THE ROLE OF THE ACCREDITATION LIAISON: A GENERAL INDUCTIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In order to facilitate the reaffirmation of accreditation process at institutional members of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), each institution is required to appoint an accreditation liaison. Since SACSCOC provides only a short description of the role these accreditation liaisons are supposed to play, and since the role is not documented within a body of scholarly literature, both accreditation officers and their supervisors are faced with the need to discover that role. This discovery process frequently occurs at the same time they are pursuing the institution’s reaffirmation of accreditation. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the accreditation liaison from the perspective of the accreditation liaison. General inductive analysis was used to analyze data collected through interviews with five participants serving in the accreditation liaison role at Texas community colleges. Professional role theory was the theoretical framework employed. The participants identified their responsibilities as accreditation, institutional education and institutional protection and their challenges as lack of support, lack of knowledge, issues of integrity, expanse of responsibility and responsibility without authority. Analysis of the interviews also identified organizational relationships and training and preparation as significant concerns for the study participants. Both SACSCOC and higher education institutions can use the findings in this study to guide and support those filling the role of accreditation liaison. However, more study is needed in order to develop best practices for accreditation liaisons, their supervisors and SACSCOC.

Keywords: accreditation liaison, role theory, community college, SACSCOC, general inductive analysis, reaffirmation of accreditation
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Chapter 1: The Research Problem

Each year, approximately 50 community and technical colleges in the south go through the reaffirmation of accreditation process. This process requires the institution to complete two major projects. The first is called the Compliance Certification. This is a detailed, documented response to 79 prompts requesting information about the mission, governance, personnel, policies and effectiveness of the institution. Its purpose is to demonstrate the institution’s compliance with accreditation standards. A typical compliance certification document runs from 500 to 5000 pages, depending on the size and complexity of the institution.

The second project is called a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Although the document describing the QEP is limited to 100 pages, the project is a much larger undertaking than the Compliance Certification. A QEP is a five year plan for institutional improvement that “focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution” (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC], 2012c, p. 21). In order to successfully meet the requirements for reaffirmation of accreditation, this plan must be implemented by the institution, with documentation demonstrating the rationale for the project, its budget, implementation schedule and assessment system.

In order to facilitate this reaffirmation of accreditation process, each institution in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) is required to appoint an accreditation liaison. Ongoing communication between the institution and the accrediting body is funneled through the liaison.
Statement of the Problem

SACSCOC provides a short description of the role these accreditation liaisons are supposed to play (See Appendix A), but few institutions incorporate these guidelines into their organizational structure. The SACSCOC guidelines describe the position as an interface between the institution and the accrediting organization, but there is no definition of the role that should be played by these accreditation liaisons within their own institutions. Yet those who serve as institutional accreditation liaisons invariably have additional responsibilities at their institutions, a fact that is alluded to in the guidelines when it says that the liaison should be appointed from among faculty or administration at the institution.

The role of the accreditation liaison is not documented within a body of scholarly literature like that which addresses human resource officers, information officers, public school administrators or higher education institution presidents. As a result, both accreditation officers and their supervisors are faced with the need to discover the accreditation liaison role, frequently at the same time they are pursuing the institution’s reaffirmation of accreditation. The problem addressed by this study is the lack of needed information about the accreditation liaison’s role within an institution.

Audience for the Research

Accreditation officers and their supervisors are the primary audience for this study. Knowledge of the role that other accreditation liaisons play allows those who fill such positions, as well as their supervisors, to begin to benchmark the activities and responsibilities of the position. This study can be a useful point of departure for executive administrators to use in understanding how to incorporate the required liaison position into their own organizational structures. It can also serve as an external touchstone during phases of organizational change.
Since the study was limited to liaisons serving community colleges within the Southern Region, it best serves audiences at SACSCOC accredited institutions.

SACSCOC staff members can use this study to understand how their expectations of the position are or are not implemented at some institutions in their region. And finally, future researchers have the opportunity to use the information that has been gleaned from this study to develop further studies that, eventually, could identify a set of best practices for accreditation liaisons and for their institutions in relation to the role.

**Significance of the Problem**

Institutions devote considerable time and expense to the reaffirmation of accreditation. According to a vice president of SACSCOC, institutions regularly hire consultants and send teams of faculty and administrators to the SACSCOC annual conference and summer institute in order to learn how to manage the reaffirmation process, (B. Goldthwaite, personal communication, July, 2011). Despite such efforts, it is extremely rare for an institution to complete the process without warnings, probations or citations (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2013). Citations, or recommendations for improvement, are the least serious of all the possible negative reaffirmation results. And even for these recommendations, colleges and universities must institute changes and complete follow-up reports.

The SACSCOC guidelines for accreditation liaisons identify institutional accreditation activity as a duty for the individual assigned to that position, saying that the liaison is responsible for “Ensuring that compliance with accreditation requirements is incorporated into the planning and evaluation process of the institution…Serving as a resource person during the decennial review process and helping prepare for and coordinating reaffirmation and other accrediting
visits” ("The Accreditation Liaison," 2012, p. 1). However, the guidelines do not say what role the individual is supposed to play within the institution, nor does it explain how the accreditation officer should implement the charge.

According to a study by Kayama, King, and Smith (1996), employees’ understanding of their role within an organization impacts the ethical decision making of employees. The 1996 study shows that employees who perceive themselves to be managers are more likely to make ethical decisions than those who see themselves as line employees. Since the first principle in the SACSCOC guidelines for reaffirmation is the principle of integrity (SACSCOC, 2012a), and all other principles are measured against this one, an accreditation liaison’s understanding of the role can have a significant impact on the institution’s success with the reaffirmation process.

The ongoing accreditation of an institution affects its reputation, its funding, and its students’ opportunities; it is a significantly important element of institutional success. Unfortunately, scholarly literature does not address the role of the accreditation officer or recommend any best practices for completing and/or maintaining regional accreditation. This investigation into the role played by current accreditation liaisons begins to fill this gap.

**Research Questions**

**Central Question**

The purpose of this study was to answer the central question – From the perspective of the accreditation liaison, what is the role of the accreditation liaison at community colleges accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges?

**Sub-questions**

Additional questions that were addressed while pursuing the answer to the central question included the following:
What do accreditation liaisons identify as their responsibilities?

What are the challenges accreditation liaisons identify for their positions?

**Organization of the Study**

The following pages describe the process that was used to develop answers to these questions and the background material that informed that process. In the section immediately following, the theoretical framework for this study of the accreditation liaison role is presented. In Chapter 2, scholarly literature relating to the process of accreditation and its possible impact on those who have a role in the process is reviewed. Following this literature review is a chapter on the design and implementation of the research project itself. This chapter also discusses the protection of human subjects. The fourth chapter presents the analysis and findings of study. The fifth and final chapter includes the discussion, recommendations for practice and recommendations for further research. It is followed by appendices and references.

**Professional Role Theory**

This study of the accreditation liaison role was examined through the lens of organizational, or professional role theory. The term role, as it applies to an individual’s professional position, can make reference to three potentially different aspects of professional position (Krantz & Maltz, 1997; Cornelissen, 2012). It can be used to refer to the duties, tasks, responsibilities and expectations associated with a particular position, the role as a part of the organization’s structure. Role can also be used to refer to the behaviors of an individual in response to that structure. Such behaviors may or may not coincide with the individual’s actual perception of the position within the organization, so that an individual may be playing a role to meet expectations, but not necessarily internalizing or endorsing that role. The third aspect of
organizational role is the individual’s perception of the position within the organization and may include both of the first two.

