculty in seven different fields of study at four-year colleges in Illinois, California, New York, and North Carolina. Faculty members rated institutions within their state and then separately rated a national list of 100 of the top programs in their field. One of the findings indicated that institutions with greater research or scholarly accomplishment were rated higher by respondents. Astin and Solmon also asked the question, “how can it be that academicians in four widely separated states share such similar views about departments in their fields at 100 different institutions?” (p. 16). They concluded that a folklore must exist within higher education regarding institutions and perceived quality. Even academicians have developed a pecking order that has been influenced over time by a college’s selectivity and research accomplishments. Stuart (1995) agrees and notes that “studies have identified rater bias among reputational survey respondents” (p. 18).
Additional flaws exist when rankings are used to define academic quality. Stuart’s (1995) review of the history of rankings identified a departmental halo effect, the timing of surveys, and the design as flaws that contribute to reputational survey bias. Stuart describes the halo effect occurring when an academic department is rated highly because of the reputation of another academic department at that institution. In fact, she notes one study that indicated respondents rated undergraduate business programs highly at institutions that did not even have business programs, this as a result of other departments at the school having strong reputations (p.18). Using reputational rankings to assess academic quality can be difficult as there are many existing biases that influence respondents to reputational surveys. Stuart summarizes by stating that

Ranking departments, colleges, and universities is like comparing the proverbial apples and oranges, especially when missions vary widely. Ranking and rating studies give minimal attention to women’s colleges and historically black colleges and universities. Such studies often ignore departments with small enrollments, interdisciplinary departments, and those with interesting combinations of varying specialties. Applying business and management definitions of quality, Bogue and Saunders (1992, p. 11) hold the ‘conviction that each college and university has the potential for excellence within its own mission’. (p. 19)

What exactly rankings are measuring will continue to be debated since the data used and how that data is compiled to create rankings continues to be questioned.

In her assessment of rankings, Brooks’ (2005) concludes that there have been advancements, but much work is still necessary in the areas of reputational indicators, research and scholarship, and student outcomes. The proposed federal rating system intended to use more
measurable and objective data such as graduation rate and post-graduation earnings with no reputational component (Riskind, 2014). The same is true of The College Scorecard. Therefore, some of the controversy caused by reputational ratings in existing ranking systems will not exist under the new federal policy changes. Throughout the years, the use of measurable or objective data in producing rankings has also been called into question. For instance, in examining post-graduation earnings, Schmidt et al. (2011) note that one’s earnings may be more a function of receiving an education perceived to be superior or having greater networking opportunities and not necessarily because one has received an objectively excellent education (p. 1).

Sometimes, objective measures self-reported by colleges and universities have created additional controversy for current rankings. In 2012 and 2013, reports surfaced about colleges that had been caught or came forward to acknowledge that they provided misleading information to U.S. News & World Report that may have boosted their ranking. It was learned that highly ranked colleges like Bucknell University, Claremont McKenna College, Emory University, and George Washington University had provided misleading data to U.S. News & World Report (Jaschik, 2013, p. 2). Tulane University also provided misleading data about its M.B.A program and ultimately was removed from that published ranking (Jaschik, 2013, p. 2). Learning that colleges changed or misreported data is not a new phenomenon, these colleges just represent the most recent to acknowledge the transgressions.

While rankings have become very popular over the past 30 years, today concerns still exist about their purpose, the methodologies used, and even the accuracy of data gathered to prepare such rankings. Despite the evidence indicating rankings and ratings may not be a true measure of the quality of an institution, the public and policy makers have turned rankings into a way to assess quality (Hossler, 2000). The new federal policies purport to remove much of the
subjective, reputational components and will rely instead on objective measures when releasing information. Martin and Samels (2007) note that “it doesn’t take much common sense to figure out that rankings can no longer rely on the escalating war of peer perceptions” (p. 37). However, as research has shown, using solely objective measures does not necessarily provide quality information that can be easily interpreted and translated into a value rating. Despite the concerns expressed by some colleges and some researchers about ranking and rating systems, the influence on users of rankings has created pressure for some colleges to react to them in one way or another. Whether colleges express concern about rankings, boycott rankings, manipulate data, or change policies and practices, the release of rankings has an impact on college decision-making.

**Administrative Responses to Rankings**

Published rankings influence more than prospective students and policy makers. A wide range of constituents associated with an institution is interested in rankings, including board of trustee members, donors to an institution, and alumni. Machung (1998) notes that a member of the board of trustees at a small liberal arts college in West Virginia wanted the college to jump tiers within the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. The college serves primarily first-generation students and reported low graduation rates and low first-year retention rates. The president at the time commented that the college would have to change its essence, essentially change its mission, to accomplish this goal (p.14). College and university leaders can be challenged to make decisions that on one hand could improve rankings, yet on the other conflict with mission or goals of accessibility. While in this instance this president decided not to change any practices or policies, it is not the case at all institutions. McDonough et al. (1998) note that “postsecondary institutions have changed admissions policies to affect their rankings [Hunter,
1995; Art and Science Group, 1995], [and] colleges have manipulated the reporting of their SAT scores and other data” (p. 514). Standardized test scores would weigh heavily upon the admissions decision, but other qualities like leadership or community service would be overlooked (Meredith, 2004). Other practices that colleges have used include making SAT scores for at-risk applicants a recommendation instead of a requirement. Based upon this change in practice, colleges would report SAT scores to *U.S. News & World Report* only for those students where SAT scores were required. This practice increases the reported SAT scores to *U.S. News & World Report* but does not necessarily represent a stronger academic profile of the incoming freshman class. Colleges have also devised strategies to increase the number of applications just to reject applicants and lower their acceptance rate, at one time a factor in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings (Hossler, 2000). Colleges that actually changed admissions practices by increasing admissions standards were able to improve the profile of their incoming class but in the process reduced access for students who previously qualified for admission.

In some respects, colleges have contributed to the success of these media-driven rankings by promoting the fact that they were highly ranked as a way to recruit and enroll both more and academically stronger students (Machung, 1998; Sponsler, 2009). A review of websites or even advertisements of some colleges reveals the *U.S. News & World Report* logo proudly displayed indicating they are a top-ranked institution. Colleges assist in the process of perpetuating the idea that rankings are providing valid judgments about quality.

**Psychological Impact of Ratings**

In a study performed by Espeland and Sauder (2007), 136 administrators from 70 of 190 accredited law schools ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* were interviewed about rankings and the final outcome for their institution. The research defines a self-fulfilling prophecy as an
unintended consequence or a process where reactions confirm the measure by conforming to the results (p.11). The research reported that there are “four ways that self-fulfilling prophecies shape the reactivity of rankings”:

- external audiences’ reaction to rankings
- how prior rankings influence future rank
- how rankings are used to make funding decisions
- how schools make decisions which conform to rankings criteria (p. 12).

Schools react to the rankings because prospective students, alumni, and donors respond to rankings. A drop in the rankings or a ranking lower than expected negatively influences how external audiences interact with a college. The interviews conducted by Espeland and Sauder revealed alumni donors are reluctant to provide funding for fear the institution is moving in the wrong direction or that trustees will begin to demand big changes to combat the rankings (p. 13). Unfortunately, external audiences take drastic actions despite the fact that rankings magnify insignificant differences among schools (p. 12). Sponsler (2009) highlights the rankings of historically black colleges and universities as an example (p. 15). The difference between the schools ranked first and third were greater than the difference between schools ranked between 11 and 33. Sponsler concludes that there is less difference in the quality of schools ranked between 11 and 33 than the quality between the first and third schools (p. 15). In this example, the school ranked 11th could receive reputational and other benefits for being ranked 22 places higher than the school ranked 33rd although the differences may not be that significant.

The rankings also influence college administrators who are thought to be experts in the field. When responding to reputational surveys administrators rely on past rankings to determine their response to current reputational surveys (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Espeland & Sauder,
By using the results from prior rankings to make judgments on current surveys, respondents are only perpetuating the rankings from year to year. Another reaction to rankings occurs with allocation of resources at institutions. Espeland and Sauder (2007) found that administrators are concerned that their budget allocations may be influenced by the outcome of rankings (p. 14). A president of one law school reported new money would be distributed to departments based on plans that would improve the school’s ranking (p. 14). Finally, the study indicated that “rankings create self-fulfilling prophecies by encouraging schools to become more like what rankings measure, which reinforces the validity of the measure” (p. 15). Some of the interviewees expressed concerns that there is pressure to conform and even operate against their own mission. In particular, one interviewee discussed the fact that his/her institution was one that provided access for students in the past but was now reluctant to do so because taking students with lower standardized test scores would impact their ranking (p. 15).

The act of conforming to rankings is not unique to higher education. Rankings exist in many other industries, and it appears this reaction occurs elsewhere beyond higher education indicating, perhaps, a larger issue with the concept of ranking organizations. The challenge for organizations occurs when the focus is “on indicators rather than on the qualities that the measures are designed to evaluate” (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, p. 2). The study by Espeland and Sauder also provided an example from another industry. Since public rankings of medical doctors in New York began, cardiologists surveyed indicated that decisions about performing angioplasties, for example, was influenced by how the outcome might influence their ranking (p. 2). Conformity with rankings is an issue that can affect organizations across multiple industries and can result in unintended consequences for any industry.
Studies suggest colleges and universities react when rankings are released, and there is information that provides insights as to why college administrators react as they do. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) studied business schools ranked in the top 20 by *Business Week* during the late 1990s. Their study was conducted to determine how organizations responded to perceived organizational threats, specifically those presented by rankings in national surveys. The research found that when members of organizations felt the core values of the organization were devalued by the survey, organizational members “will be motivated to protect and affirm positive perceptions of their organization’s identity” (p. 446). Some of the assertive tactics used by these schools included highlighting the important aspects of the school that were ignored in the survey and aligning themselves with higher ranked schools by promoting their similarities to that institution (p. 456). While schools react in different manners, the impact of rankings and ratings provoke enough concern and emotion that college administrators believe they need to take some type of action. One might expect reactions solely from schools that are not highly ranked. However, as Elsbach and Kramer note, even highly ranked colleges that believe they are not ranked appropriately will show concern and take action in response to rankings (p. 458).

Martins (2005) conducted research to better understand organizational change that occurred as a result of the release of published rankings. Prior and subsequent research indicated that schools tend to conform to the metrics used by ranking systems (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Gioia & Corley, 2002). Martins (2005) attempted to understand why conformity occurs. One of the results indicated that the larger the discrepancy between the perceived status of the institution by the college’s administrators and the outcome of the rankings, the greater the likelihood of organizational change occurring. Martins’ research found that “respondents consistently
expressed disappointment and indicated plans for organizational change to improve in the rankings” (p. 714).

Colleges perceive the results of rankings as threats to their organizational identity (Martins, 2005). Even schools that are highly ranked may be threatened if the ranking received does not agree with their sense of where they believe the college should be ranked. Schools are motivated by rankings to assertively defend themselves, align themselves in other ways to more highly ranked schools, conform to ranking metrics, and make strategic decisions that may cause mission drift. Many colleges are also concerned that rankings do not properly reflect quality or may ignore crucial elements that should be included in rankings (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Corley, 2002; Martins, 2005). As a result, they react to improve the external image of the institution. By chasing prestige and image, many colleges just appear to be doing what other successful institutions do without the real benefits (Eckel & Kezar, 2011). Shaw (2011) notes that the “worst thing that can happen to a university from the viewpoint of administrators and trustees is to do something that leads to a loss of reputation (The *U.S. News & World Report* rankings’ reliance on reputation strengthens this pressure)” (p. 446).

Some college administrators interviewed in Martins’ (2005) study expressed concerns that since external audiences are using rankings, colleges have to respond, or they fear they will become less relevant (p. 714). In the twenty years after the release of the first *U.S. News & World Report* ranking, the use by external audiences has increased dramatically, particularly the use by students and their families.

**Use of Rankings**

Almost two decades ago, the percentage of students reporting rankings as important in the college search process was just over 40% (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough et al.,
Then a decade later, those students indicating that rankings were very important increased by more than 50% (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009). While this increasing reliance has been a growing trend over time for all income levels, the most growth occurred for higher income freshmen and the slowest growth occurred with lower-income freshmen (Espinosa et al., 2014, p. 12).

The data reveal the importance students place on rankings as they consider colleges during the selection process. While not all students rely on rankings, a school’s reputation remains important in the college search process and for many students, high ranking translates to strong reputation. The National Center for Education Statistics reveals that a large number of students indicate reputation was a factor for enrolling at an institution (Radford & Tasoff, 2009). The percentage of students’ enrolling at four-year private not-for-profit colleges in 2003-04 based on the college’s reputation was 76.6%. Of these students, 55.7% consulted college rankings before selecting their college (Radford & Tasoff, 2009, Table 3). The reliance on rankings by students and families has grown since the 1990s and continues to grow to the point that most colleges are unable to ignore the perceptions created by published rankings. Many colleges have also realized that as more students and families rely on rankings, there are tangible institutional benefits to be accrued if higher rankings can be attained.

**Benefits of Higher Rankings**

Rankings influence application submissions by students (Luca & Smith 2013; Meredith 2004) as well as peer assessments submitted to *U.S. News & World Report* by college administrators themselves (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). Lucas and Smith (2013) evaluated rankings data and determined that for the schools tested, a one-rank improvement increased applications received by that college by 1%. Colleges are organized in tiers by *U.S. News &
World Report with the top colleges listed by rank order and additional colleges in the tier listed alphabetically. The researchers note that applicants respond to the numerical rankings which could cause colleges to compete harder for applications when their school is listed numerically. In addition, although beyond the scope of their work, Lucas and Smith (2013) surmise that colleges may change their behavior due to the layout of the rankings (p. 72).

Bowman and Bastedo (2009) studied 56 national universities and 50 national liberal arts institutions that were ranked in the U.S. News & World Report Top 50 at any point between 1997 and 2004. Their research indicated that moving into the Top 50 resulted in a 3.6% decrease in acceptance rate, 2.3% increase in freshmen in the top 10% of their graduating class, and an increase in admissions applications of 3.9% (p. 423). Meredith (2004) performed similar research and also noted that movement within quartiles impacted the number of applications received. Bastedo and Bowman (2010) in another study on rankings determined that colleges ranked in tier 1 in U.S. News & World Report received more financial support from different constituents than those colleges ranked below tier 1. The rankings also had an impact on alumni donations, receipt of federal and private grant funding, and out-of-state tuition (p. 16). These studies (Bastedo & Bowman, 2009; Bowman & Bastedo, 2010; Lucas & Smith, 2013; Meredith, 2004) provide evidence that improved rankings deliver benefits to colleges and universities.