**How Roles Are Determined**

Employees assess themselves, their structural position, the systems in which they see themselves embedded and the influence of stakeholders to whom they see themselves accountable in order to determine their professional role (Cornelissen, 2012; Ibarra, 1999; Tierney & Farmer, 2011). Making sense of a professional role is a negotiated process that proceeds interactively with influence from all of the above. According to Krantz and Maltz (1997), individuals generally acquire the information used to identify their role in four ways, frequently using information collected by all four methods.

**Contributing factors.** First, individuals usually have specifically assigned functions or purposes within the organization or team that brings with it particular tasks or duties. The roster of these tasks or duties is one way to define the individual’s role. Because these duties or tasks fulfill some part of the overall mission of the organization, they lead to the second source of information – how this position contributes to the mission. The third potential source of information used to identify professional role is the unconsciously assigned or assumed function of the position. Since this source of information about a professional role is not overtly recognized or identified, it is often the most difficult to pin down. Finally, an individual’s own understanding of the role will impact the way in which information from these other sources is integrated into the final role as performed.

In contemporary organizations, individuals are likely to find themselves being asked to fulfill a role that requires a break with, rather than continuity with previous experience (Cornelissen, 2012). The accreditation liaison, recommended by policy to be appointed from
among the ranks of faculty or administration at an institution, is almost invariably placed in this situation. Krantz and Maltz (1997) provide a particularly effective framework for examining exactly how accreditation liaisons arrive at the definition of their roles. This framework includes two distinct pieces that each contain two processes, resulting in the four-part framework presented in Figure 1.

In the first piece of the framework, characteristics of the role are either given or taken. Employees are given a role when elements of the role are identified outside the employee and given to or imposed on the employee. Given elements can come from job descriptions, performance evaluations and the expressed expectations of others. Employees take a role when they identify and choose to take on elements of a professional role. The taken aspects of a role can originate from the employee’s ideal of the role. How the employee enacts the role and the tasks that the employee performs on a regular basis make up additional elements over which the employee exercises control.

In the second piece of the framework, characteristics of the role are divided between those that pertain to the task and those that pertain to the sentient system of the organization (Krantz & Maltz, 1997). According to this framework, the characteristics of role that pertain to task are those characteristics that exist apart from individuals within the organization. These include such things as structures, procedures and technologies. The characteristics that pertain to the sentient system of the organization are those characteristics dependent on individual personalities and human interaction, the social work context of the role or the underlying system of values and motivations (Tierney & Farmer, 2011). These include such things as symbols, meanings, attitudes, opinions and experiences.
Where the given and the taken aspects of a professional role overlap, the employee fulfills the expectations of the organization. Where the task and sentient aspects of a professional role overlap is the boundary between the formal and informal. It is here that the employee experiences, among other things, organizational change, peer pressure and supervisory relationships.

![Diagram of Professional Role](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 1** Adapted from Krantz and Maltz, 1997

The greater the area of alignment between the given and taken aspects of professional role, the greater the degree of authorization there is for the job responsibilities fulfilled by the employee. And the greater an organization’s understanding of its own sentient system, the more likely employees will be able to negotiate an achievable professional role (Krantz & Maltz, 1997).

**Conflict and ambiguity.** In order to develop an achievable professional role, employees must not only negotiate the systems described above, but also must come to grips with potential
role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict occurs when the various factors contributing to the role are in opposition. Role ambiguity occurs when the factors contributing to role development or identification are obscure, unstable or incomplete, making it difficult for the employee to determine the nature of the role.

**Dual role identification.** In the case of the accreditation liaison, a third participant adds complication to professional role identification. The liaison has the responsibilities laid out by the accrediting organization in the SACSCOC liaison policy. And the liaison has the institutional responsibilities that come from the employing college. According to Vora, Kostova, and Roth (2007), a study of managers with subsidiary responsibilities in multinational corporations showed that the greater the dual role identification, the greater the role fulfillment. For the accreditation liaisons, then, it could be true that the ability to identify with both SACSCOC and their institutions could lead to greater role fulfillment than identification solely with the institution or solely with SACSCOC.

However, dual role identification may be discouraged by the configuration of institution-based role responsibilities. Some elements of the role that are defined by SACSCOC may or may not be included in the institutional definition of the role. If these two sets of expectations, those from SACSCOC and those from the institution, are closely aligned with each other and with the employee’s perspective of the role, the employee will be less likely to experience conflict or ambiguity with regard to the accreditation liaison role. However, there could be significant conflict if institutions do not closely align their definitions of the role with that of SACSCOC. Liaisons in such situations would find themselves in the position of having to choose whether to take on the responsibilities given by SACSCOC or those given by the institution. Either choice
would place the liaison in a position where the likelihood of fulfilling both sets of expectations would be low.

Although it is the accrediting body that requires the position, it is the college that appoints the individual who fills the position and determines whether or not that individual remains employed in that position. Therefore, it is necessary for accreditation liaisons to define their roles in ways that will satisfy both the accreditation requirements and their institution. This dichotomy of responsibility in which the employee must determine how to negotiate possibly conflicting expectations makes the liaison role one of potentially significant ambiguity, if not conflict.

**Models and prototypes.** In a study of high performance organizations, management as role model was found to be one of 35 characteristics correlating with high performance (DeWaal, 2012). In situations where the position is one that offers multiple role models, an employee can observe the various models and adapt one to fit the employee’s individual experiences and abilities. Employees taking on new roles frequently experiment with various role prototypes until they find a model or modify a model that naturally integrates with their abilities, self-concepts and experiences. Ibarra (1999) calls this element of role adaption “role-prototyping,” and suggests that employees use imitation strategies and true-to-self strategies in creating these provisional roles.

Ibarra divides imitation strategies into two types, wholesale and selective. Wholesale imitation simply takes on the persona of a single role model without making changes or adjustments. Selective imitation adapts selected elements of multiple role models to create a synthesis used as the model to be imitated. True-to-self strategies are those that come from the employee’s own experiences, style and values.
The SACSCOC liaison position is, by definition, limited to one per institution. Therefore, opportunities for modeling and identity matching (Ibarra, 1999) are limited. This is especially true where the previous liaison is unavailable or is an inappropriate model for a new liaison. In these cases, the liaison will be forced to rely primarily on true-to-self characteristics in forming an initial role prototype. Where the liaison is naturally gifted with the characteristics that promote success in the liaison position, the results can be extremely positive. But if the liaison would benefit significantly from the opportunity to model others, the outlook is less positive.

**Individual interpretation of role.** In his 2009 study of organizational citizenship behavior, Moideenkutty suggests that “An individual's interpretation of what constitutes the role obligations of a specific job can be called his or her role definition” (p. 114). This definition situates the professional role solidly in line with the perspective of the employee by emphasizing the individual’s interpretation over an outside observer’s perspective. Because this study was conducted from the perspective of the accreditation liaison, the operational definition of professional role is the one supplied by Moideenkutty.

The interviews for this study elicited information from the accreditation liaisons about their job responsibilities and their role within their institutions, as well as how they identified that role. The liaisons in this study were asked about their experience as a liaison. Study participants were asked to discuss the nature and quantity of their responsibilities as the accreditation liaison, as well as how those responsibilities were determined. Study participants were also asked to elaborate regarding their development as the accreditation liaison. They were asked to discuss how they learned about the responsibilities of the position and if there were any aspects of the role that they perceived to be things they had to identify for themselves. Finally, liaison participants were asked if they experienced their positions as ones of ambiguity or conflict.
between responsibility to the SACSCOC principle of integrity and their institutional responsibilities.

Limitations of Theory

Organizational role theory has primarily been developed as a result of studies conducted in business and industry where the hierarchy of management and supervision is clearly defined by organizational charts. Although the culture of any organization can provide sidetracks and backways around the charted hierarchy and specific relationships can impact the effectiveness of supervision, for the most part, defined hierarchies can be expected to impact the task system and the role as given.

However, higher education institutions operate in a system of shared governance. This means that faculty, despite the positions they may hold within the formal institutional hierarchy, have considerable influence on the operations of the institution. As a result, the role as given and the task system may be subsumed to some extent by the sentient system or the role as taken, depending on the level of control exercised by faculty within the shared governance of the institution.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to Areen (2011), accreditation is one of the three things that sets United States higher education apart from institutions in other countries. She is referring to the regional accreditation process entered into by almost all institutions of higher education in the United States and some institutions in other countries, as well. Areen suggests that the peer review process used by the regional accrediting agencies in the United States is the best method for promoting both quality and innovation throughout the many different institutional missions, governance and student bodies that makes up the collection of higher education institutions in the United States.

Ralph Wolff (Smith & Finney, 2008), on the other hand, points out that the peer review process in which a single visit every ten years is considered sufficient to adequately evaluate an institution does not account for the significant changes made in the nature of higher education institutions since this process was initiated. From accreditation of institutions that were primarily single locations enrolling less than 10,000 students, regional accreditors now find themselves working to assess multi-campus systems with significantly larger enrollments.

As the president and executive director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Wolff led his regional accrediting body through a complete reorganization of its process, focusing on student learning outcomes and institutional improvement rather than regulatory, compliance-oriented evaluation. However, despite the focus of their processes, regional accrediting bodies are still the arbiters of compliance for the purpose of federal education funding. For most institutions, this raises the stakes of the accreditation process.

According to Katsinas, Kinkhead and Kennamer (2009), the planning process for reaffirmation of accreditation is far more complex, multifaceted, and transactional than most
realize. To fill this role that must manage complex, high-stakes responsibilities in a constantly changing environment, each institution in the Southern Region is required to appoint an accreditation liaison (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2013). Although SACSCOC requires institutions to have an accreditation liaison, there is very little direction provided regarding the liaison’s role. The problem addressed by this study is the lack of needed information about the accreditation liaison’s role within an institution.

Three streams of literature combined to provide a foundation of knowledge for this investigation into the accreditation liaison role. The first stream describes the regional accreditation process. The second stream of literature identifies challenges within that process. The third stream of literature discusses potential challenges for those serving in the role of accreditation liaison.

The Process of Regional Higher Education Accreditation

There are six regional accrediting agencies in the country, each one responsible for institutional accreditation of the colleges and universities in the states of its region. According to Baker (2002) and Sibolski (2012), reaffirmation of accreditation is intended to ensure compliance and promote quality improvement. Although not exactly alike, the process for initial accreditation or for reaffirmation of accreditation is similar across all regions.

General Characteristics of Regional Accreditation

To achieve accreditation, institutions host a team of faculty and administrators from peer institutions who evaluate and make recommendations for improvement. These peer teams consist of volunteers who participate in the process for the purpose of professional development, academic civic duty and institutional self-interest (McGuire, 2009).
Prior to the visit, an institution will have produced a self-study for the visiting team members to use in order to familiarize themselves with the institution and to begin assessing the institution. The specific requirements of the accrediting process may vary from region to region, but all regions assess institutions according to a series of common themes developed collaboratively by all six agencies. These themes include institutional philosophy, governance and management, curriculum development, faculty and staff credentials, financial and physical resources, student support services and institutional effectiveness (Jackson, Davis, & Jackson, 2010).

After the peer evaluators have visited the institution, they generate a report of their findings that is shared with the institution and the regional accrediting body. Based on this report, the institution receives or does not receive its accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. The findings of a visiting team can recommend that an institution receive a qualified rating that requires specific changes be made before the sanction will be lifted. Depending on the nature of the recommendations and the guidelines in use by the specific regional agency, lifting of sanctions may be done via a desk audit or it may require a follow-up visit by another peer review team (Head & Johnson, 2011; Jackson et al., 2010).

**Specifics of the Process in the Southern Association**

For accreditation through SACSCOC, institutions are required to complete two distinct processes. The first process is the self-study, known in the Southern Region as the Compliance Certification document. There are 79 Principles of Accreditation (SACSCOC, 2012a) that must be addressed in the Compliance Certification. The second process is the development of a Quality Enhancement Plan (SACSCOC, 2012b). Known as the QEP, this plan is a college wide project designed to improve student learning or the environment in support of student learning.
In the Southern Region, the Compliance Certification is turned in for peer evaluation to an off-site, or desk audit, team approximately six months prior to a visit by an on-site, peer evaluator team. Any questions or findings generated by the off-site team are shared with the institution so that they may prepare a response or make necessary changes prior to the visit by the on-site team. The on-site team focuses on suggestions to assist the institution with its QEP and on any questions from the off-site team not satisfactorily resolved by the institution’s response. The institution also has an opportunity to respond to the on-site team’s findings prior to a final decision being handed down by the regional accrediting body. This iterative process of findings and recommendations and actions and responses allows the accreditation activity to serve the additional purpose of strengthening the processes and programs at the institution (Head & Johnson, 2011).

The accreditation process is complex, and even within higher education, it is somewhat obscure. A basic understanding of the regional accreditation process and some of the specifics of the process in the Southern Region is essential background for a study of the accreditation liaison’s role in Texas Community colleges.

**Changes and Challenges for Regional Accreditation**

The focus of regional accrediting bodies has changed over time from concern with what is being taught to concern with what is being learned (Jackson et al., 2010). According to Rhodes, “accreditors remain key driving forces for learning improvement” (2012, p. 42).

**Positive Changes By Virtue of Accreditation**

Institutional effectiveness is one of the common themes identified for accreditation scrutiny by all regional agencies. Despite its high profile, it continues to be one of the most difficult challenges for institutions to meet (Matveev, 2013). Head and Johnson (2011) suggest
that this may be the result of implementing institutional effectiveness as an accreditation measure instead of a system for promoting quality and improvement. This may well be the case. Given the high stakes of accreditation, it is tempting to focus on accreditation regulations rather than on institutional improvement (Rhodes, 2012). But Rhodes and others (Areen, 2011; Eaton, 2012; Hall, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; McGuire, 2009; Spangehl, 2012; Wergin, 2005) believe that the push from accreditors for a focus on learning has changed the lexicon and that there is evidence that it is also changing practice, creating a “framework for placing learning, faculty and student work at the center of institutional success” (Rhodes, 2012, p. 40).

Wergin (2005) supports the assertion that accreditation is a major force for change in higher education, describing the accreditation process as a catalyst for institutional improvement. McGuire (2009) also touts the accreditation process as a positive influence on institutional change. She tells the story of an institution that was unable to reverse its plummeting enrollment and plummeting financial situations until its accrediting agency shared some useful truths with the administration and the Board.

**Regulatory Pressures for Regional Accreditors**

Despite the fact that higher education has a long history of autonomy in the United States (Areen, 2011), current governmental regulations and public demands for accountability and transparency are threatening that autonomy (Eaton, 2012; Eaton et al., 2005; Hall, 2012; Sibolski, 2012; Spangehl, 2012). Few accrediting agencies see what they do as primarily compliance enforcement; however, adjustments are being made by all accrediting bodies to accommodate Department of Education demands. Frequently, these adjustments result in embedded compliance assessment (Crow, 2009). Although the accrediting bodies continue to focus on learning and institutional improvement, expanding governmental regulatory authority is
pushing both accrediting agencies and institutions towards an increasing focus on compliance, leaving less time and resources to address improvement (Eaton, 2012; Eaton, Fryshman, Hope, Scanlon, & Crow, 2005; Sibolski, 2012).