For many, college rankings have also become synonymous with academic quality and reputation. With improved rankings equating to increased applications and perceived improvement in academic quality, Lucido (2013) believes that U.S. News & World Report has contributed to the illusion that somehow quality can be measured, which has in turn accelerated efforts by colleges to improve their rankings (p. 8). According to Sponsler (2009) “college rankings are one way stakeholders of higher education obtain information on institutions and
construct notions of educational quality” (p. 1). While some colleges have vigorously fought against this notion, other colleges have actively perpetuated the idea. Colleges, especially those that have something to gain from their position in the rankings, have proactively promoted their high ranking or position in the rankings on their website, in communications with students, and in their marketing materials to students and other constituents (Machung, 1998; Sponsler, 2009).

Many colleges might prefer to ignore ranking and rating systems, but the research indicates there are clear benefits to having a strong ranking. Admissions and enrollment data can improve, the shape of the freshman class can change, funding seems to be more accessible, and college reputation seems to increase as its ranking increases. However, there also may be unintended consequences that result from colleges working toward improved rankings. For many small private colleges, it takes significant scholarship funding to attract better academically prepared students. According to Davis (2003), increased tuition discounting by colleges “has led to troubling outcomes for low-income students” (p. 3). This study by Davis further acknowledges that tuition discounting also negatively impacts student affordability (p. 5). Through funding academic scholarships, colleges have less resources available for need-based aid. Need-based aid is usually important for low-income students, and the lack of such resources negatively impacts student access (Davis, 2003).

**Political Intervention, Complex Environments, and Decision-Making**

Ranking and ratings have clearly provided challenging decision-making opportunities for academic leaders. Leaders will cycle through several steps in order to make decisions for their organizations. Researchers (Laroche, 1995; Lyles, 1979; Manning, 2013) have identified some simple steps, including gathering information, analyzing the situation and available options, selecting a course of action, and carrying through and acting on the selected option. There are
also environmental forces that often require organizations to make decisions. Manning (2013) organizes most forces requiring organizations to act into one of four categories: demographic, economic, social, or political. Organizations that operate effectively and successfully do so in part by carefully monitoring their external environment for these forces and through decision-making and adaptation, allowing their organization to successfully change within an often complex and rapidly changing environment (Burke, 2011). Environmental change can create challenging decision-making opportunities for leaders but is “a significant part of organization process” (Laroche, 1995, p.63).

Zardo, Collie and Livingstone (2014) conducted research on external factors impacting the healthcare industry, and one of the five key external factors impacting decision-making by hospital leaders was government input. Other research (Longest Jr., 2012) on the impact of public policy changes on hospitals also indicated “significant decision making challenges” were created for many public hospitals as a result of government intervention. When policy changes arise, leaders can encounter difficult decisions that are necessary to continue operating their organization effectively. Healthcare and higher education both operate in comparable complex environments with similar external forces contributing to that complexity. Higher education today is operating in a highly complex environment from an economic, political, and social perspective which is creating difficult management conditions for leaders (Manning, 2013).

Federal regulation of higher education has been part of the higher education environment for a very long time (Denham, 2010). Federal policies and regulations that colleges and universities need to comply with have contributed to the complex environment that is higher education today (U.S. Senate Committee, 2015). The rapid increase in the number of higher education regulations in a short period of time has also contributed to this complex environment.
Research released by George Mason University indicated that during the period from 1997 through 2012, colleges and universities encountered a 56% increase in the number of federal requirements (Kirwan & Zeppos, 2015; U.S. Senate Committee, 2015). This increase in federal regulations and the associated responsibilities placed on institutions “creates negative incentives” for institutions (U.S. Senate Committee, 2015, p. 7) that could result in poor decision making.

Information disclosure or consumer information mandates constitute a large number of the policy changes enacted in the last few years (U.S. Senate Committee, 2015, p. 10). The federal policies on college ratings and *The College Scorecard* are but two examples of recent information disclosure regulations that add to the complex decision-making environment facing college and university presidents.

**Consumer Information Policy**

Currently there is no scholarly research available about the new consumer information mandates; however, news articles, opinion pieces and editorials, and news releases have been published. A search of the Scholar One database using the terms federal rating plan, Obama rating plan, new federal rating system, proposed federal rating system, college ratings, accountability measures and others did not produce any results. Colleges did voice their concerns about the proposed rating plan and the viability of some of the accountability measures to the current federal administration. A common theme emerged that “a ratings system will create improper incentives for institutions, undermine the value of higher education and cut off access to institutions that serve low-income and underprivileged students” (Lederman et al., 2014). In response to the feedback received, the federal government moved away from implementing a strict rating system and decided to utilize an online consumer information sharing tool. The tool,
known as *The College Scorecard*, compiles vast amounts of information that families can use to compare colleges and universities (Blumenstyk, 2015).

Federal policy changes create tension for institutions, and some react before policies are actually enacted. In a recent issue of *Inside Higher Education*, it was reported that an unnamed institution had increased its admissions standards to improve future graduation rates due to concerns brought about by the proposed federal rating system (Stratford, 2014). This decision could jeopardize the likelihood of acceptance for low-income or at-risk students at this institution. While the decision to make the change was premature, it is an expression of colleges’ concern about consumer information and an example of how colleges’ might make decisions in light of new policy initiatives. Relative to these actions, in the February 14, 2014, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, two researchers from the American Enterprise Institute concluded that “basing incentives for colleges on student success could end up rewarding institutions on the basis of whom they admit rather than how well they educate their students” (Blumenstyk, 2014).

In an article in *Inside Higher Education*, Arthur Kirk, the president of St. Leo University commented:

> The purpose of the plan and proposed rating system is to increase access to higher education for all students, and especially to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet implementing a ratings system using data as it is currently collected through IPEDS will likely disenfranchise the very students it is supposed to help. (as cited in Lederman et al., 2014, para. 10)

This type of policy change could incentivize schools to work toward improving their accountability measures or, as some have in the past, work to improve metrics within the ranking
calculation while not necessarily improving what the metric is measuring (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sponsler, 2009). As an example, instead of working to improve the graduation rates of its students through improved academic support, an institution might elect to admit better academically prepared students in hopes of improving its graduation rate. Ultimately, the pressures colleges face from new accountability measures could influence decisions of college presidents which may impact student access, student choice, and student affordability.

Conclusion

Higher education operates in a highly complex environment creating difficult management conditions for its leaders (Manning, 2013). Contributing to this complex environment is the federal government’s intervention through frequent policy changes, including a 56% increase in policy changes from 1997 through 2012 (Kirwan & Zeppos, 2015). With the proposal of a new rating system and introduction of *The College Scorecard*, pressure is placed on institutions to comply with change while continuing to make effective decisions. Historically, college decision-making has been impacted by rating and ranking systems. Changes to admissions policies and misreporting of data are just two examples of decisions made in response to rankings with some harming student access (Hossler, 2000; McDonough et al., 1998). Comparable reactions to the new federal policy that created *The College Scorecard* could result in similar unintended consequences, which would be contrary to the goals of the new policy. How presidents interpret and react to *The College Scorecard* will be important in understanding how federal policies impact administrative policies and procedures, particularly related to student access.
Chapter III: Research Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeast United States that serve low-income students might interpret and react to *The College Scorecard*. This study will explore the following central research and sub question:

Q1: How do college and university presidents describe the impact of *The College Scorecard*?

S1: How will college and university presidents react to *The College Scorecard* in relation to new student enrollment and admissions?

This question is framed through the lens of institutional theory and particularly by the seminal work on isomorphism by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Organizations face three types of pressures that lead toward isomorphic tendencies. The three types -- coercive, mimetic and normative pressure -- may work together or individually to lead organizations toward isomorphism. Federal policy changes that impact institutions are an example of a coercive pressure while mimetic pressure occurs during times of uncertainty and leads organizations to copy more successful institutions. The association colleges and universities have with one another through professional organizations and networking produces normative pressure for institutions. This lens of institutional theory is appropriate as this study seeks to explore how college presidents interpret *The College Scorecard* and what resulting reactions may occur.

Since no prior research exists exploring how college presidents might interpret *The College Scorecard* and react to this federal policy, this study will provide initial research into this phenomenon. This chapter explains how this phenomenon will be explored by describing the
research design, research approach, participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and protection of human subjects.

**Research Design**

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand the lived experience from those that are living it (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). Creswell (2013) further defines qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 43). Phenomenon are studied in a natural environment where the researcher attempts to make sense of the phenomena based on the meaning others bring to that phenomena (p. 44).

Qualitative research is appropriate when a study has a practice-oriented purpose (Haverkamp & Young, 2007), the researcher is a key instrument in the research (Creswell, 2013), an in-depth view of a phenomenon is preferred (Creswell, 2013; Morrow, 2007), individuals are being studied in the natural world (Morrow, 2007), and the research question asked is a how or what question (Morrow, 2007). Finally, in qualitative research, “the researcher, in pursuing understanding, is an interpreter rather than a reporter” (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

This study encompasses the characteristics reflected in a qualitative approach to research and is appropriate for this study. This study seeks to interpret the reaction to *The College Scorecard* by current college presidents and learn how they derive meaning from this experience. It is necessary to develop a detailed understanding of this phenomenon to ensure that reactions do not result in any unintended consequences. Currently, there is no research that explores how presidents interpret *The College Scorecard*. The researcher’s skills fit well with the skills necessary for qualitative research and will be a key instrument in this study. Creswell (2013) describes some of those skills as being committed to long hours in the field, having the ability to complete thorough data analysis, and working in an atmosphere that is evolving and changing.
Once a qualitative approach has been selected, it is important to understand that there are several research paradigms that “set the context for an investigator’s study” (Ponterotto, 2005).

This study employs a design informed by a research philosophy grounded in a constructivist/interpretivist perspective. Truth is seen as relative and dependent on one’s perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Using a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, the researcher embraces the idea that multiple realities can exist instead of one true reality, which would be considered a positivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). In using this paradigm, “the goal of this research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation” (Creswell, 2013, p.25). This interaction with participants and use of research questions to gather data allows meanings and themes to emerge through inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013, Morrow, 2007). Deductive reasoning is used as themes emerge to compare and contrast against existing and new data (Morrow, 2007). The appropriate evidence collected in a qualitative study includes, but is not limited to, observations, interviews and basic questionnaires, documents, and audiovisual media (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2012).

In summary, using a qualitative design with a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm is appropriate for this research study. This study aims to understand the lived experience of college presidents, in their natural setting, and seeks to answer a how question. Evidence will come from interviews, a basic questionnaire, and review of documents to produce an in-depth narrative on the phenomenon. After deciding on a qualitative approach, a research approach or strategy needs to be selected. There are five research approaches or strategies that can be selected including narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, and case study research (Creswell, 2013). The research approach selected for this study is described in the next section.
Research Approach

Creswell (2013) describes case study research as “the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting” (p. 97). Case study research allows the researcher to investigate a case, or cases, while maintaining a real-world perspective (Yin, 2014, p. 4). According to Yin, there are three factors to consider when determining if a case study is the best research method (p. 9). First, researchers should consider whether they are answering a how or why question. Second, it should be considered if the event being studied is a contemporary event. Finally, it needs to be determined that the situation is one where behavior cannot be manipulated (p. 14). This case study required an exploration of a contemporary phenomenon presented in a real-life bounded system and answered a how question where there is little control over behavior. Yin also bases his approach to case study methodology on a constructivist paradigm (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545), the same paradigm selected for this study. Based upon meeting the conditions as explained by Yin (2014) and alignment of paradigms, the use of a case study is an appropriate strategy. Sources for the data and information that are collected and reviewed include a basic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a review of admissions policies, admissions websites, and mission statements. This review of multiple types of information is characteristic of case study research.

Creswell (2013) identifies additional defining features of case study methodology and they are well-suited for this research. These include problems that are current in nature, bounded in context, and clear in intent. This case investigates a real-life problem of practice that is current in nature - the implementation of The College Scorecard which occurred in September 2015. The problem can also be bounded within the context of small private Catholic colleges within a specific region of the United States.
Yin (2014) divides case-study research into either single-case or multi-case research and then further sub-divides both single and multi-case research into holistic or embedded designs (p. 50). This study employed a multi-case holistic study which Yin (2014) suggests provides richer, stronger, and more compelling research than a single-case study (pp. 63-64). Researching multiple cases allows for cross-case analysis, providing an in-depth understanding of the cases and the ability to build patterns or assertions that lead to conclusions “about the overall meaning derived from the cases(s)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). The goal of a multiple case study is to “replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons will be drawn, it is imperative that the cases are chosen carefully so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548). A full description of the selection of cases and participants is detailed in the next section.

Participants

This study employs comparable case selection to select participants. Yin (2014) suggests that instead of using a sampling design in a multiple-case study, a replication design is preferred (p. 57). Miles et al. (2014) refer to this replication strategy as a comparable case selection where groups or individuals are selected because they possess similar characteristics important to the study (p. 32). According to Yin (2014), “the logic underlying the use of multi-case studies is the same. Each case must be carefully selected…. it either (a) predicts similar results (a literal replication) or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication)” (p. 57). In this study, a literal replication logic was used to guide the selection of the participants. According to Yin (2014), the use of a statistical determinant for sample size is irrelevant; instead one should consider the number of cases using judgment (p. 61). Yin suggests that as few as two cases can produce a stronger study than a single case study and that the
analytic benefits may be significant (pp. 63-64). Miles et al. (2014) argue the number depends on how rich and complex the sampling will be and describe studies that ranged from as few as two cases to others in excess of 20 cases but do not offer a strong recommendation as to the number of cases to be selected.

Four cases were ultimately selected for this study based on the researcher’s level of experience and expertise. The four cases are institutions that meet criteria relevant to the study which include having a Catholic affiliation, a location in northeast United States, an undergraduate enrollment between and including 1,000 and 3,500 students, and Pell grant recipients representing at least 30% of the undergraduate enrollment. A list of institutions meeting the criteria was retrieved through IPEDS and reviewed with four institutions being selected based on convenience and accessibility. The participants for the study are selected from these four institutions.