Eaton (2012) and Areen (2011) believe this expanding governmental participation in higher education will have a negative effect on institutional and academic quality. Spangehl (2012) describes the increasing impact of federal regulations as a conflict for institutions and accrediting agencies between assuring quality and improving quality.

Opinion regarding how higher education should respond to these pressures is mixed. Some suggest increased advocacy for accreditation agencies (Eaton, 2012), while others promote the concept of accrediting agencies taking the lead in making changes (Jackson et al., 2010). Hall (2012) offers an economic argument against incorporating regulatory changes, suggesting that if consumers wanted the changes being promoted by governmental entities, they would be clamoring for them and willing to pay for them.

These changes and challenges for accreditation may also mean changes and challenges for the role of the accreditation liaison. The context provided by identifying some of the fundamental issues facing the accreditation liaison helped to inform this study of how accreditation liaisons perceive their roles.

**The Accreditation Liaison**

According to guidelines from SACSCOC (See Appendix A), the accreditation liaison is expected to see to it that required annual reporting is completed, submit substantive change notifications to SACSCOC, educate institutional employees about SACSCOC standards, serve as an institutional contact for the commission staff and as the coordinator for accreditation visits. The liaison is also expected to ensure that the college includes compliance with accreditation
standards in its organizational planning. In addition to this responsibility, the accreditation liaison is responsible for any duties assigned by the institution. Those who are responsible for guiding an institution through the accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation processes find themselves in positions where the ability to respond and adapt, to exercise creative thinking, is critical.

Vice President Charles Taylor with SACSCOC recommends that all accreditation liaisons report directly to the college president, regardless of where the position is placed in the institutional hierarchy (2013). According to Taylor, a regular and direct connection to the president is the only way to ensure the liaison is aware of all the changes and innovations throughout the institution that may need to be reported to SACSCOC. Taylor also identifies the influence of the president’s office as an important ingredient for implementing procedures necessary for compliance with the Principles of Accreditation.

As described above, the accreditation process is influenced by a variety of internal and external pressures, constantly changing, evolving, and adapting. Baker (2002) supports the regional accreditation process, saying it promotes confidence in higher education by conducting “continuous, effective, and relevant assessment and evaluation,”(p. 6) of higher education. While this constant change may, indeed, be beneficial to institutions and the learning processes in which they are engaged, it does not provide a stable working environment for those who are charged with managing an institution’s accreditation process.

The accreditation liaison is serving in a multiplex role system where liaison responsibilities may require providing direction to the liaison’s supervisors and peers. Valcour (2002) points out that traditional managerial roles depend on the hierarchy of the organization to lend validity to directives. But in a multiplex system, where a responsible party does not always
have a supervisory role in relation to the individuals who must carry out the necessary activities, success depends in large part on building mutually supportive relationships, a process that can take significant time.

**Role Change**

As previously mentioned, individuals being assigned to serve as the institutional accreditation liaison retain many, if not all the responsibilities of their previous role. As a result, the accreditation liaison is almost invariably a new role for both the individual and the institution, constituting a role change according to Turner (1990). The movement of individuals out of one role and into another can be identified as role transition or reallocation. But the accreditation liaison is not moving into an already defined role. Instead, the liaison must craft a new role that incorporates both the liaison responsibilities and those continuing from the liaison’s previous position.

The constantly changing accreditation process and the re-defining of the liaison role with each new liaison appointment results in situational instability for those serving as accreditation liaisons and calls for creative thinking on their part. According to a study done by Tierney and Farmer (2011) in the non-profit environment, employees who are aware that they are expected to demonstrate creativity as a part of their organizational role are able to develop and improve their creative skills. Tierney and Farmer recommend that employees be provided with creative skill training and given the opportunity to practice without severe time constraints or penalties in order to develop creative self-efficacy and proficiency. However, accreditation liaisons are often appointed specifically for the reaffirmation process. Given the high stakes of accreditation and the tight time limits of the process, the development opportunities suggested by Tierney and Farmer are rarely either practical or available.
Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity can be the result of contradictory role responsibilities, inconsistent evaluations and vague or ill-defined expectations (Beach & Brumels, 2008; Smith, Fuqua, Choi, & Newman, 2011). Role ambiguity can lead to both lower productivity and lower employee confidence and job satisfaction (Smith et al., 2011). But if the accreditation liaison perceives the institutional level of support for the position and/or the accreditation process to be high and if there is a positive leader-member exchange between the liaison and the position supervisor, then the liaison will be likely to feel a strong sense of belonging to the organization. This sense of belonging can contribute to positive organization-based self-esteem, which has been demonstrated to mitigate role ambiguity (Ferris, Brown, & Heller, 2009).

Since the liaison is specifically chosen for the role, based on the individual’s perceived ability to integrate the SACSCOC responsibilities with those already covered by that individual, the liaison position can be described as an idiosyncratic role, or one that is specifically designed to fit the capabilities of a particular employee (Turner, 1990). Miner (1987) noted that both mission ambiguity and resource uncertainty correlate with idiosyncratic jobs.

Studies (Jordan et al., 2012; Krantz & Maltz, 1997; Lau, 2011; Schuler, 1975) show that employee performance is enhanced by non-monetary measures that increase role clarity. However, those filling the accreditation liaison position often are not able to take advantage of the resources for divining role clarity that are available when filling most other positions. These resources include modeling, level-of-hierarchy capital and recognized values of style.

**Modeling.** The SACSCOC guidelines suggest that the appointee come from the ranks of faculty or administration at the institution. A sampling of accreditation liaisons at SACSCOC
institutions in Texas results in a list of individuals whose additional roles vary widely: an English Department faculty member, a Chief Information Officer, a Chief Academic Officer, a mid-level Human Resources staff member, and an Institutional Research officer. As a result of this diversity, it is difficult for liaisons to find models or mentors who can help them to achieve success in the position for themselves or for their institutions.

**Level.** Where the accreditation liaison’s additional role is placed in the hierarchy of the organization can also have a significant impact on the success of the individual in that position. Employees in higher levels of an organization are better able to perform with role ambiguity than employees at lower levels of an organization (Schuler, 1975). Some institutions choose a SACSCOC liaison from those serving as a member of the institutional leadership team. Other institutions appoint faculty or mid-level staff members as the SACSCOC liaison. The SACSCOC liaison usually continues to function at the hierarchical level of the responsibilities they fulfill in addition to the SACSCOC liaison roll. Therefore, those who are not serving in the upper echelons of the institutional hierarchy in their non-accreditation liaison role are less likely to be able to effectively manage the potential role ambiguity of the position.

**Style.** Although the accreditation liaison is responsible within the institution for guiding the college or university though the process, the liaison is also responsible for representing the institution to the regional accrediting body and to the peer evaluators. According to Burkhardt (2002), the form of leadership that is effective within the context of a particular college or university is not the same as that which is needed to represent the institution outside that context. Certainly it is possible for a single individual to be effective in both contexts. However, such is not always the case, particularly where training and direction or modeling and experience are not available.
Schein’s basic assumption (as cited by Ibarra, 1999) is that professional identity develops over time, influenced by an individual’s experiences and the feedback received. Accordingly, Ibarra concludes that professional identity is more mutable and adaptable early in one’s career. However, given the high stakes nature of accreditation bids, the accreditation liaison role is rarely assigned to someone in the early stages of a career. Instead, it is usually assigned to someone who has already developed some solidly entrenched views of their role within the institution and an operational style for fulfilling that role. This has the potential for increasing the role ambiguity of the person assigned to the liaison position.