**Participant Recruitment.** The participants are presidents currently serving at small private Catholic colleges or universities located in the northeastern United States. Contact with each president was made directly through personal connections with the participant or indirectly through other personal connections to the participant. An invitation to participate (see Appendix A) was emailed to each president to determine interest in participating in this study. Approximately one week after the initial email, a reminder email was sent to any president who did not respond (see Appendix B). Approximately one week after the first reminder, a second reminder was emailed (see Appendix C). If any president had declined the invitation or not responded after the second reminder, another institution from the IPEDS list would have been selected, and the president of the selected institution would have received an invitation to
participate via email. Since all four of the initial participants agreed to participate in the study it was not necessary to select any additional colleges.

After selecting the four institutions, each president was contacted to briefly discuss his or her knowledge of *The College Scorecard* and overall willingness to participate in the study to determine compatibility. After each president agreed to participate, all were asked to sign a letter of consent (see Appendix D).

**Protection of Human Subjects.** Data was collected through the basic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with human subjects. In this study, the researcher sought to develop a rapport and establish trust with the participants, protect participant and institutional identities, avoid any misconduct or impropriety, and uphold the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2009). The research proposal was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University and the research was not conducted until approval was received. Participants were required to sign a release form to indicate that they consented to participate in this study. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and the identity of their institutions.

**Data Collection**

The case study approach employed in this study includes three approaches to data collection: a basic questionnaire (See Appendix E), semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The collection of data from multiple sources is a strength of case study research and allows for the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2014). Data triangulation, the collection of data from multiple sources that corroborates findings, “helps to strengthen the construct validity of your case study” (Yin, 2014, p. 121). In case study research, the convergence of multiple data sources “adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data
A basic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were selected to collect participant perspectives in this study. Creswell identifies these two methods as appropriate evidence in a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013). Basic questionnaires may include both open-ended and closed-ended questions in a qualitative approach, with closed-ended responses providing “useful information to support theories and concepts in the literature” (Creswell, 2013, p. 220). Yin (1981) asserts that there are no particular data collection methods associated with case study research, and depending on the type of evidence collected, collection method, type of case study, and type of case study design, collection methods will differ. A basic questionnaire was used to allow the participants to respond to inquiries with less time constraints, at their own leisure, and provide the opportunity to reflect upon the questions as the participants in this study are presidents of colleges and universities with busy schedules and limited time availability. Additionally, the few closed-ended questions were used to gain quick reaction and help guide the conversation during the semi-structured interviews. In “case study research, investigators can collect and integrate quantitative survey data, which facilitates reaching a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). Use of a basic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews are appropriate data collection techniques for this study.

The following procedures are used to collect data and evidence. The basic questionnaire was sent electronically to each participant, and a semi-structured interview following an interview protocol (see Appendix F) was conducted at a location convenient for the participant, generally not exceeding one hour in length. These semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and probe the participants on some of the responses to the basic questionnaire. The
researcher collected denaturalized transcripts by providing participants an opportunity to review transcriptions of their interviews and respond to the key issues emerging from the data. Denaturalized transcripts benefit the research in that it is a courtesy to the participants, validates the information collected, and could “improve conditions by empowering people” (Mero-Jaffe, 2011, p. 235). In addition to the basic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, institutional documents, such as mission statements, websites, and other material related to this phenomenon, were reviewed.

Data Storage. Data was securely stored in electronic files using a password protected cloud-based system. These electronic files will be destroyed six months after successful defense of this study.

Data Analysis

Miles et al. (2014) strongly suggest data analysis occur concurrently with data collection (p. 70) while other researchers recommend in-depth analysis after all interviews are transcribed (Seidman, 1998). The timing of data analysis was evaluated as the process developed, but given the nature of a multi-case study, it was the intention of this researcher to analyze data concurrently with data collection. In analyzing data, Yin (2014) recommends using one of four general strategies, and the one selected was to “follow the theoretical propositions that led to your case study” (p. 136). Since institutional theory was used to frame the research question and the literature review, this approach fit best with Yin’s (2014) general strategy to rely on theoretical propositions. Yin (2014) offers five analytic techniques that can be used in data analysis (p. 164). Cross-case synthesis was selected by this researcher. This technique is only used in multi-case studies and aggregates “findings across a series of individual studies” (pp. 164-165). Creswell (2013) suggests three additional techniques, direct interpretation,
establishing patterns, and developing naturalistic generalizations (pp. 199-200). Each of these techniques proved useful in this study. In using direct interpretation, the researcher was able to extract meaning from a single incident that may have occurred without considering if this incident has occurred in any of the other cases (p. 199). Miles et al. (2014) suggest that the use of a multi-case study does not change the issue of generalizability because researchers generalize from one case to the next and not to a larger population (p. 34). According to Yin (2014), “in doing case study research, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories…and not to extrapolate probabilities” (p. 21).

For each individual case in this multi case study, “lean coding” or developing five or six categories initially and then expanding those categories after data are continuously reviewed was conducted (Creswell, 2013). The expanded categories were limited to no more than 20 to manage the data and then reduced into five or six themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). Miles et al. (2014) mention 25 different approaches to coding and note that researchers can mix and match while determining the best mix of approaches. Various types of coding were considered during data analysis in an effort to develop the best mix for this study.

The following steps were developed to analyze the data gathered during the case studies. For each individual case study, the basic questionnaires were read multiple times to gain insight into the thoughts of each participant. Following this step, the transcript for each interview was read multiple times, and the recording was listened to multiple times. The next step was to initially code the transcript data and any field notes collected. After the initial coding, major themes were identified by searching for patterns and connections in the data. When all individual case study data had been analyzed, a cross-case analysis was conducted to determine if there were shared themes or patterns across cases. Documents and materials including mission
statements and college websites were analyzed to determine if the institution had addressed *The College Scorecard* in any fashion.

**Trustworthiness**

There are many researcher perspectives and terms used to describe how to maintain the reliability and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Miles et al. (2014) mention five categories that if done well lead to trustworthiness in the research:

- objectivity/confirmability
- reliability/dependability/auditability
- internal validity/credibility/authenticity
- external validity/transferability/fittingness
- utilization/application/ action orientation

While this terminology tends toward the critical realist tradition, Creswell (2013) simplifies trustworthiness as a process that attempts “to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings” (pp. 249-250) and suggests strategies that include prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, clarifying researcher bias, and rich, thick description. Yin (2014) suggests four tests and several tactics that are relevant to research design in case study research and that can be applied to validate the researcher’s work. These four tests are construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (p. 46). This researcher utilized the following:

**Construct validity.** Yin (2014) describes construct validity as the identification of “correct operational measures for the concepts being studied” (p. 46). The operational measures to test this construct include detailed description of measures to be followed in this research, clarification of researcher bias and data triangulation. As described earlier, triangulation of data was achieved through the collection of data through multiple sources.
**External validity.** Yin (2014) describes this as “defining the domain to which a study’s findings can be generalized” (p. 46). While generalizations between the individual case studies in this multiple case study may occur, this study did not extrapolate probabilities. Yin (2014) suggests that defining the research question during the design phase is the time and place to address external validity. This was accomplished in this study through the design of the research question and the use of replication logic, as noted by Yin (2014).

**Reliability.** Yin (2014) defines reliability as “demonstrating that the operations of a study – such as the data collection procedures – can be repeated” (p. 46). This study documented procedures used to conduct the research including, but not limited to, selecting participants, design of basic questionnaire, interview questions, and protocols used. The results themselves do not necessarily have to be repeated, but the process should be able to be replicated. Yin (2014) suggests using a case study protocol which this researcher has described in chapters I through III of this thesis and through attached appendices.

**Summary.** Major tactics were used to validate the research including data triangulation, clarification of researcher bias, the review of transcripts by participants, the use of replication logic, and the use of a case study protocol. These major tactics ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the research. Through multiple touch points with each participant, there was ample opportunity for participants to provide their perspectives, reflect, and revise for accuracy. A case study protocol has been provided that will allow for the process to be replicated although the results may differ. The researcher also continued to monitor for researcher bias throughout the study.
Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeastern United States that serve low-income students, might interpret and react to *The College Scorecard*. A case study strategy was utilized, and four individual case studies were conducted. A case study approach fits with the constructivist paradigm chosen for this study and provides a real-world perspective of the phenomena being studied (Yin, 2014). A replication design was used to guide the selection of the cases for this study with criteria including Catholic institutions, with at least 30% of the undergraduate population being Pell grant recipients and the enrollment of 3,500 or fewer undergraduate students. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the research, a thorough review of the researcher’s bias was conducted, data was triangulated, and participants reviewed their transcripts. The identities of the institutions and the presidents were protected throughout this study.
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

This chapter reports the research findings based on the data collected and analyzed in the study. The purpose of the study and the research question provide context for the findings and analysis. Participant selection, research design, data collection, and analysis procedures precede the case studies. Each case is presented individually in a consistent format, beginning with a descriptor of the institution and then followed by a discussion of the five major themes that emerged throughout the research. Those five themes are pressure, data, usefulness, mission, and access. The chapter concludes with a cross-case synthesis and a summary of the research findings which are then discussed in Chapter Five.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeastern United States that serve low-income students might interpret and react to The College Scorecard. Actual and proposed federal policy changes place pressure on institutions to interpret, understand, and react to changing regulations. A proposed post-secondary institution rating system was revised by lawmakers in 2015 and resulted in the enactment of The College Scorecard.

Research Question

This study will explore the following central research and sub question:

Q1: How do college and university presidents describe the impact of The College Scorecard?

S1: How will college and university presidents react to The College Scorecard in relation to new student enrollment and admissions?
Participant Selection

This study focused on presidents at small private Catholic colleges and universities in the northeastern United States that were selected using a replication design. Relevant criteria, including enrollment size, percentage of Pell grant recipients, location, and Catholic religious affiliation, were used to guide the selection of relevant institutions. The four institutions selected “possess similar characteristics important to the study” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The participants in this study are the four presidents of the institutions selected who are currently serving these four small private Catholic institutions.

To protect the institutions and the presidents’ identity, the institutions were assigned pseudonyms, “College A”, “College B”, “College C”, and “College D”. Likewise, each of the corresponding presidents was provided a pseudonym corresponding to his/her institution, “President A”, “President B”, “President C”, and “President D”.

Research Design

A multiple case study design was selected to explore presidential perspectives on The College Scorecard. Creswell (2013) identifies defining features of case study methodology as problems that are current in nature, bounded in context, and clear in intent. This case investigates a real-life problem of practice that is current in nature -- the implementation of The College Scorecard which occurred in September 2015. Using a multiple case study approach allows data to be examined within each setting and across settings, providing evidence that is stronger and more robust (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014).

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected following sound qualitative case study procedures through multiple sources including a basic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a
review of appropriate print and digital documentation. Using basic questionnaires with closed-ended questions is an appropriate form of collecting evidence in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013, p. 220). If the researcher elects, “within case study research, investigators can collect and integrate quantitative survey data” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). This collection and analysis of multiple sources of data, known as data triangulation, are strengths of case study research and provide stronger validity (Yin, 2014).

The theoretical foundation of this study is institutional theory and isomorphism. Institutional theory asserts that institutions are shaped by their external environment (Scott, 1987). Isomorphism is defined as a “constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 149). Laws and rules represent external conditions that exert pressure on institutions and have the potential to lead to isomorphic tendencies. Following the tenets of institutional theory and isomorphism, one wonders whether The College Scorecard creates pressure on organizations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, a practice strongly suggested by Miles et al. (2014). Each individual basic questionnaire was collected, read, and coded in an initial effort to understand each participant’s reactions to The College Scorecard. The researcher then met with each participant for a semi-structured interview, which was recorded and transcribed. As part of the validation process, the transcription was provided to the participant for review and correction of any inaccuracies and then returned to the researcher. The denaturalized transcript and the recording of the interview were reviewed five times. The basic questionnaire and the transcript went through two cycles of coding. Notes were written on each
basic questionnaire and transcript, identifying broad ideas or concepts related to the research question, using a method which is described by Miles et al. (2014) as descriptive coding.

Analysis resulted in the formulation of eight broad themes or codes including pressure, accuracy, usefulness, awareness, high level concerns, planned changes, data improvements, and government oversight. Miles et al. (2014) argue that there are numerous types of coding methods and that multiple methods can be used simultaneously (p. 74). In this study, in vivo coding, using words or phrases directly from the participants supplemented the descriptive coding. The resulting codes included dangerous, compliance, over-regulation, confusing, graduation rates are misleading, flawed, and data is limited. These broad codes were then collapsed or grouped into five major themes in a process known as pattern coding or second cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). The five major themes include pressure, data, usefulness, mission, and access. The evidence within each case study is grouped and summarized by these five themes. Table 4.1 provides a list and explanation of the five themes.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td>Did The College Scorecard produce any pressure which compelled a president to respond in some fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>The accuracy, validity and understandability of the information provided by The College Scorecard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Would students and families understand what was being presented to them and be able to make informed decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>How important of a role did an institution’s mission play in decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>What role would The College Scorecard have on student access to the institution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case Study Reporting

Creswell (2013) reminds us that “there is no standard format for reporting case study research” (p. 236). In this study, a separate section for each case study is followed by a cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014, p. 184). This replicates the format Thompson (2010) used in The Caring Teacher: A multiple case study that looks at what teachers do and believe about their work with at-risk students. Each case study represents a compilation of the data collected from the basic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and review of print and digital documentation.

Each case study begins with demographic information about the institution, including student body size, campus type, and basic information about the president. Most identifiable information is excluded to protect the identities of the institutions and presidents. Each president’s overall perception of The College Scorecard is presented, and the data collected are reported within each of the five major themes.

Each case is reported individually using this format, and the individual cases are then followed by a cross-case analysis. Chapter Four closes with summary findings. A full discussion of those findings occurs in Chapter Five.

Case Study – College A

College A is a private Roman Catholic institution with less than 2,000 undergraduate students. The institution, with a suburban campus, serves a large number of low-income students and over 45% of the population are federal Pell grant recipients. The president of College A, President A, has served as a college president between 6 and 10 years and was attracted to leading a catholic institution. “I felt that my personal values and faith had been wedded beautifully with my professional goals” (President A, personal communication, March 29, 2016).
President A brought all the data from *The College Scorecard* for College A, responses to the basic questionnaire, and other materials to the interview.