**Role Conflict**

If the SACSCOC liaison’s sense of role ambiguity escalates to a point of internal conflict in which the liaison feels obligated to choose between conflicting obligations, role conflict occurs (Vora et al., 2007). Since accreditation liaisons are assigned by the institution to serve a function required by the accrediting body, they must find a way to balance the demands of both organizations. In so doing, the potential for role conflict is high.

Role conflicts stem from both external and internal sources. External sources can vary from incompatible obligations toward different organizations to mutually exclusive responsibilities within an institution. Internal sources of role conflict are the result of incompatibilities between expectations, internal or external or both, and an individual’s value system. When role conflict is the consequence of both internal and external sources, hybrid role conflict results (Nir, 2011).

Ultimately, these conflicts reduce the liaisons ability to complete tasks or reach a satisfactory level of performance (Beach & Brumels, 2008). However, the impact of role conflict may not be apparent in all cases. According to Driscoll and Beehr, (2000), the impact of role
conflict on employee performance may be mitigated by an individual’s lesser need for clarity. If an individual does not have a high need for clarity, the conflicting pressures of the liaison’s role may not result in recognizably poor performance. Instead, it may simply result in less excellent performance than might have been demonstrated if role conflict was not a factor.

**Boundary spanning.** Role conflict may be expected when an individual is placed in a position that requires consideration of goals and interests of different parties who may also have different expectations of the individual (Miles, 1976; Mohr & Puck, 2007; Vora et al., 2007). Such roles are known as boundary spanning roles. When a boundary spanner is working to link different levels of hierarchy within the same unit or within the same organization, the potential for role conflict is not as high as it is when the link is being made between different organizations or different units within an organization (Miles, 1976).

In Mohr and Puck’s (2007) study of international joint venture managers, they discovered that experience in the international market correlated to lower stress and higher job satisfaction. Their results suggested the conclusion that experience in boundary spanning positions can mitigate the negative effects of role conflict resulting from boundary spanning.

The SACSCOC liaison’s responsibility for both institutional goals and accrediting agency goals places the individual firmly in a boundary spanning position that may or may not result in role conflict, depending on how closely aligned the institution is with the principles of accreditation. But even if a liaison serves an institution where there is no role conflict resulting from inter-organizational dissonance, issues of intra-organizational misalignment can result in significant role conflict. In higher education, administration, staff and faculty can, famously, all be at odds within the same institution. Since the accreditation process spans all sectors of the institution, the accreditation liaison must serve in an internal boundary spanning capacity,
regardless of the position’s other responsibility affiliations, sometimes resulting in high levels of role conflict.

**Integrity.** The first, and arguably most significant principle of accreditation from SACSCOC is the principle of integrity. The reaffirmation process is expected to be conducted with unimpeachable integrity from both the perspective of SACSCOC and the institution. But there is always the potential for the accreditation liaison to be faced with a conflict between adhering to the principle of integrity and not sharing germane but less-than-positive information about the institution.

Organizations in the public sector and their employees are often faced with higher expectations for transparency and accountability, resulting in concomitantly higher levels of scrutiny. When the position is one that is defined by evaluation, like that of the accreditation liaison, the resulting pressures are exacerbated. Employees working in this kind of environment often must deal with increased expectations of conduct that embody honesty, fairness and responsiveness. These expectations have the added unintended consequence of complicating the decision making process (Jordan, Lindsay, & Schraeder, 2012). Even a decision that is made as a result of entirely ethical considerations can be second-guessed or controversial when it is available for evaluation by a public that may not be privy to all the relevant facts, some of which may remain undisclosed by statutory regulation.

**Popularity.** When the standards of accreditation require an institution to depart from its traditional and/or popularly defined operating procedures, it is often the accreditation liaison who must explain and bring this requirement to the attention of administration. Frequently, the accreditation liaison is credited with identifying the need for this change and, possibly, with implementing it, as well. Depending on the depth of negativity and the influence of detractors,
the sentiment evoked by such changes can cause the role to become unacceptable or even untenable for the liaison, (Turner, 1990).

As noted above, the role of the accreditation liaison will almost inevitably be characterized by change. And the potential for role ambiguity and role conflict is also high. Knowledge of the difficulties that arise from role change, role ambiguity, and role conflict provided a basis for understanding the comments from study participants regarding difficulties they perceived in the role of the accreditation liaison.

Summary

Regional accreditation is important to higher education on both an industry and an institutional level. Although it has common features across the six different regional accrediting bodies, each agency has practices and processes that are unique. In the Southern Association, each institution is expected to appoint an accreditation liaison to assist the institution in completing all the required accreditation processes.

The accreditation liaison role is an important one to the institution. But little is known about what accreditation liaisons do or are expected to do at their institutions. Unfortunately, these liaisons do not have a set of best practices to reference. Nor do they have a set of traditions or conventions or body of literature that can provide direction for the position. Differences between their various responsibilities or between their actual role and the overview of the role provided by SACSCOC can result in role ambiguity or role conflict.

With the increasing pressures for transparency and accountability being brought on by the various governmental entities, come increasing pressures for productivity. Both accreditation liaisons and their institutions need to know how to effectively use the position to maintain
compliance and to improve quality. But little is known about how the appointee should fulfill that role or how the institution needs to support that role. This research study begins that inquiry.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Higher education institutions that are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) are required to have an accreditation liaison. As a result, every regionally accredited higher education institution in the 11 states of the Southern Region assigns someone to this position. But there is not a body of literature defining the role or the expectations of those who fill it, and very little information is provided by SACSCOC regarding the role of the position with SACSCOC or with higher education institutions. The purpose of this study was to explore how accreditation liaisons at community colleges accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges perceived their role.

Methodology

According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is best suited for investigations of this nature in which the variables are unknown and the purpose is to explore the phenomenon. This study included seven of the nine qualitative research characteristics identified by Creswell (2013). The study was conducted in a natural setting by the researcher as the key data collection instrument, focusing on the participants’ perspectives within the context of their professional cultural. Although there was an interview protocol at the outset, the interviews were allowed to flow informally and data gathered from one interview resulted in changes to the questions and the order of the questions in the next interview. The study was reflective and interpretive, recognizing the interviewer’s position as a member of the accreditation liaison community. Finally, the study produced a holistic view of the position of the accreditation liaison.

General Inductive Analysis (GIA) as described by Thomas (2006) was used for the study. In General Inductive Analysis, the purpose “is to allow research findings to emerge from the
frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data, without restraints imposed by structured methodologies,” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). In order to begin developing a set of best practices for accreditation liaisons, the analysis of interviews with accreditation liaisons was conducted by applying a variety of coding techniques to the interview transcripts, identifying the core meanings relevant to the research. From these core meanings, themes were identified and the most important themes described in the findings (Thomas, 2006). The interview transcripts analyzed came from interviews with five accreditation liaisons. While this sample is not extensive, it did incorporate diverse and heterogeneous sources so that initial conclusions could be drawn about answers to the research questions.