President A reported being knowledgeable about *The College Scorecard* and proved so throughout the interview process. Table 4.2 indicates President A’s responses to several key questions regarding reactions to *The College Scorecard*.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Reaction (q. 6)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness for families (q. 7)</td>
<td>Not useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy for families to understand (q. 8)</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do students at your institution rely on consumer info (q. 9)</td>
<td>Probably not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The basic questionnaire responses and the subsequent interview indicate an initial reaction to this new policy that overall is negative. In response to a question regarding perception of the new policy, President A expressed concern that there are more federal regulations of higher education today than ever before. During our interview, the increasing involvement of the government in the regulation of higher education was reinforced with the statement that there currently is an “over-regulation of everything” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). While President A’s reaction to *The College Scorecard* is strong and fairly negative, it was balanced with an acknowledgement that the purpose of starting *The College Scorecard* was probably “well intentioned.”

The results of this interview are reported below using the sub-headings: pressure, data, usefulness, mission and access.

**Pressure.** President A identifies several pressures and challenges currently faced by college presidents. Those challenges include public questioning about the value of an education,
negative media exposure, tight budgets and financial concerns, levels of student loan debt, and over-regulation of the industry by the federal and state governments. President A made no specific mention of *The College Scorecard* as a challenge or concern. In discussing concerns about over-regulation, President A used compliance with recent changes to Title IX (1972) as an example and did not mention *The College Scorecard*. When asked directly if *The College Scorecard* places any pressure on College A, President A said “if we believed, as an institution, that a lot of our students were going to be swayed by *The College Scorecard* data to select their institution of higher education, it would place more pressure” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). President A believes that students interested in and attending College A rely on three factors to select that institution: majors offered, location of College A, and the overall net cost to attend College A. President A also believes that students and prospective students interested in attending College A probably do not use consumer information, such as rankings or *The College Scorecard*. In fact, President A states, “I feel very strongly that the vast majority of the students who come to College A not only don’t look at *The College Scorecard*, they don’t even know it exists” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). President A appears to feel very little pressure from the implementation of *The College Scorecard*, mainly from the belief that there is a lack of student use and/or even a lack of knowledge of its existence.

**Data.** During our interview, the data presented in *The College Scorecard* was mentioned often by President A. In fact, President A used the words “dangerous”, “confusing”, “incomplete”, and “disaggregated” to describe the data. This language is used more than once to describe the data and in reference to how prospective families might interpret the data as well as how the media might portray it. President A described the fact that students and their families
are unaware of how the data is actually compiled as “dangerous”. The term was also used when discussing media portrayal of the information and again to express concern that the media could lead students to interpret the data incorrectly.

Other concerns, including the limited student population represented in the data, emerged through the interview. *The College Scorecard* data only reports first-time, full-time freshman data at each institution. President A indicated that transfer students, part-time students, and other types of students are not included in the data. The data is not fully inclusive, “not that it is false data, it is just incomplete or disaggregated data, and that’s the problem” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). Another concern is that reported salary data is aggregated for all students but not provided for individual educational majors. The concern raised by President A is that salary data is skewed based upon the majors offered at an institution.

If you have professional schools on your campus, that’s going to skew the data one way because you have people graduating who their first job will be a white collar job. We have relatively few of those kinds of majors. (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016)

If an institution offers majors in the helping professions, such as teaching or social work, that can skew salary data lower. President A believes this information can be “confusing” for students and families. Presenting average data was another concern President A mentioned when discussing additional data elements. President A wondered if students and families realize there are outliers on both sides of average net cost. Having families understand that net cost does not necessarily reflect what a student will pay for his or her education was also termed “confusing” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016).
President A was not surprised by the data for College A that appeared in *The College Scorecard* and made no mention of feeling any pressure from the release of the data. President A was content with the results of the data for College A. However, frustration was expressed with the design of the data collection and whether the information provides students and families with value. President A was less concerned with the individual data of College A and more concerned conceptually with the data presentation. President A summarizes the concern about data by stating, “it is impossible to reduce the purpose and effectiveness of an institution to a finite set of data points that all have to do with cost and salaries after graduation” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

**Usefulness.** President A does not consider *The College Scorecard* to be a useful tool for students. There is no expectation that it will become a popular tool used by students at College A. Table 4.3 summarizes the basic questionnaire questions and responses related to usefulness of *The College Scorecard*.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How useful will <em>The College Scorecard</em> be for prospective students</td>
<td>Not Useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy will it be for families to understand and interpret</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think students that currently enroll at your institution might rely on consumer information</td>
<td>Probably Not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

President A acknowledged *The College Scorecard* would be used by some students but feels “very strongly that the vast majority of the students who come to College A, not only don’t look at *The College Scorecard*, they don’t even know that it exists” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016).
Choosing a college is a very individualized decision for many students. Some drivers for their decisions, according to President A, are majors offered, location, and net cost. According to President A, providing students with data on graduation rates is not necessarily beneficial information without knowing the history of an institution, the mission of an institution, and the types of students an institution serves (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). In discussing the usefulness of the data, President A remarks that “the choice the students make are so individual that looking at that [graduation rates] I don’t think helps the student predict whether he or she will individually be successful at graduating” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). “What a lot of our students are using to make the determination, is something that is not going to be quantified in a way that these numbers attempt to slot us all into” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). Table 4.4 provides a list of items that President A believes does influence student choice when deciding on a college.

Table 4.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>“I hear about fit all the time. And that fit is an intangible that these numbers don’t touch”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>“Do we have the major they want to study”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>“I think location for our students is a huge issue”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Cost</td>
<td>“By far and large the biggest driver for our students”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussing “fit”, President A explains that parents of prospective students mention “fit” frequently.

I heard this again as recently as last week…many family members said to me, my son, my daughter, they looked at X number of institutions, sometimes it was a handful,
sometimes it was a dozen…when they came to College A, there was just a fit. I hear about that fit all the time. And that fit is an intangible that these numbers don’t touch.

(President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016)

In sum, President A believes the data is not useful or easy to understand and does not believe it is being used by the students at College A or by prospective students. “I would be surprised if we have…students that used it” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

Mission. The mission at College A is, and has always been, to serve marginalized students. It is an institution founded to serve a specific population of student, a population that at the time was considered socio-economically challenged. Over time the definition of a marginalized student has changed for the institution. The current population at College A is more than 40% ethnic minorities and for many of those students English is not their first language. “We have a large percentage…of students who are first generation to college. Some of those coming from families where no one’s even gone to high school. The marginalized have just changed by definition” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). In discussing the data included in The College Scorecard, President A voiced concern that data on its own does not reflect the fact that some institutions have “a mission to serve the under-served” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

Living the mission of the institution is clearly important to President A. The mission to serve and provide access to a college education for marginalized students is of paramount importance. When asked about providing opportunities to students who might be considered academically risky and could ultimately reduce retention rates and graduation rates, President A responded:
If we are wrong, then our retention rate or graduation rate might go down just a bit. If we are right, I think we have lived our mission, which is to invest in these students and to give them an opportunity for something at College A that I think is very special and that helps them to have the best chance to have a college education. (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016)

It was clear throughout the interview that the mission of the institution is extremely important to President A and is a driving force in decision-making. Mission was mentioned when discussing program development and in terms of student access. Improving data elements such as retention rates, graduation rates, and others are important to President A, but not at the risk of mission drift.

Access. President A believes that College A is currently attracting the right type of student. The data included in The College Scorecard on retention and graduation rate are fairly strong, and President A is satisfied with the results. “We have...had a very strong freshman to sophomore retention rate. More than what would have been expected by as much as 10 percentage points” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). While satisfied, President A is always interested in improving student success.

I think that anything that an institution can do to improve graduation for students, retention, to hold costs as low as possible, those are all things that the leaders that I know in higher education want to do because it is the right thing to do, not because it would improve their positioning or how they would appear on The Scorecard. (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016)

When asked if any changes to current admissions policies would be considered as a result of the release of The College Scorecard, President A said “I don’t think we are going to recruit any
differently” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016). President A suggested admissions staff could be better trained to respond to questions that families might have about *The College Scorecard* although admittedly, President A was unaware if families were even asking about *The College Scorecard*. When asked about how this new policy would impact access for students at College A, President A said “not at all, and I wouldn’t want it to” (President A, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

**Case Study – College B**

College B is a private Roman Catholic institution with over 3,000 undergraduate students. The institution, with a suburban campus, serves a good number of low-income students with over 40% of the population receiving federal Pell grants. The president of College B, President B, has served as a college president for over 16 years, all at College B. President B served as a vice president for academic affairs at another Catholic college prior to coming to College B. President B was attracted to leading a Catholic institution because of the unique transformative mission of Catholic higher education. President B was well-prepared for the interview, bringing all the data from *The College Scorecard* for College B, responses to the basic questionnaire, and other materials to our meeting.

President B indicated being knowledgeable about *The College Scorecard* and proved to be very knowledgeable throughout the interview process. Table 4.5 reports President B’s responses to some of the key questions about reactions to *The College Scorecard*. 
Table 4.5

Reactions to College Scorecard – President B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Reaction (q. 6)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness for families (q. 7)</td>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy for families to understand (q. 8)</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do students at your institution rely on consumer information (q. 9)</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial reaction to *The College Scorecard* by President B, based on the responses to the basic questionnaire and the interview, is negative. Although the initial reaction is negative, President B is comfortable with the release of this new policy. President B stated that the original intention of the proposed rating system, where colleges were to be measured “comparably to force movement along certain government priorities” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016) was a concern initially. However, when the main purpose of this new policy shifted to sharing information, any major concern dissipated.

President B was heavily involved in providing input and feedback to the federal government regarding *The College Scorecard*. President B had the opportunity to meet with the Undersecretary of Higher Education as part of a group of independent college leaders within the state College B resides. At this meeting the federal government’s official position was presented to education leaders who provided a great deal of pushback. President B was asked to attend a second meeting, which included a much smaller group of leaders, where President B had the opportunity to provide insight and feedback on *The College Scorecard*.

The data analysis of this interview is reported below using the sub-headings: pressure, data, usefulness, mission and access.

**Pressure.** President B provided a long list of challenges and concerns facing leaders in higher education that create pressure on institutions, including
Compliance and risk issues

Pace of change

Competitive situation in the marketplace

Need for additional resources

College affordability

There has been a significant increase in the number of compliance and risk management issues in higher education recently. There is also “tremendous pressure for there to be reasonable costs so tuition expansion and staying…within your means is another major factor” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016). The pace of change in higher education has also accelerated; there are “so many presidents pushing their institutions in a … faster pace to look for other opportunities for program growth” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016). Today’s marketplace is considered much more severe than it was a decade ago, and there is “always pressure to bring additional resources” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016). College affordability, resource issues, and risk and compliance issues were cited as factors creating pressure for President B, yet no specific reference to The College Scorecard creating pressure was mentioned.

The implementation of The College Scorecard has not created any pressure for President B. “It seems fairly apparent to myself …the scorecard really was an attempt to find some measures that could be used to provide quick and easy comparison for multiple purposes” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016). President B often referenced the original version of The College Scorecard, the college rating system, which placed more pressure on institutions because “the purpose was really to use those comparisons to drive certain behaviors, whether it was limiting tuition increases or whether it was driving people to increase
affordability or would be access” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016). In explaining the lack of pressure from *The College Scorecard*, President B stated “we’ve been assured that it is not going to be used in a comparison way for purposes of regulation” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016). Initially, schools were going to be held accountable based on the data and potentially lose aid or be put on a watch list. That level of accountability disappeared with the newer version of the scorecard. Another factor reducing pressure on colleges cited by President B is the belief that families are not relying on *The College Scorecard*. “I don’t think hardly anybody finds this [*The College Scorecard*]” (President B, personal communication, April 14, 2016), suggesting that President B believes that students are not only failing to use the information but do not even know that it exists.

**Data.** President B expressed concern about some of the data elements presented in *The College Scorecard*. Two data points are specifically mentioned as not providing families with effective comparative information: starting salary data and graduation rates. Although the starting salary data for College B is rated above average in *The College Scorecard*, President B does not wish to publicize this information. “I can tell you I wouldn’t want it published; we do not publicize that and part of the reason we do not actually publicize is because we think it is a misnomer” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016). President B explains that the salary data is driven by two majors at College B, accounting and nursing. Starting salaries for these majors drive the salary data upwards as they tend to be higher paying professions. Students reviewing this information may not understand that fine point. For students studying other majors, this data may result in expectations that their starting salary will be equally high. President B also emphasized that all majors and professions are important. “If I was a school
that produced a lot of social workers, I would want to take great pride in the fact we produce social workers” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016).

The need for caveats that accompany the data is important to President B as a way to help the user understand the data more clearly. This is the case with graduation rate data, which also was rated as above average in *The College Scorecard* for College B. In the case of graduation rate, President B indicated that families need to understand the difference between institution types and the mission of each institution to better compare the data. “There are no caveats in here by types of institutions and I still think that is a problem…I would hate for our graduation rate to be compared to a community college” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016). President B believes an indication of progress institutions have made in improving some of these data elements would be more helpful for families.

Although President B expressed concern about the data, the release of this information placed no pressure on College B. President B believes the information for College B is strong and is not concerned with families comparing College B with other institutions. “Because of where we sit, that part doesn’t bother me, doesn’t bother [College B]” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016). When asked if there is pressure to work to improve the data that is presented in *The College Scorecard*, President B was clear that College B, and most institutions, are always working toward identifying areas that need improvement. President B indicated that there are other factors creating pressure on institutions to produce stronger results, citing *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings as an example. President B does mention that it is possible that the data are raising awareness for constituents other than families. Board members at College B appear more interested in conversations about topics like cost now. Although this
may be the case, there was no indication this increase presented any additional pressure on the president or the institution.

**Usefulness.** President B does not consider *The College Scorecard* to be a particularly useful tool for students and does not expect that it will be widely used. Table 4.6 presents the questions related to usefulness along with the responses of President B.

Table 4.6

*Overall Reaction to Usefulness of College Scorecard – President B*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How useful will <em>The College Scorecard</em> be for prospective students</td>
<td>Somewhat Useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy will it be for families to understand and interpret</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think students that currently enroll at your institution might rely on consumer information</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While President B stated there is no reliable information or data available that indicates how often the data has been used by families, President B generally feels that it is not being used by prospective students at College B. For students considering other schools, President B feels the data is not being used by many students at all. President B clarifies that it is just not students and families not using the information but high school counselors do not appear to be accessing the information either. “My sense is they are probably not necessarily pointing people in that direction” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016).

**Mission.** The mission of College B traditionally has been to serve low income and first generation students. College B remains a college for first generation students with over 40% of the student population being first generation students. “When I came it was over 50% and now we are probably 42 or 44% but they look very different. They are not Irish and Italian anymore; they are Caribbean and so forth” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016).
President B also indicates that access and diversity at the institution are important aspects of the mission of College B. The population of College B is representative of the community within the county College B is located, and President B mentions that they are “just trying to be mission driven as an institution” (Personal communication, President B, April 14, 2016).

Access. President B is clear that The College Scorecard has to be used to have any impact on access at an institution. Students select institutions based on affordability and value; those are the major drivers for students. College B is using the mission of the institution to guide admissions decisions, and there are no plans to make any changes to admissions policies or practices based upon the release of The College Scorecard.

Case Study – College C

College C is a private Roman Catholic institution with less than 2,000 undergraduate students. The institution has multiple campuses and serves a large number of low-income students with over 45% of the population receiving federal Pell grants. The president of College C, President C, has served as a college president fewer than five years. President C served in various administrative and faculty positions at both secular and Catholic institutions before becoming president at College C

President C reported on the questionnaire being knowledgeable about The College Scorecard. Table 4.7 indicates President C’s responses to some key questions regarding initial reactions to The College Scorecard.
Table 4.7

Reactions to College Scorecard – President C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Reaction (q. 6)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness for families (q. 7)</td>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy for families to understand (q. 8)</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do students at your institution rely on consumer information (q. 9)</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based upon the responses to the basic questionnaire and the interview comments, President C has a mixed reaction to *The College Scorecard* but one that leans toward a negative reaction to the new policy. In response to the question about students using consumer information, President C answered “definitely” on the basic questionnaire. However, throughout the interview process, President C indicated that students probably do use some consumer information but that use is limited and as for *The College Scorecard* does not believe it is being used by students. President C clearly understands how ratings and rankings can influence people and what needs to be done if one wants to manipulate the results.

I know how to play the game to make statistics look better. You control your freshman class size, you make sure you send nice glossy information about yourself to all other schools so presidents have you top of mind when they are filling out their surveys, you work on your alumni development. There are ways to do that if that is what you choose to do. (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016)

President C quickly points out that College C is not in the ranking game and that rankings such as *U.S. News & World Report* are not relevant to a college like College C. The reason provided is that *U.S. News & World Report* does not value the same things that College C values.

President C acknowledges that there are families that care about rankings but was clear that despite that fact, rankings are not valued by College C.
The discussion was directed back to *The College Scorecard*. In describing the work of the federal government in creating *The College Scorecard*, President C is fairly positive. Terms like “decent” and “reasonable” were used to describe the effort of the federal government. However, President C believes that the final format of the information is not easy to understand. President C summarized thoughts about the new policy in this manner:

I applaud that the government is trying to get a handle on it. I’m just always afraid that in an effort to reduce things to some sort of understandable soundbite, that you lose all the nuance of what the data means. Is it a noble cause that is worth the resources is, I think, the big question. (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016)

The results of the data analysis are reported below under sub-headings: pressure, data, usefulness, mission and access.

**Pressure.** President C mentions several challenges facing leaders in higher education:

- Changing demographics of students
- Competition from private and public institutions
- Viability
- Program offerings and course delivery
- Government oversight
- Defending the value of a higher education

When discussing government oversight issues, President C mentioned questions about the value of higher education, the cost of higher education, and changing labor laws. President C described the federal government’s actions as “constant” questioning, an indication there is some pressure being exerted. Absent from the list of challenges and factors placing pressure on institutions is the mention of *The College Scorecard* or consumer information issues. While
discussing pressure and whether *The College Scorecard* placed any on the institution, President C states, “To be honest, no. I think the pressure is ours; we want to always increase our retention and graduation rates because we want to serve our students well” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016).

**Data.** Overall, the data in *The College Scorecard* is concerning to President C. While “there are certain pieces of it that I think have value,” there are many concerns that come to light (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). Some of the issues with the data include

- Misuse of graduation rate
- Scorecard descriptions
- Deception of using averages
- Data relevance for specific individuals

A large part of the discussion on data focused on graduation rate, a data point that President C described as being “flawed.” President C used the graduation rate data element to show the many flaws in *The College Scorecard* data. First, graduation rate is calculated only for first-time, full-time freshmen and excludes other categories of students such as transfer students and part-time students. As a result, President C believes graduation rate is not properly calculated. If a student starts at one institution and graduates from different institution, it is represented as a failure for the first institution because the student did not graduate. The student is not reflected in the graduation rate at the second institution because the student was a transfer student and not a first-time full-time student. “It’s not that less of our students graduate, it is the way we are counting them” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). Secondly, President C does not find the graduation rate relevant for students. “Is it really relevant for a student who is just going to be starting school, or is the retention rate more relevant because that is a more
recent metric of how students are doing? (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016).
Since the graduation rate reported is often the four or six-year graduation rates, the data represent
a group of students that entered that long ago, and the information may not be relevant to the
incoming group of students. Third, President C questioned how these metrics would relate to an
individual potential student. Success is as much a result of individual behavior as it is of
anything the school is doing. As a result of all these flaws in this one data element alone,
President C expresses concern about the legitimacy of the data and how it is interpreted. “I
really get concerned when people use those statistics to say we, as a higher ed system in the
United States, are failing” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). President C
explains that the way the data is collected and counted misrepresents “the success of higher
education in the United States, and I think that is a real issue” (Personal communication,
President C, May 2, 2016).

Usefulness. Table 4.8 presents President C’s responses to questions from the basic
questionnaire about the usefulness of The College Scorecard.

Table 4.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Reaction to Usefulness of College Scorecard – President C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful will <em>The College Scorecard</em> be for prospective students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy will it be for families to understand and interpret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think students that currently enroll at your institution might rely on consumer information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

President C indicated that the data may be somewhat useful for families in the basic
questionnaire response and elaborated during the interview that “there are certain pieces of it that
I think have value. There are certain metrics that would help” (Personal communication,
President C, May 2, 2016). The idea that the data was comparative and students could easily compare schools was described as another useful element. Yet President C has real reservations about just how useful the information will be to prospective families, especially when the data is unfamiliar. “If someone does not understand this stuff and they are coming to it for the first time, and you read what the scorecard descriptions are, does it really help families (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016)?

The interview clarified President C’s initial response that students were using consumer information to make college decisions. While the initial response to the basic questionnaire was ‘definitely,’ when asked for clarification during the interview process, President C indicated that was in error. President C believes that use of consumer information and *The College Scorecard* is probably very limited. There has been no research data collected indicating whether or not students are using the information to make decisions on where to attend college.

I think part of what is really hard about trying to find out if it is really of value is, the people who are using it are not necessarily going to tell you. Maybe it is naïve on my part, and maybe students are using it more than I think. (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016)

**Mission.** One of the values of College C has been, and continues to be, to serve the poor or lower-income families in the community. President C was clear that institutional mission drives decision-making at the College C. Decisions would not be made to improve consumer information in an effort to increase a ranking or rating in *The College Scorecard.* “If we did [make changes], it would be for other reasons, not because a ranking is driving us to change our values” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). President C provided an example of a decision that improved the academic profile of the class, but was not made for the sake of
improving data so that consumer information would appear stronger. After deep analysis of the
students that were not succeeding at College C, it was determined that there was a certain
population needing an excessive amount of remediation. Even with remedial work and extra
services, these students were not succeeding. The decision “to stop admitting the students that
we know we cannot serve well…was a value-driven decision” (Personal communication,
President C, May 2, 2016). While the result was an improvement to the academic profile of the
class, the decision was mission driven.

**Access.** The discussion on mission provides answers to the question about access at
College C. President C has no plans to change admissions policies or practices based on the
release of *The College Scorecard.* While changes in the academic profile at College C have
occurred in the past, as described in the example provided in the mission section, the change was
based on admitting students who would be successful at College C. President C believes few
prospective students interested in College C are relying on *The College Scorecard* when making
enrollment decisions. “I certainly do not hear anyone talking about it….I don’t even know if
high school guidance counselors use it” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016).
President C was clear that no changes were forthcoming.

**Case Study – College D**

College D is a private Roman Catholic institution with over 1,500 undergraduate
students. The institution, with a suburban campus, serves a large number of low-income students
with over 40% of the population receiving federal Pell grants. The president of College D,
President D, has served as a college president for over 16 years, all at College D. President D
was attracted to leading a catholic institution because of being a life-long member of the Catholic
church, interest in an environment influenced by Gospel values, and belief that the educational
environment is an excellent means toward realizing personal growth.

President D reported on the basic questionnaire being only somewhat knowledgeable
about *The College Scorecard*. Table 4.9 indicates President D’s responses to the key questions
about reactions to *The College Scorecard*.

Table 4.9

*Reactions to College Scorecard – President D*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Reaction (q. 6)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness for families (q. 7)</td>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy for families to understand (q. 8)</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do students at your institution rely on consumer information (q. 9)</td>
<td>Probably not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A review of the basic questionnaire and the conversation throughout the interview
revealed the initial overall reaction to *The College Scorecard* was negative. During the interview
President D maintained that perspective and suggested there are many concerns with at best a
reaction that could be described as moderately enthused. President D does agree that providing
information to the public is not a bad thing and is not opposed to families having as much
information as possible when making decisions. Yet there are still concerns that create a sense
of negativity around this initiative, and many were discussed as we explored the five major
themes of pressure, data, usefulness, mission and access for College D. The results of the data
analysis are reported below using those themes as sub-headings

**Pressure.** President D listed several pressures and challenges currently facing College D,
including

- Enrollment
- Competition
• Tuition dependency
• Low endowment
• Increased government intervention

While *The College Scorecard* was not addressed specifically, President D mentioned several times throughout the interview the increased costs to an institution that government intervention creates. President D mentioned that keeping up with different government mandates requires additional resource allocation. Federal policies have required the hiring of additional staff and a great deal of time to comply with government requests or policy changes. During the interview, President D mentioned that government intervention and demands continuously increase pressure on institutions; “It puts a great deal of pressure I think on administrative faculty and staff. We cannot respond to twice as much request for information by hiring twice as many people” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). Other concerns raised about government intervention included increased control over higher education, particularly accreditation, which President D firmly believes would not be good for higher education.

When prompted about *The College Scorecard*, President D indicated that there is some pressure but does not consider it a bad thing. President D categorized the information about College D included in *The College Scorecard* as “not so good.” When describing the slight amount of pressure, it appears that what is being described is a level of self-awareness rather than pressure.

In one sense it puts pressure, but in another sense it is good to talk about this and realize that there is a very important thing that we want to do. It does put pressure because you do not know how the data will be interpreted and if it will have an adverse effect, but
there is an internal challenge that is not bad. To work harder, to increase your graduation rates. Also the retention rates. (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016)

President D reflects further on this response, noting the release of the information really reinforced what they were already reviewing and analyzing. “I would say we were paying attention before” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016) the release of The College Scorecard. President D further explained that College D is already reviewing, analyzing and developing new initiatives to improve results where the institution is not satisfied. “The role of this particular tool may become more prominent. Right now it is not the primary motivating cause [for change]” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

Data. President D indicated on the basic questionnaire being somewhat knowledgeable about The College Scorecard. Clearly President D is aware of some of the major issues with the data; however, many of the responses are general in nature and admittedly so in this case. “Well, I wish I were a little better informed here, but aren’t there things in this data and the way they calculate that can sway a bit?” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016)

Throughout the interview, though, concerns about the data do surface. President D acknowledges that not all students are included in the calculation of the data and mentions student exclusions as non-financial aid filers, part-time students, and second-semester freshmen. If the data collection is not inclusive of all students, President D remarks “How accurate it is, I am not sure. If it is not accurate, it is not going to be helpful to anyone” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

President D uses terms such as ‘dangerous’ and ‘misleading’ or refers to the data as not clear or understandable when discussing the information presented in The College Scorecard. Statements used to describe the data include ‘I think it can be misleading,’ the information is ‘not
always clear or understandable,’ ‘that is why it can be dangerous’ and ‘it could be very
dangerous’ (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). While President D is
uncomfortable with some of the inaccuracies inherent in the data, there is a lack of understanding
about how the data are actually calculated and the ramifications that creates. President D is self-
aware of this lack of knowledge and admitted to wishing to be more aware.

While President D believes the data presented is not accurate or truly reflective of an
institution, it is acknowledged that “the questions that are asked should be looked at seriously,”
especially if families will be relying on this information (Personal communication, President D,
May 10, 2016).

Usefulness. The usefulness of the data is determined by the clarity and understandability
of the data. President D was clear that the information could prove helpful but too often is not
clear or understandable for families. During the interview, President D refers to the data as
‘dangerous’ in reference to how the data may be interpreted and used by families. “I suppose it
depends very much on how well it is publicized and how seriously people take it” (Personal
communication, President D, May 10, 2016). President D referred often to the fact that the data
is just one type of information that families should be reviewing. The concern is that families
will begin to use inaccurate or unclear data exclusively, which could have an adverse effect on
enrollment decisions by families. President D used as an example a family that compares
graduation rates and assumes that the institution with the higher graduation rate provides a better
opportunity for their child to earn a degree. This would ignore the mission of an institution, the
type of students attracted to an institution, and the services provided that might make it more
likely for a particular student to succeed. “[The College Scorecard] would be one of 25 things
that would be helpful to them in making a decision. If it becomes too prominent, it will not be”
(Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). Here again, President D uses the word dangerous when describing the use of the data: “To the extent that this type of … data sharing… becomes more and more exclusive, it could be very dangerous” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

President D clearly believes the scope and breadth of an institution is broad. It was mentioned several times that there are many aspects of an institution and that numbers alone cannot provide a family all the necessary information. At the same time, President D does not believe that students are using The College Scorecard. Table 4.10 presents responses to questions about usefulness of the information and use by students.