The primary research question asked about the role of the accreditation liaison from the perspective of those who fill that role. Although it might ultimately be valuable to study the position using a grounded theory design, grounded theory presupposes some knowledge on which to build a tentative theory for investigation and focuses on a process or an action that occurs periodically or at least regularly (Creswell, 2013). The initial research into the role of the accreditation liaison was unable to identify any studies of the accreditation liaison role. Therefore not enough was known about the position to develop a tentative theory or identify characteristic processes and actions that could be investigated and compared using a grounded theory design.

This investigation into the role of college accreditation liaisons depended on the experiences of the participants in that role. The understanding of the accreditation liaison role developed from the understanding of participants’ experience, rather than from observers of the phenomenon. Burrell and Morgan (1979) identify this approach to understanding a social system as the interpretivist paradigm. Socially constructed is the term Creswell (2013) uses to identify a
worldview in which researchers rely on participants views for a source of meaning. He points out that in a constructivist paradigm, the meanings are subjective and complex, like the participants.

**Positionality**

Ponterotto (2005) specifically includes the researcher in what he calls constructivism-interpretivism, saying that meaning is jointly created through the interactive dialogue between researcher and participant. Ponterotto’s description of the paradigm that underpins this study is particularly appropriate since the researcher was a key instrument in the study, conducting interviews and analyzing the data as a member of the accreditation liaison community.

The researcher had worked in Texas community colleges for twenty years as a faculty member and as an administrator. For the last ten of those years, she served as an accreditation liaison, first at a small, rural school and more recently at a large, suburban institution. In addition, she served as a consultant for other community college accreditation liaisons. As a result of her experiences with multiple institutions, she was able to bring a broad-based understanding of the community college context and the practice of accreditation to the development of the study and to the interpretation of the data.

The researcher’s experience also brought with it biases and values that, like the biases and values of the participants, would inevitably impact the meaning that evolved as a result of the interpretive nature of the qualitative design. Having served as an accreditation liaison, the researcher valued the role as a significant one for an institution and expected some of the participants experiences to be similar to her own. These perceptions had prompted the researcher to investigate this role in the first place. Therefore, it was important to the researcher that the participants’ perspectives of their experiences be faithfully noted and interpreted.
All of the participants in the study had known the researcher through the informal accreditation network prior to the study. This connection to the researcher allowed them to recognize the researcher as a trustworthy individual with whom they could share their experiences. As suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012), this connection motivated them to participate. The participants’ confidence in the researcher and the value they saw in the study emphasized the potential importance of the findings. As a result, the researcher entered into the study with a distinct awareness of both her own biases and the importance of prioritizing the participants’ perspectives in order to develop new understandings that could enhance the interpretation of the data.

Participants

The five participants in this study all worked at community colleges in Texas where public, two-year colleges are statutorily required to be open enrollment institutions with both a general education and a workforce education mission. Limiting the sample to accreditation officers from two-year institutions within the same state placed all of the participants within the same broad frame of reference since such state regulations that applied to the two-year institutions in Texas would be the same for all participants. Holding the category of institution constant allowed data collection and analysis to focus on the role of the liaison in the specific institution without having to account for and evaluate the impact of institution category on the results. However, representation from across the spectrum of Texas, two-year institutions was sought. Participant selection also considered age, gender and experience of the liaisons in an effort to have maximum variation in the sample of accreditation liaisons to be interviewed.

Three men and two women were recruited from the researcher’s existing contacts in the state’s informal accreditation liaison network. For ease of reference, they will be known as
Andrew, Matthew, Robin, Carley and Sophie. At the time of the study, Matthew, Robin, Carley and Sophie were actively serving as accreditation liaison for their community colleges. Andrew had just accepted a new position that included supervising the accreditation liaison at his college. Prior to accepting the new position, Andrew had served as an accreditation liaison for eight years. Matthew and Sophie had been in the accreditation liaison role for over fifteen years, Carley for six years and Robin for one year.

The colleges represented were distributed across geographic location, institutional size and community type. One college was a large, urban system with multiple campuses, one was a small, rural college, two were medium sized, urban institutions with rural, satellite locations and one was a large suburban college with multiple teaching locations. One college was located on the south Texas coast, one in west Texas, one in northeast Texas, one in north central Texas and one in central Texas.

Most of the participants had worked exclusively for Texas colleges. Three had begun their careers at four-year institutions in Texas and one had moved to Texas from out of state. Four of the liaisons in this study had teaching experience, one moved into higher education from industry and one maintained a commercial business in addition to his college position. Three of the liaisons had served in strategic planning, assessment and institutional effectiveness roles prior to becoming accreditation liaisons, and two came to the liaison role from academic affairs.

The participants were invited to take part in the study as an opportunity to contribute to the development of a body of knowledge about the role of accreditation liaisons. The initial contact was made via traditional, hard copy mail (See Appendix B), with a follow-up phone call asking for the potential participant’s commitment and a tentative date for an initial interview.
The researcher offered to share the aggregate data with the participants at the conclusion of the study. Once the study was completed, the researcher sent the participants a thank you note and a $25.00 gift card to Starbuck’s. IRB and confidentiality issues are addressed in the Protection of Human Subjects section below.

**Data Collection.**

Data was collected via a three interview sequence. An initial interview took place using e-mail in order to build rapport with the participant, explain the purpose of the study, make logistical arrangements and complete the informed consent process. A second, face-to-face interview was recorded and transcribed. This second, in-depth interview collected the bulk of the data and was the primary vehicle used to understand the experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2006). A third interview was conducted to share the transcripts of the second interviews for the purpose of member checking and to allow the participants to add anything that was not captured during the earlier interviews. These third interviews were conducted both asynchronously and face-to-face, as was most convenient for the participant.

All of the participants agreed to a face-to-face, taped interview with the researcher. One interview took place in a hotel coffee shop following a conference, one interview took place in a hotel lobby, and the other three interviews were conducted in the participants’ offices. The shortest interview lasted one hour and the longest interview lasted two and one half hours.

After each interview, the recording was transcribed and pseudonyms were inserted to replace the names of the participants and any other individuals or colleges mentioned in the interview. A table was built for that interview and demographic information was inserted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carley</th>
<th>IR/IE – female – under 50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suburban College</td>
<td>Large, Suburban/rural, 10,300 enrollment – gulf coast – main campus + branch campuses -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Liaison’s office – late afternoon – June</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next step was to paste each statement from the interview into the table, with questions and comments from the researcher labeled Researcher and participant remarks labeled with that participant’s pseudonym.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carley</th>
<th>IR/IE – female – under 50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suburban College</td>
<td>Large, Suburban/rural, 10,300 enrollment – gulf coast – main campus + branch campuses -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Liaison’s office – late afternoon – June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>How long have you been the accreditation liaison at Suburban?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carley</td>
<td>Let’s see, 15 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews**

A digital recorder with the capability to block out background noise was used to record the interviews. The interview protocol in Appendix C was used for the initial interview, with minor changes made to the interview plan as called for after each of the interviews was completed. Creswell (2012; 2013) suggests the use of e-mail interviews for participants at great geographical distance. Most of the follow-up interviews, as well as member checking took place via asynchronous, electronic communication between the researcher and the participants. In one case, the follow-up interview took place in person when the researcher and the participant met at a conference.

**Data Storage and Management**

Hard copy data was kept in a locked filing cabinet in the home office of the researcher. This included interview notes, draft printouts, copies of all communications with the participants and transcripts of all interviews. Recordings were made using a digital recorder that was erased
after the recording was downloaded to the computer being used for the study. All recordings
were transferred to flash drives after transcription and stored in the locked file cabinet.