Table 4.10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How useful will The College Scorecard be for prospective students</td>
<td>Somewhat Useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy will it be for families to understand and interpret</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think students that currently enroll at your institution might rely on consumer information</td>
<td>Probably not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

President D does not believe The College Scorecard has played a significant role in student decision-making this year. “I haven’t heard a whole lot of conversation about this [from families]” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). Beyond families, President D does not believe many other constituents are using the information much either, including high school counselors and other institutions. “I would imagine…if you had 95 percent retention rate … and you had a graduation rate of 80 percent in four years, you would be talking about it yourself. You would be using it in your marketing” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). President D indicated that there has been little of that happening this year, but does
acknowledge that it will be important for institutions to take note of what does happen in the future. “If guidance counselors use it a lot … I could see it making a difference” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

Mission. The mission of College D is to serve a diverse population, have an atmosphere of excellence, develop leadership, and serve the community. This mission is similar to other Catholic institutions of this sponsoring order. “We have long been committed to giving students who might not make it elsewhere the opportunity…. We believe in it and we want to do it” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). When asked about maintaining mission versus changing philosophy to improve consumer information, President D believes that there will be some presidents that will struggle with that question and that there is no easy answer. President D admits that this could present a juggling act between mission and strengthening the institution, knowing that a mission to serve under-served and low-income populations could result in poorer results in the data presented. For College D, admittedly there is conversation occurring about ensuring that, with all the support services that are provided, they are admitting and accepting the type of student that can be successful at College D. President D wants to remain committed to the mission of the institution but acknowledges that these are challenging times with difficult decisions for many institutions. “We do not want to change the focus…but maybe [The College Scorecard] will make us more aware” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

Access. College D has been reviewing and analyzing internal data in an effort to improve the success of the students at the institution. The College Scorecard has had some impact on planning at the institution because of the timing of its release. “It has certainly put us in a position of wanting to review…. We are never satisfied when we do not graduate as many as we
would like to or have students come and not do well” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). As it relates to changing admissions policies, however, there are no plans to change them right now. However, College D is looking at current admissions criteria, reviewing and evaluating criteria such as standardized test scores and high school ranks for students. President D pointed out that this evaluative process is not a reaction to The College Scorecard but rather a frequent occurrence. “It very well may help us to improve or get a better handle on the type of student that we can best serve (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

Cross-Case Synthesis

Cross-case analysis, an analytic technique, was conducted to validate and strengthen the data of this research (Yin, 2014). This technique is only used in multi-case studies and aggregates “findings across a series of individual studies” (Yin, 2014, pp. 164-165). In this study, the data collected was analyzed and documented individually for each case and then compared and analyzed across all four cases. The analysis included a comparison of the responses to the basic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and any print and digital documentation that was reviewed. The cross-case analysis includes word tables that display the data from each case in a comparative format followed by a descriptive analysis of the evidence reviewed. The summary findings will be presented in the following sections.

**Finding 1. Admissions policies and practices are not changing.** Each of the four presidents was clear that there are no current plans to change admissions policies as a result of the release of The College Scorecard. It is also evident that each president is committed to student access. Table 4.11 compares responses from each president in response to a direct question about changing admissions practices and policies based on the release of The College Scorecard.
Table 4.11

Responses to Changing Admissions Policies and Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are there plans to change admission policies or practices?</th>
<th>President A</th>
<th>President B</th>
<th>President C</th>
<th>President D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I don’t think we are going to recruit any differently&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;No&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;No…this is not top of mind for me&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;We don’t want to change the focus&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Not at all, and I wouldn’t want to&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both President B and President C were very clear with a succinct response of no. President A elaborated further indicating there were no plans for the admissions office to do anything differently than what it has been doing. President D mentioned that College D is undergoing an institutional review of admissions policies and practices and considering different options, noting however the release of *The College Scorecard* did not precipitate this review. While College D is reviewing policies and practices, there are no current plans to make any changes.

Presidents A, B and C are emphatic that there will be no changes to admissions policies and practices at their respective colleges. President A believes that College A is attracting the right type of student and appears satisfied with enrollment results. President A was clear that access was not going to be impacted by the release of *The College Scorecard*. In response to questions about how access might be impacted, President A states, “not at all, and I wouldn’t want it to be” (Personal communication, President A, April 12, 2016). President B does not believe students use *The College Scorecard*, and therefore, it has not been part of any discussion about admission policies and practices. President C also has no plans to make any changes to admissions policies or practices. President D agreed but was less emphatic than the other presidents.
It certainly has to put us in a position of wanting to review…It may very well help us to improve or get a better handle on the type of student that we can best serve. We don’t want to change the focus…but maybe it will make us more aware. (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016)

President D points out that no changes are imminent at this time, rather a review of many policies and practices across the campus is in process and *The College Scorecard* is being considered during that review process. However, President D mentions that College D is always reviewing information, and since *The College Scorecard* data is now available, it is simply being added to the review process.

The release of *The College Scorecard* has had no impact on admissions policies and procedures at the four institutions in this study.

**Finding 2. The College Scorecard created no coercive pressure.** Since *The College Scorecard* is a government mandate, it was expected it might create pressure on colleges and universities. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that coercive pressure is created for organizations by the enactment or implementation of government laws and mandates. Yet, the data collected in this study indicates there is little to no pressure generated by The College Scorecard.

When asked to describe current challenges and concerns facing leaders in higher education, each president provided a number of issues ranging from political to financial. Even though political pressures are a concern for all presidents, not one mentioned *The College Scorecard* as a federal rule or mandate that produced any pressure. Table 4.12 provides a list of several factors mentioned by each president considered to be a challenge or concern.
### Pressures Placed on College Presidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure</th>
<th>President A</th>
<th>President B</th>
<th>President C</th>
<th>President D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Over-regulation</td>
<td>Compliance and risk issues</td>
<td>Government Oversight</td>
<td>Government Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Financial concerns</td>
<td>Need for additional resources</td>
<td>Viability</td>
<td>Tuition dependency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>College affordability</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low endowment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td></td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Value of higher education</td>
<td>Pace of change</td>
<td>Value of higher education</td>
<td>Competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative media</td>
<td></td>
<td>Program offerings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure created by <em>Scorecard</em></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for feeling no or little pressure from <em>The College Scorecard</em></td>
<td>“I feel strongly that the vast majority of the students who come to College A... do not even know it exists”</td>
<td>“We’ve been assured that it is not going to be used in a comparison way for purposes of regulation”</td>
<td>“I think the pressure is ours; we want to always increase our retention and graduation rates because we want to serve our students well”</td>
<td>“It does put pressure because you do not know how the data will be interpreted and if it will have an adverse effect”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each president mentioned government regulation in some manner, using different terminology like ‘over-regulation’, ‘compliance’, ‘government oversight’, and ‘government intervention’.

*The College Scorecard* was not mentioned as a specific source of pressure by any of the presidents. President A and President C both refer to Title IX (1972) when providing examples of government mandates that place pressure on higher education institutions, and President D
refers to the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938). When asked specifically if *The College Scorecard* created any pressure, both Presidents B and D indicated that pressure to serve students well and improve retention and graduation rates is created internally. Presidents A, B and C either directly or indirectly indicated that they do not believe students and families that are interested in their institutions are using *The College Scorecard*. President D indicates that there is some pressure to at least review the information and determine if the institution is meeting goals and/or expectations. Ultimately, President D believes the true pressure is generated internally and not externally through *The College Scorecard*. The real pressure appears to be to enroll students that can be successful, and President D indicates that pressure existed long before *The College Scorecard* was introduced.

There is no evidence that *The College Scorecard* created pressure on the four institutions that would ultimately lead to organizational change.

**Finding 3. The College Scorecard data are not considered useful or relied upon.** The data analysis on reliance and usefulness is consistent across each case study. Each president is convinced that the data is not accurate enough or defined clearly enough to be helpful to students and families. The respondents are clear that they do not believe students or high school counselors are using the information, and two presidents indicate they do not believe students are aware *The College Scorecard* exists. Table 4.13 provides information that includes each president’s initial reactions to the usefulness of *The College Scorecard*.

At best, three presidents consider it somewhat useful while one president does not consider it useful at all. All four presidents consider the information to be confusing to students and families, a contributing factor to the perception *The College Scorecard* is not useful.
### Table 4.13

**Reactions to Usefulness of Scorecard Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usefulness</th>
<th>President A</th>
<th>President B</th>
<th>President C</th>
<th>President D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How useful is the data?</strong></td>
<td>“The choice the students make are so individual that looking at that [graduation rates] I don’t think helps the student”</td>
<td>“I don’t know and I don’t know how many people are actually looking at it”</td>
<td>“The graduation rate statistic is flawed”</td>
<td>“Not always as clear or understandable as it might be”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Somewhat helpful information”</td>
<td>“There are no caveats in here by type of institutions and I still think that’s a problem”</td>
<td>“If someone doesn’t understand this stuff and they’re coming to it for the first time… does it really help families?”</td>
<td>“If it’s not accurate, it’s not going to be helpful to anyone, ultimately”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is The College Scorecard being used?</strong></td>
<td>“I feel very strongly that the vast majority of students who come to College A, not only don’t look at The College Scorecard, they don’t even know that it exists”</td>
<td>“Quite frankly, I don’t think hardly anybody finds [The College Scorecard]”</td>
<td>“I certainly don’t hear people talking about it”</td>
<td>“I think it can be misleading”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I would be surprised if we have … students that used it”</td>
<td>Referring to high school counselors, “My sense is they are probably not necessarily pointing people in that direction”</td>
<td>“I don’t even know if high school guidance counselors use it”</td>
<td>“That may happen more as time passes”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
President A and President D do not believe students at their institutions use much consumer information in any format, and President B thinks that students may be using some information, but probably not The College Scorecard. President C initially indicated that students are definitely using consumer information, but later during the interview clarifies that initial response by indicating that most students at College C are probably not using consumer information. Table 4.13 also summarizes comments related to whether the data are currently being used by prospective students and families.

Several of the presidents positively acknowledge the work of the federal government in trying to develop a consumer tool that would provide students and families with comparative information. President A believes this all started with good intentions, and President B states, “I applaud that the government is trying to get a handle on it” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). In sum, the evidence from the interviews and the basic questionnaires are clear, each president believes the Scorecard data are not useful as currently constituted and that students and their families are not using the information.

Finding 4. There may exist a correlation between student reliance and pressure. It does appear that some of the presidents are concerned that if usage and reliance on the data by students and families were to increase, more pressure may be exerted on each institution. President C laments that “I think part of what’s really hard about trying to find out if it’s really of value is the people who are using it aren’t necessarily going to tell you that they’re even looking at it” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). President A states “if we believed, as an institution, that a lot of our students were going to be swayed by The College Scorecard data to select their institution of higher education, it would place more pressure” (Personal communication, President A, April 12, 2016). President D seems to agree by indicating that “the
role of this particular tool may become more prominent” and if so could have a bigger impact on schools (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016).

President A articulates this most clearly by stating that if student use of *The College Scorecard* increases so would the pressure on colleges to present data that puts the institution in the best light. Currently, students do not seem to be relying on *The College Scorecard* data which appears to minimize external pressure for the four college presidents participating in this study. If students are not aware of the data or not using the data and if high school counselors are not pushing students in the direction of using *The College Scorecard*, little to no pressure would be exerted on college leaders.

However, President D observes that the use of *The College Scorecard* could increase over time which could alter some of the current thinking. This study was conducted during the first year *The College Scorecard* has been made available to students. There is a possibility it may gain popularity over time. When the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings were initially released in the 1980s, they were not widely used nor deemed overly important by prospective students (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough et al., 1998). However, from the middle of the 1980s until the middle of the 2000s, the number of students indicating rankings were very important to them in the college search process increased over 50% (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Espinosa et al., 2014).

While the release of *The College Scorecard* generated no pressure on the four institutions in this study, there are indications that if over time students rely more on the information, there could be more pressure on institutions to consider changes to policies and procedures.

**Finding 5. The College Scorecard does not create pressure to improve outcomes.**

One goal the federal government hoped to achieve with the release of *The College Scorecard*
was better accountability from institutions. None of the four presidents felt the need to improve any of the accountability measures detailed in *The College Scorecard*. All four presidents remarked that there is an intrinsic need to improve and each institution continuously seeks to improve. President D remarked that as a president “you are constantly looking at the data and constantly trying, through strategic planning, to improve it” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). This sentiment was confirmed by other participants. President B remarked that there are other pressures ensuring schools are accountable, and President C mentions “the pressure is ours; we want to always increase our retention and graduation rates because we want to serve our students well, not because it is going to make our scorecard look better” (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016).

Each president did express general concern about the data presented in *The College Scorecard*; however, no president expressed concern about the individual data of their institution. President D does indicate that current data for College D is better than the year reported, but does not express any concerns about the data presented. President A and B also indicated that the data for their respective institutions are better today than what is currently reported. While there are few concerns about each individual institution’s data, each president expressed great concerns about the data collection, data presentation, and how the data might be interpreted by students, families and other constituents.

President D indicates the data creates some level of pressure: “it does put pressure because you do not know how the data will be interpreted and if it will have an adverse effect” (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). However, even for President D, any pressure created seems minor and serves more as a reminder to focus efforts on student success.
Much of the data in *The College Scorecard* is presented to consumers through other means, including the *U.S. News and World Report*, IPEDS, and other private organizational websites and publications. However, the presidents are still concerned *The College Scorecard* data are misleading and that using averages to display the information does not accurately depict the data. Even though the data are perceived to be flawed in many respects, this did not result in any pressure on the four presidents to react to the information.

Table 4.14 highlights concerns each president expressed related to the data collected for *The College Scorecard*.

**Table 4.14**

**Data Concerns Expressed by Presidents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns</th>
<th>President A</th>
<th>President B</th>
<th>President C</th>
<th>President D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data is limited</td>
<td>Data is limited, excludes some student populations</td>
<td>Graduation rates misleading</td>
<td>Data is limited, excludes some student populations</td>
<td>Data is limited, excludes some student populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data is misleading</td>
<td>Salary data misleading</td>
<td>Graduation data is not properly determined and will be misused</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to data</td>
<td>Presenting averages can be misleading</td>
<td>Salary data misleading</td>
<td>Using averages can be misleading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Impossible to reduce the purpose and effectiveness of an institution to a finite set of data points”</td>
<td>Need caveats to help students properly compare data at different institutions</td>
<td>“I am just always afraid that in an effort to reduce things to some sort of understandable soundbite, that you lose all the nuance of what the data means”</td>
<td>“You are going to attract and serve different students. All of that you cannot possibly reflect in a little bit of data”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words used to describe data or how data may be used</td>
<td>Dangerous</td>
<td>Confusing</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
<td>Disaggregated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there pressure on College from data presented in <em>The College Scorecard</em></td>
<td>Doesn’t appear to present any pressure on College A</td>
<td>No pressure on College B, President B indicates there are other forms of pressure on colleges to produce stronger results</td>
<td>Does not appear to present any pressure on College C</td>
<td>Acknowledges data is better today, there is some pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data collection and the presentation of the data in *The College Scorecard* are topics that each president spoke about at length. The general feeling of all four presidents is best summarized by a comment from President A,

*I think that anything that an institution can do to improve graduation for students, retention, to hold costs as low as possible, those are all things that the leaders that I know in higher education want to do because it’s the right thing to do, not because it would improve the positioning or how they appear on the scorecard.* (Personal communication, President A, April 12, 2016)

Each president acknowledges they are always interested in presenting better data, but *The College Scorecard* is not driving that interest.

**Finding 6. Decision-making is driven by mission.** In cross-analyzing the four cases it is clear that each college is strongly guided by the mission of the institution. Each president indicated that mission guides the decision-making, and *The College Scorecard* has not resulted in any decisions that would change policies to conflict with the institutional mission. All four presidents are committed to the students that they currently enroll. Each school attracts and
serves a diverse student body with a fairly large number of low-income and first generation students. When discussing mission, President C states that “mission would come above” other factors when making decisions (Personal communication, President C, May 2, 2016). President D states that the release of the *College Scorecard* data helps College D to focus on its mission through review of its policies and ensuring their students are being successful (Personal communication, President D, May 10, 2016). Neither President A nor President D expressed any concerns that the data might be skewed downward because of the student body they serve. In fact, President A states that by enrolling certain ‘at-risk’ students “I think we’ve lived our mission” (Personal communication, President A, April 12, 2016).

For this group of Catholic college presidents, making decisions within the values of the institution and using the mission of the college to guide decision-making are strong forces. Each of the presidents was very clear that the mission of the institution shaped his or her college from its inception and will continue to be at the forefront in leading each organization. *The College Scorecard* does not appear to place any of the colleges in a position to make decisions that would be in conflict with their mission to serve low-income and first-generation families.

While College C has changed admissions policies in the past, President C believes that doing so remained within the tradition and mission of the institution. Each president is confident that if there were pressure to change admissions policies, their guiding mission to serve diverse, low-income or first generation students would prevail. The importance of remaining true to the mission guides the decision-making process at each school.

**Conclusion**

Four case studies were conducted and analyzed with the setting for each a small private Catholic college or university. Presidents from the four colleges and universities participated in
the research and responded to a basic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as part of the data collection process. Three techniques were used to analyze the data including direct interpretation, establishing patterns, and developing naturalistic generalizations (Creswell, 2013, pp. 199-200). For each individual case two cycles of coding occurred. In the first cycle both descriptive and in vivo coding was used to develop several categories of data. In the second cycle of coding, pattern coding was used to reduce the data into five major themes.

The five major themes include pressure, data, usefulness, mission and access. Each case study was analyzed individually, and then a cross-case synthesis was conducted. The overall reaction to The College Scorecard by the participants was fairly negative, mainly due to concerns about the types of data being shared with students and families, the methodology for obtaining some of the data, and the presentation of the data. Reactions of the four presidents to each major theme were similar and consistent. Based on the analysis of the data, the following findings were reported in this chapter and will be discussed further in Chapter Five:

- Finding 1. Admission policies and practices are not changing.
- Finding 2. The College Scorecard created no pressure.
- Finding 3. The College Scorecard data are not considered useful or relied upon.
- Finding 4. There may exist a correlation between student reliance and pressure.
- Finding 5. The College Scorecard does not create pressure to improve outcomes.
- Finding 6. Decision-making is driven by mission.
Chapter V: Summary, Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how college presidents at small private Catholic institutions in the northeastern United States that serve low-income students might interpret and react to *The College Scorecard*. This study will explore the following central research and sub question:

Q1: How do college and university presidents describe the impact of *The College Scorecard*?

S1: How will college and university presidents react to *The College Scorecard* in relation to new student enrollment and admissions?

This study explored how presidents interpreted *The College Scorecard*, and if pressures developed that could lead to changes in current institutional policies and practices, particularly those related to student access. Evidence was obtained through a basic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a review of print and digital information. The research question is framed through the lens of institutional theory and particularly by the seminal work on isomorphism by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). When isomorphic tendencies emerge within an industry, it is usually the result of pressures that impact organizational behavior. There are three types of pressure that may act in concert or individually to lead organizations toward isomorphism or similar policies and practices. Those pressures are described as coercive, mimetic and normative pressure. Federal policy changes that impact institutions are an example of coercive pressure. Mimetic pressure occurs during times of uncertainty and leads organizations to copy more successful institutions. Normative pressures force organizations to professionalize and work within industry standards and guidelines. This multiple case study explored how the implementation of *The College Scorecard* was interpreted by college
presidents and whether there was pressure to change behavior in relation to admissions policies and practices.

This chapter will summarize the primary findings from Chapter Four and explore the significance of those findings. This chapter will also relate the research findings to the literature reviewed in chapter two, discuss implications for higher education, identify limitations of the study, and suggest areas for future research. Six primary findings were reported in chapter four and are provided here for review.

**Primary Findings**

- Finding 1. Admission policies and practices are not changing.
- Finding 2. *The College Scorecard* created no pressure.
- Finding 3. *The College Scorecard* data are not considered useful or relied upon.
- Finding 4. There may exist a correlation between student reliance and pressure.
- Finding 5. *The College Scorecard* does not create pressure to improve outcomes.
- Finding 6. Decision-making is driven by mission.

**Findings and the Research Question**

*The College Scorecard* did not make an impact on any of the four presidents in this study, and as a result none of the presidents plans to change admissions policies and practices at his or her institution. The presidents were not particularly supportive of this policy and elaborated on what they considered to be flaws in the construction of the policy. First, while the government believed *The College Scorecard* could be used to promote accountability and force schools to improve, the presidents in this study believe they already work to improve student outcomes and student success. Continuous review and self-improvement are part of their normal course of business. As a result, the release of *The College Scorecard* did not provide any increased
motivation, desire or pressure to improve student outcomes. Secondly, each president believes that the information provided by The College Scorecard is not used by students when making enrollment decisions. Two of the presidents did acknowledge that pressure to consider the impact of The College Scorecard might increase over time if students were to use the information to make enrollment decisions. Finally, the four institutions in this study are strongly mission-driven. Each one of these colleges has a long standing mission to serve the under-represented student, including many first-generation students, and these presidents are strongly guided by that mission when making decisions. A decision to change policies and practices related to admission of students would cause mission drift for these institutions. Mission drift is not a consideration for any of the four presidents and a key factor in not changing admissions policies.

The findings in this study provide strong evidence that The College Scorecard is not having an impact on any of the college presidents to react, specifically as it relates to new student enrollment and admissions. More importantly, this research also highlights the powerful guiding force that mission is for these four Catholic institutions and the strong belief of their presidents that working toward student success and strong accountability measures occurs without the need for government intervention. The findings do reveal that even when presidents are committed to a mission of serving under-represented students, they understand future challenges might occur should students begin to rely on The College Scorecard when making college choices. The significance of schools of this type considering changes to admissions policies may be the unintended consequence of reduced access for low-income and first-generation students.
Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

*The College Scorecard* did not create any coercive pressure for any of the four colleges in this study. The work by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) on isomorphism concludes that organizations can encounter three types of pressure -- coercive, mimetic, and normative, and these pressures working in concert or individually can lead toward isomorphic tendencies. As noted in chapter three, coercive pressure can occur when other organizations, like the government, exert pressure by enacting new rules or mandates (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). *The College Scorecard*, as a new federal policy mandate requiring colleges to provide data that would produce stronger consumer information for prospective students, might have been expected to exert coercive pressure on institutions. However, in this research *The College Scorecard* did not exert coercive pressure on any of the four institutions.

It does appear that normative pressure played a role in the presidents’ reactions to *The College Scorecard*. Some degree of normative pressure is exerted through the four institutions’ association with one another as Catholic institutions dedicated and committed to following their mission. Additional normative pressure appears to have been exerted as a result of higher education’s pushback on the proposed federal rating system. The original federal mandate was developed as a rating system and then revised to *The College Scorecard*. The initial rating system was highly controversial, and many in higher education were concerned that it would lead to unintended consequences. Feedback from the higher education community led to significant pushback against the initial rating system. Ultimately, the federal government responded to those concerns and dropped the rating aspect. This change in policy reduced tensions and diminished the pressure on institutions to react through organizational change. As a result, higher education as an industry acquiesced to the federal mandate, and *The College
Scorecard was implemented. This industry acquiescence would be expected to exert normative pressure on individual institutions to accept The College Scorecard and refrain from reacting with any organizational change. This expectation is supported by this study. It appears that normative pressure led the four presidents here to comply with the release of The College Scorecard based upon the environmental pressures from the higher education industry as well as their association with Catholic colleges. A reaction that reflects normative pressure and contradicts the theory that federal mandates create coercive pressures. While isomorphic tendencies are likely if pressure is exerted on an organization, compliance is another potential result (Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2008). Institutional theory posits that organizations want to remain sustainable and viable while also generating social approval and legitimacy (Manning, 2013; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Complying with the new federal policy designed to promote affordability, accountability, and better consumer information generates social approval and increases legitimacy.

Although coercive pressure might have been expected with the release of The College Scorecard, each president cited other government regulations that created coercive pressure for each institution. The Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) and Title IX (1972) were the federal regulations mentioned most often. These federal regulations, recently updated, require institutions to make resource commitments of time or dollars to remain in compliance. Resource commitments appear to be a factor contributing to coercive pressure. The fact that there was no coercive pressure on the four institutions by The College Scorecard could be explained by the lack of resource commitment required by any of the institutions. The seminal work by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify federal rules or mandates as examples of items creating
coercive pressure, yet this research has determined that not all federal mandates produce coercive pressure.

**Findings in Relation to Literature Review**

In this study the four presidents indicate that no organizational changes will be made to admissions policies as a result of *The College Scorecard*. The literature indicates that organizational changes occur when institutions feel devalued as a result of published information, such as rankings (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Even institutions that are ranked or rated highly will make changes if the institution feels the information does not accurately portray the institution (p. 458). Three of the presidents in this study were comfortable with the institutional information provided and did not feel devalued by the information. The fourth institution, College D, had the least favorable data. President D did express some concern about the information but acknowledged it was factual and thus did not feel devalued. Martins (2005) reports that the chance for organizational change increases or decreases based on whether or not the data or outcomes presented match the organizations’ perception of themselves. In this study, each president was comfortable with his or her own data and indicated it was reflective of the institution. In this way, the research in this study supports this prior work.

Evidence shows that institutions have reacted in the past by changing admissions policies and practices when confronted with other consumer information, including the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings (Hossler, 2000). The release of data for consumer information purposes, particularly rankings, places pressure on institutions to show strong results (Machung, 1998; Espeland & Sauder, 2007) that will ultimately produce better rankings. Higher rankings result in benefits to institutions, such as increased applications, larger enrollments, and stronger fundraising (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Meredith, 2004). Since *The College Scorecard* is in its
first year of existence, there is no evidence that strong data or ‘above average’ ratings provide any benefits to an institution. The presidents in this study do not foresee any tangible benefits resulting from improvement to the data released in *The College Scorecard*. The decision not to make changes to admissions policies aligns with prior research that indicates schools will make changes to attain improved rankings and receive the associated benefits.

In this study, the presidents cited concerns about the quality of the data in *The College Scorecard*, including the validity of the data, flaws in the data, and a belief that a college cannot be reduced to numbers alone. Historically, the methodology and data used in various ranking and rating systems have often been criticized by academia (Myers & Robe, 2009; Webster, 1984). The evidence in this study suggests that the presidents felt no pressure from the data to be more accountable, but rather that each institution would continue to work to improve student success. Much of the data currently presented on *The College Scorecard* is already available to families through other websites and formats. The data being available prior to the release of *The College Scorecard* may explain why this new format does not create any pressure for the presidents in this study.

No president believes that students and families are relying on the data in *The College Scorecard* when making college decisions. However, if students and families begin to rely on the information, whether useful or not, institutions may become more concerned with the data being provided. The research by Espeland and Sauder (2007) determined that external audience reaction to rankings influences how administrators react. There is no evidence in this study that external audiences are relying on the information in *The College Scorecard*. While this research did not study student usage, the interview responses by each president indicated a strong perception that students attending the four institutions do not rely on *The College Scorecard*. 
This is consistent with the initial release of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings where students did not rely on the information at first (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough et al., 1998) but quickly grew reliant between the 1980s and 2000s (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009). The literature provides clear evidence that pressure to change admissions policies and practices occurred once institutions realized students were relying on rankings data (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Hossler, 2000; McDonough et al., 1998). A recent press release from the United States Department of Education on September 14, 2016, claimed that 1.5 million people have used *The College Scorecard* (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This is the first such release of user statistics. This data describes the number of visitors to the website, but it does not provide any evidence that students are relying on the information when making college decisions.

Collectively, the presidents do not believe the data included in *The College Scorecard* are useful to families or reflective of the strengths of an institution. The findings of this study reveal concern regarding collection of the data, the misleading nature of the data, and the relevance of the data. This study supports prior research that found institutions are concerned about how data will be interpreted once released to the public. This has been a long-standing concern dating back to the early 20th century (Myers & Robe, 2009). Concerns about the exclusion of important information or important data elements (Altbach, 2012; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Corley, 2002) or confusion associated with the data presented, such as post-graduation earnings (Schmidt et al., 2011) or that quantifiable measures have no relation to academic quality (Brooks, 2005), are similar to the concerns expressed in this study.