An external electronic hard drive was also be kept in the locked filing cabinet. The
computer being used for the study was backed up regularly to that hard drive. All electronic
interviews were also saved to files stored on that computer, along with drafts, transcripts and
other electronic documents. The computer was password protected and not connected to any
network. The researcher was the only one to have general access to these materials. On an item
by item basis, access may be granted to particular items for specific purposes, but only within the
parameters of confidentiality agreements with the participants and the IRB committee. All
materials for the study will be kept for three years after the study has been finalized. Any
material that could lead to the identities of the participants or their institutions will be erased or
shredded at that time.

Data Verification

After the transcribed interviews were checked for transcription errors, each participant
was sent a printed copy of his or her interview. The transcription was accompanied by a note
thanking the participant for his or her participation and offering the opportunity to make
corrections or add information.

Two of the participants suggested spelling and punctuation changes for their interviews,
one via return mail and the other via an e-mail message. One of the participants added additional
information, expanding on the answers to several of the interview questions. A fourth participant
sent an e-mail identifying one transcription error that had not been corrected. All of the
suggested changes were made to the interview transcripts and to the data tables that had been
created from the interview transcripts. The suggested additions were added to the data tables.
After the data tables were completed, they were rechecked to ensure that all references to institutions, locations and individuals were purged and replaced with pseudonyms.

**Data Analysis**

There are four elements of data analysis as presented by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014): data collection, data condensation, conclusions and data display. Thomas (2006) focuses on the latter three and describes analysis for the general inductive approach as a process that identifies core meanings in the interview transcripts, determines the themes most relevant to the identified research objectives and describes the most important of those themes.

Data condensation took place via iterative, label coding of the interviews following the types of coding identified by Saldana (2013). Each interview was evaluated through attribute, structural and descriptive coding during the initial coding phase. Attribute and structural coding were used for organization of the study and tracking of the interview process, but descriptive coding was the method used for the majority of the data during the initial coding phase. This method uses a word or short phrase to label the basic topic of a passage of data and is useful to assist the researcher in seeing what was heard in the interview (Saldana, 2013). Descriptive coding can be used to develop a vocabulary for the categories identified in further study.

Each interview was coded as it was completed. Following completion of the initial descriptive coding, the next interview was conducted, transcribed and assigned initial codes. After the second interview, any previous interviews were recoded at the time of a new interview’s initial coding to add any topic labels from the new interview that might have been missed in the previous interviews.

As the participants provided additional information in response to receiving the transcripts of their interviews, it was added to the table for that interview. Although Matthew and
Carley offered additional information, none of the participants identified any substantial corrections or deletions to the transcripts. Sophie, Carley and Matthew did make changes to spelling and punctuation. Matthew identified one transcription error.

To begin the coding process, a third column was added to the data table built for each interview. In this column, a word or phrase was inserted to identify the basic topic of that passage. The cell in which a passage appeared and the cell labeling that passage’s topic were split to accommodate any passages that appeared to address multiple topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>That’s two.</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carley</td>
<td>Probably a 3rd one I have but may need to be #1, is I am always thinking about protecting the institution.</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>But I’m thinking about protecting the institution and with integrity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have never agreed to anything that was a cover up even though I have been pressured by at least one president tried to get me to do that.</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the process, simultaneous coding was applied as it appeared to fit the data collected. During second round coding, pattern and focused coding (Saldana, 2013) were used. Focused coding searches for the most frequent or significant codes in the first round analysis in order to develop categories or identify important themes in the data. Pattern coding identifies similarly coded data and organizes it into sets or themes. Pattern coding, frequently used to examine social networks and patterns of human interaction, was useful in this investigation of a specific role within an organization.

Thematic analysis of the coded data was used for the purpose of condensing the various ideas presented into overarching, larger themes and drawing conclusions. Throughout the process, data was continuously assigned to categories and managed via Word tables. After all of
the interviews were completed and assigned descriptive codes, a new table was designed to support integrating the material, determining major themes and identifying sub-themes. In a six column table, each of the last five columns was assigned to one of the participants. In the first column, all of the descriptive codes were assigned a row. Then, for each interview, all of the passages were pasted into the row and column that corresponded to their descriptive code and participant pseudonym.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Andrew</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Robin</th>
<th>Carley</th>
<th>Sophie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to president</td>
<td>I reported to the Vice President for Instruction when I was hired there. But for Accreditation Liaison, I reported to the President. I was expected to go to the President when there were issues. Because it’s a little awkward, ok I’m reporting to the Vice President for Instruction and I know they are not reporting an issue that it’s required by SACS. So what am I going to do give me the parameters, as long as I’m inside the bar ditches, the normal operating range, just kind of leave me alone and I will not do anything to embarrass him and I keep you informed. And so, that’s the role I had with him for a long time, and that’s the role I feel the most comfortable in. You have to earn that.</td>
<td>Well, I would say the thing that makes it difficult is that George [previous liaison] was on the President’s cabinet. I am not.</td>
<td>Although presidents have ready access to anyone a lot of people are afraid of them depending on where they fall in the organizational structure. And I think that when you are a direct report to the president you get over that kind of fear.</td>
<td>Oftentimes when you don’t report to the president, the president may have an opposing viewpoint and that can create a bigger issue when you are not unified as a team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In some cases, the participants commented multiple times on the same sub-topic. If the comments were made immediately following one another and clearly made for the purpose of emphasis, they were entered as a single comment. If the participant came back to the same sub-topic after other topics had been interposed, the comment was treated as a separate comment. Separate comments by the same participants within the same category were divided by double spacing.

A printout of this table combining all the interviews was used for the next step in consolidating and analyzing the data. Within several of the topics or categories, there were multiple entries per participant. Each such entry was identified as a potential sub-topic and assigned a highlight or underline color, beginning with the left hand column and moving to the right. Any passage that was found to fit into the same sub-topic category as a previous passage received the same color coding. When all of the multi-passage sections were color coded, the table was reorganized to reflect the sub-themes and sub-category comments within the sub-themes that had appeared.

During this process of organizing the interviews according to their various themes, each of the comments was evaluated to determine whether or not it related to more than one of the themes identified. If so, it was added to a second category. Ultimately, the tables were reorganized to reflect the themes, subthemes and sub-categories with all the comments inserted into all the categories to which they related.
The last step in consolidating and summarizing the data was to add a comment count to each category and participant. While all of the participants could speak at length on a particular subject, Andrew, Matthew and Robin were more loquacious overall than Carley or Sophie. Therefore, the researcher considered the reiteration of discreet comments, as described above, per category rather than word count or minutes so that the particular conversation styles of the participants would not impact the analysis of the data.

For each sub-theme and/or sub-category, the number of different comments were counted for each participant and added to the table across the top of the row for that category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Andrew</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Robin</th>
<th>Carley</th>
<th>Sophie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities: Accreditation – Ongoing compliance/Link to SACSCOC</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an effective “link” between SACSCOC and my college.</td>
<td></td>
<td>So that relationship, at least in our 11 states, 800 schools, that relationship, between the SACS liaison [SACSCOC VP and accreditation liaison], on both sides, whether it be Dr. Wheelan’s staff member</td>
<td>it’s so important that you have a really good relationship with your SACS VP.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Particularly CR 2.5 and 3.3.13 that helps. Because that is the basis of everything that SACS is really looking for.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
or college’s staff member, is critical. That linkage, that ability to communicate and articulate is the responsibility of the Liaison.

copied on the email. And the expectation was I would be the one that responds. accreditation matters. But I also am called on for programmatic accreditation matters as well even though I don’t have that title.