Finally, for each president of the four schools in this study, the mission of the institution is a driving force for decision-making. A firm commitment to the mission of the institution was expressed by each of the four presidents. The literature suggests that institutions in the past have
found it difficult to continue making decisions that align with mission when confronted with ranking systems. College administrators believe they are compelled to react to rankings and not necessarily in ways that advance the mission of the institution (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). There has been pressure placed on college presidents to make changes that would essentially change mission (Machung, 1998). An interviewee in a study by Espeland and Sauder (2007) commented that there is pressure to operate against one’s own mission when making decisions in response to rankings.

The four schools in this study all represent Catholic colleges with missions to serve economically disadvantaged students. This is not only the mission of the college but an extension of the work of the sponsoring ministries that support each institution. The findings in this study are clear: each president is firmly committed to the mission of the institution, and following the mission is paramount to the success of the institution. This finding contradicts prior research where institutions felt pressure to make decisions that may have resulted in mission drift (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Two explanations might explain this contradiction. The first is that The College Scorecard is not a ranking system and the presidents are feeling no pressure to react to The College Scorecard. There is no reason to make any decisions that conflict with mission if the perception of the study’s participants is that there is no external pressure to improve or manipulate the data. Secondly, each participant represents a Catholic institution with a strong commitment to mission and to serving low-income students. Prior studies may have consisted of a wide range of institutions, including some that were not as strongly committed to an institutional mission as the four institutions in this study.

This strong commitment to mission ensures that no changes to policies and procedures that impact student access will occur at this time and suggest that would be the case in the future
as well. Institutional theory discusses how institutions seek legitimacy through acceptable actions by key stakeholders (Scott, 1987), and the four institutions in this study consider commitment to mission as a critical action for stakeholders. Remaining committed to mission provides legitimacy to this group of institutions.

**Implications for Higher Education.**

Access to a college education is important not only for individual students and families, but for the betterment of society. There have been unintended consequences as a result of ranking systems, such as the *U.S. News & World Report*, leading to reduced access for some lower-income and first-generation students at certain institutions. When the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings were released in the early 1980s, there was little reaction from colleges and universities initially (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough et al., 1998). Over time, though, colleges and universities became more aware of the reliance on such rankings by students, which resulted in greater pressure to produce a strong ranking.

In this initial release of *The College Scorecard*, the perception of the four presidents in this study is that students are not relying on *The College Scorecard* when selecting a college to attend. As a result, there is no reason for any of the four presidents in this study to react with any changes, particularly to admissions policies and procedures. While this research suggests that there are no immediate plans to make changes to admissions policies and practices, concerns still exist for the future. Early indications from two of the participants suggest that should student reliance on *The College Scorecard* grow in the future, the pressure on presidents to make policy changes related to admissions and student access could be heightened. Increasing reliance on *The College Scorecard* could result in unintended consequences including mission drift and policy changes that restrict student access. Stuart (2015) argues that colleges should be
evaluated for excellence within their own mission; similarly, in this research President B discussed the need for identifying similar colleges in *The College Scorecard*. This study suggests that commitment to mission is a strong factor in the decision not to change admissions policies. As more students rely on the information, the commitment to mission may be tested. If this commitment to mission falters, then the likelihood of organizational changes will increase. Any future versions of *The College Scorecard* or other variations of consumer information should consider mission when compiling information for families.

The data presented in *The College Scorecard* raised many issues and concerns for the four college presidents in this study. The data need clearer explanations for families and students and more robust information on salaries, retention, and graduation rates as a start. To improve usefulness, the data also need to be more inclusive and include transfer and part-time students. The mission, character, and personality of an institution are not captured simply by providing data points. Descriptors to help students understand the mission, character and personality of each institution would help to improve *The College Scorecard*’s usefulness. The danger of using only data points is that more than 600 other developers have now begun to use this data to provide additional tools to prospective students for making important decisions about college (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). If the data are already confusing and its usefulness is in question, then having it used by others and spread to even more students and families could be potentially damaging for both students and institutions. As more students with access to this data rely on this information, the pressure on institutions to weigh mission versus potential student access decisions increases.
Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study including its small sample size. Although the study is a multiple case study analysis designed for replication and not extrapolation of the results, the sample size is relatively small with four participants. Increasing the number of cases used in the future would increase the validity of the study. Selection of the cases in this study was limited by several factors including size of the institution, religious denomination, and the number of Pell grant recipients. Changes to any one of these factors could influence the outcome of the study. Other factors potentially important were beyond the scope of the study and were not considered, including the financial condition or enrollment condition of the institution. However, they are potentially important variables that may warrant additional study.

Suggestions for Future Research

A key concern that emerged throughout the analyses in this study is the type and extent of use of The College Scorecard. While the number of users searching The College Scorecard has been reported at 1.5 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), a study should be conducted to determine the number of students that used the data and to examine the degree to which those students relied on the data while making their college selection.

Correspondingly, a longitudinal study should be conducted to review student usage and reliance on the data over a period of time to determine if student reliance on the information is increasing. Studies can also be conducted to determine the socio-economic status of the students relying on the information and determine if there are any differences between higher income and lower income families. Research should also be conducted to determine if an increase in the use of and reliance on The College Scorecard ultimately places pressure on institutions leading to
changes in admissions practices and policies and to what extent there is a struggle with mission drift.

**Conclusion**

For small, private, catholic colleges, the evidence suggests that *The College Scorecard* is not having an impact on the presidents to react to this federal policy mandate, particularly as it relates to new student enrollment and admissions. The federal mandate to provide better consumer information to students and families has produced no coercive pressure on these four institutions. Coercive pressure might have been expected to result from this new federal mandate, yet the data suggest that normative pressure may have played a larger role in influencing decisions by the presidents of the institutions in this study. The perception that the information is not being relied upon has placed little pressure on these institutions to make decisions that may be in conflict with mission or lead to more stringent admissions policies and procedures that could restrict student access. This supports the literature that suggests that institutions began to make organizational changes as the reliance on prior ranking models increased.

Although there is concern about data quality, particularly related to the use of averages, skewed data, flawed data, and meaningless data, there is an overwhelming feeling that most families are not relying on this information. As a result, the participants feel no pressure from *The College Scorecard* to improve the data included. Each president was clear that the practice to improve student outcomes is continuous because it is the right thing to do and not because of a need to improve data in *The College Scorecard*. 
Each president expressed deep commitment to institutional mission and a strong interest in serving low-income and first-generation students. The mission of each college is to serve this student population, and honoring the mission is of utmost importance at these four institutions.

The relative lack of pressure, little concern about significant student use of *The College Scorecard*, and strong commitment to serve low-income and first-generation students are indications that presidents are not concerned enough about *The College Scorecard* to make any significant changes to admissions policies and procedures. When asked directly about changes to admissions practices, three of the presidents clearly indicated that no changes would be made at this time. The fourth president acknowledged that a review of policies was on-going as the result of an internal review process, not because of *The College Scorecard*. Changes were unlikely and would not be based on *The College Scorecard* information. This study suggests that *The College Scorecard* will not impact the decision of college and university presidents in relation to new student enrollment and admissions in the immediate future.
References


Subject: Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Study

Dear President_____________,

My name is Joseph Posillico and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am conducting research for my doctoral thesis and am inviting you, and other presidents of small, private, catholic institutions in the northeast of the United States to participate in this study.

This study will explore presidential perceptions on federal policy changes, specifically your reactions to *The College Scorecard* that was implemented in September 2015. At a time when growing pressures from the federal government, changing policies, and additional rules and regulations place pressure on your institution, this timely research is being conducted to explore how proposed policy changes might influence decision-making at small, private, catholic institutions. In particular, the focus is on small, private catholic institutions that serve low-income students.

If you would like to learn more about this study or if you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at posillico.j@husky.neu.edu and I will provide you with further information on the study.

I hope you consider participating in this research study and appreciate your support.

Sincerely,

Joseph Posillico  
Doctoral Student at Northeastern University
Appendix B

Reminder Email
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject: Second Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Study

Dear President ___________,

Last week I emailed you to request your participation in a study exploring presidential perceptions on federal policy changes, specifically your reactions to *The College Scorecard* that was implemented in September 2015.

This is just a reminder to email me at posillico.j@husky.neu.edu to learn more about this study or let me know if you would be willing to participate in this study.

Thank you again for consideration and continued support.

Sincerely,

Joseph Posillico
Doctoral Student at Northeastern University
Appendix C

Second Reminder Email
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject: Reminder to Participate in Study on The College Scorecard

Dear President_____________,

I am emailing you once again to request your participation in a study exploring presidential perceptions on federal policy changes, specifically your reactions to The College Scorecard that was implemented in September 2015.

Please email me at posillico.j@husky.neu.edu to learn more about this study or let me know that you would be willing to participate in this study. If I do not hear from you I will assume you are unable to participate and want to thank you for your consideration.

Thank you again for consideration.

Sincerely,

Joseph Posillico
Doctoral Student at Northeastern University
Appendix D

Letter of Consent
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Principle Investigator: Dr. James Griffin, Northeastern University
Student Researcher: Joseph J. Posillico
Title of Study: Impacting Student Access through Federal Policy Changes:
Exploring How College Presidents Interpret Policy Changes and the Impact on Student
Enrollment Decisions

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but
the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. Your participation in this study, while extremely valued, is completely voluntary. Even if you begin the study, you may choose not to answer any question or to withdraw at any time. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement, return it, and provide you a copy for your records.

This study will explore presidential perceptions on federal policy changes, specifically your reactions to The College Scorecard that was implemented in September 2015. At a time when growing pressures from the federal government, changing policies, and additional rules and regulations place pressure on your institution, this timely research is being conducted to explore how proposed policy changes might influence decision-making at small, private, catholic institutions. In particular, the focus is on small, private catholic institutions that serve low-income students.

If you decide to take part in this study, We will send you a survey questionnaire that will probe current challenges facing presidents, thoughts about current ranking systems and The College Scorecard. After receiving your completed survey questionnaire, we would like the opportunity to schedule a meeting with you for approximately one hour to learn more about your thoughts regarding federal policy changes and The College Scorecard. We can meet at a location on a day and time that is convenient for you, and should you agree, audiotape these meetings.

For purposes of privacy, I am the only person who will see your survey questionnaire responses and the only person who will meet with you and the other participants. Your part in this study will be completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to keep all participants and your institution anonymous. For instance, participants will be referenced as “Participant A”, “Participant B”, etc., and institutions will be referred to as “Northeast College A”, “Northeast College B”, etc. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

There are no costs, foreseeable risks or direct benefits to you if you choose to participate in this study. However, this study may contribute to understanding how federal policy decisions impact institutional decision-making and in particular, student access for low-income students.
If you have any questions about this research, please contact me at posillico.j@husky.neu.edu or Dr. James Griffin, who is overseeing this research, at jam.griffin@husky.neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Ave., Mailstop: 490 Renaissance Park, Boston, MA 02115-5000. Tel: 617.373.4588. Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________
Signature of participant      Date

______________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above     Date

______________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________
Joseph J. Posillico, Student Researcher       Date

______________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________  __________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above     Date
Appendix E
Survey Questionnaire
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Personal Information:
Date: ________________________________________________
Name: ________________________________________________
Institution: ____________________________________________

1. How many years have you served as a college president?
   __ 0-5       __ 6-10       __ 11-15       __ 16 +- 

2. What led you to serve as president at a catholic institution?

3. What percentage of low-income (Pell recipients) students did you have in your traditional (first-time, full-time) undergraduate population in fall 2015?
   __ 30-35%       __ 36-40%       __ 41-45%       __ 45%+-

4. What are some of the enrollment challenges you face today in leading a small, private, catholic institution?
5. How knowledgeable are you about *The College Scorecard*? Use the following scale:

1 – Very  
2 – Knowledgeable  
3 – Somewhat  
4 – Not Very  
5 – Unaware of Scorecard

If you selected 5 – Unaware, skip question 5a. and move to question 6.

a. What is your perception of the purpose of this new policy?

6. What is your initial reaction to the release of *The College Scorecard*?

1 – Very Positive  
2 – Positive  
3 – Neutral  
4 – Negative  
5 – Very Negative

7. How useful will *The College Scorecard* information be for prospective students and their families when they are searching for colleges?

1 – Very Useful  
2 – Useful  
3 – Somewhat Useful  
4 – Not Useful  
5 – Undecided

8. How easy will it be for families to understand and interpret the information provided by *The College Scorecard*?

1 – Very Easy  
2 – Easy  
3 – Neutral  
4 – Confusing  
5 – Very Confusing

9. Do you think prospective students that currently enroll at your institution might rely on rankings or other consumer information?

1 – Definitely  
2 – Probably  
3 – Maybe  
4 – Probably Not  
5 – Definitely Not
Appendix F
Interview Protocol
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Personal Information:
Date: ________________________________________________
Name: ________________________________________________
Institution: ____________________________________________

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study exploring how presidents perceive federal policy changes, specifically the recent policy instituting the federal college scorecard implemented in September 2015. The purpose of this interview is to discuss your responses to the survey questionnaire, provide an opportunity for us to discuss your responses, and allow for further elaboration and I also have five additional questions for us to discuss today. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, know that all materials will be stored securely and your name will be omitted.

Do you agree to allow this interview to be recorded?

Thank you.

1. Describe in your role as president some of the challenges that exist in higher education today?

2. Regarding federal policy changes – Tell me about your reactions to the new consumer information and accountability measures (The College Scorecard)?
a. What concerns do you have?
b. How do you think your institution will measure up?
c. Does a new rule or regulation such as this place pressure on your institution?
   i. How so?
d. What effect do you think the new information might have on student access?
e. Will the new policy impact your enrollment engineering?

3. How do you think prospective students and others will use the new consumer information?
   a. Is this good or bad?

4. What changes might you make as a result of this policy change?
   a. Do you plan to make changes to admissions policies and recruiting practices?
      i. Why/Why Not?
   b. Are you concerned about consumers comparing your data with peer institutions or competitors?
   c. Do you plan to work to improve the measures reported?
      i. How so?
   d. Do you think that the new policy change will impact access to your institution?
      i. If yes, in what ways will the rating system impact access?
      ii. Is this good or bad?