While comments assigned to one nested theme were sometimes explained by a reference to another, the primary topic of the comment was used to categorize each one. When a theme included sub-themes and/or specialized comments, the number of comments from each category was distinguished by a slash and the total number of comments for the sub-theme or theme was noted following an equal sign. A row was added to the table for entering the total number of comments for each category with multiple sub-categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Andrew</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Robin</th>
<th>Carley</th>
<th>Sophie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/17/16=56</td>
<td>3/6/3=12</td>
<td>6/7/4=17</td>
<td>3/1/3=7</td>
<td>4/1/3=8</td>
<td>7/2/3=12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/14=23</td>
<td>0/3=3</td>
<td>1/5=6</td>
<td>2/1=3</td>
<td>2/2=4</td>
<td>4/3=7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities: Accreditation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities: Accreditation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Reaffirmation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I ended up being responsible for the QEP and the compliance report and then ended up heading the product that came out.

I think a lot of people’s expectation is to bother them three years away from a SACS visit. I think that’s the main expectation.

met every Tuesday and Thursday that year and a half as were writing the compliance certification, leading all the efforts.

I also give guidance on every aspect, I give guidance regarding the business office and how they need to write.
of the QEP so I was pretty married to it for a long time.

To me, I just think your regular Joe employees that are not really excited. Their real role in SACS is IE. IE touches everything. So I really wish that …we don’t just do paperwork for paperwork sake. We do it so we have jobs so that we can provide an education to our students. If we don’t do this, we don’t do anything. Because no one is coming to our college if it can’t transfer.

and not necessarily, I didn’t write the document, but I organized the team that wrote the document.

I give guidance on every CR statement, not just instructional but all of them. I step back and look at whether or not there’s a way to answer the question honestly from an instructional standpoint. I especially do that with faculty qualifications.

I have also overseen the entire site visits.

The writing skills and the analytical skills necessary to do what would be required of an accreditation liaison, not just the continual accreditation but in especially that fifth and ten year
Trustworthiness

The researcher in this study serves in the same role as the participants. Since this position is not a well-known role within higher education and is an obscure position outside higher education, it was useful for the researcher to be familiar with the terminology, the categories of activity and the regional accrediting body. However, serving as an accreditation officer did predispose the researcher to see the position as making a useful and valuable contribution to its college. Recognizing this concern at the outset of the study allowed the processes of peer review and member checking to be more effective. Not only were the transcripts of the interviews shared with the participants, but also the analysis and conclusions of the study were shared.

The Doctoral Thesis Project advisors served as peer reviewers for the study, along with one experienced accreditation officer from a SACSCOC accredited institution. This experienced accreditation officer agreed to adhere to the same confidentiality strictures as the Project advisors and signed a commitment form to this effect prior to participation in the project (See Appendix D). All of these individuals provided alternative viewpoints and were able to make suggestions and question processes and initial results. This peer review element provided an external check on the research process in much the same way that inter-rater reliability provides a check for quantitative research (Creswell, 2013).

Protection of Human Subjects

All the participants in the study received a written description of the project and its purpose at the time they were invited to take part. It was explained that the participants, as well as the institutions they represent, would be given pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. As part of the invitation process, the participants were reminded that their participation would be
voluntary, and that they should decline if they considered an investigation of their role as an accreditation liaison to be contrary to their interests.

Prior to each interview, participants were asked to give written permission to conduct, tape and use the interview for the purpose laid out in the permission form (Appendix E) that each participant signed. After each interview, the participant received a transcript of the interview in order to verify the accuracy of the transcript and to reaffirm permission to use the material in the interview.

Thesis project advisors, an experienced accreditation liaison and the participants read the interview protocols, the transcripts and the analysis. All of these individuals had an opportunity to comment on the various stages of the study and offer any recommendations that were needed in order to limit any inappropriate impact from the researcher’s participation. The Northeastern University IRB process was completed prior to beginning the study.

**Conclusion**

Higher education institutions in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges are required, as a part of the accreditation process, to appoint an accreditation liaison to lead the institution though the process of accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. Acquiring or retaining accreditation impacts the funding, reputation and future of an institution. As a result, the performance of the accreditation liaison has a significant bearing on the success of the institution. But those appointed to accreditation liaison positions and those appointing and supervising accreditation liaisons have no body of literature, nor any set of best practices to guide them in fulfilling these roles.

These interviews with individuals serving as accreditation liaisons begins to collect the kind of information that will lead to a better understanding of the role of the accreditation liaison
and how best to pursue it and support it. Participants in the study have shared information about how they were chosen for the accreditation liaison position, its place in their institution’s organizational structure, the challenges and the responsibilities of the position. The resulting material has been analyzed in an effort to reveal common themes and/or concepts that can be used by future research to further the understanding of the role accreditation liaisons play in the life of higher education institutions.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study is to begin an investigation into the role of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) accreditation liaison. This study explores that role from the perspective of accreditation liaisons at community colleges in Texas.

The interview information provided by the participants ultimately revealed four super-ordinate themes, with multiple nested themes in each one. These super-ordinate themes and their nested themes were: 1) Responsibilities (1.1 Accreditation, 1.1.1 Reaffirmation, 1.1.2 On-going Compliance, 1.2 Institutional Protection, 1.3 Institutional Education); 2) Challenges (2.1 Lack of Support, 2.2 Lack of Knowledge, 2.3 Integrity, 2.4 Expanse of Responsibilities, 2.5 Responsibility without Authority); 3) Training and Preparation (3.1 Insufficiency, 3.2 Suggestions); 4) Organizational Relationships (4.1 College President, 4.2 Other Stakeholders).

All five of the participants addressed the super-ordinate themes that were identified within the interviews. Themes that converged under the super-ordinate themes occurred in at least four of the five participants’ interview data. All but two of these nested themes, 2.3 Integrity and 2.5 Responsibility without Authority, were addressed by all of the participants. For one of the nested themes, 1.1 Accreditation, participant comments were clearly divided into further sub-categories addressed by at least four of the participants. Table 1 shows the super-ordinate themes, the nested themes and the further sub-categories.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Andrew</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Robin</th>
<th>Carley</th>
<th>Sophie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nested Themes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Responsibilities</td>
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<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Accreditation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1 Reaffirmation</td>
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<td>yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Institutional Protection</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Institutional Education</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Challenges</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Lack of Knowledge</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Integrity</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Expanse of Responsibilities</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Responsibility without Authority</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Training and Preparation</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Insufficiency</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Suggestions</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Organizational Relationships</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 College President</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Other Stakeholders</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Responsibilities**

The participants’ comments about their responsibilities as accreditation liaisons emerged as the first super-ordinate theme. All of the liaisons interviewed described some specific duties that they were tasked with completing. But despite the fact that the accreditation liaison role is a job assignment at every institution in SACSCOC, all of the participants described the work they do in relation to that role in terms of responsibility to the institution rather than job tasks. Their discussion of their responsibilities as an accreditation liaison focused on accountability for meeting some fairly broad institutional needs. The participants in this study described their responsibilities in terms of an obligation to nurture and support the institution, rather than assignments to be completed in fulfillment of a job.
The institutional needs that the study participants described as their obligation to meet in their roles as accreditation liaisons fell into three categories – Accreditation, Institutional Education and Institutional Protection. Therefore, these themes make up the nested themes within the superordinate theme of responsibilities. While each of the participants contributed something to all the nested themes, individual participants focused their contributions on different nested themes.

**Accreditation**

All of the participants commented on accreditation responsibilities. Their discussion of responsibilities in this category can be further divided into two sub-categories, the decennial reaffirmation of accreditation process and the on-going compliance responsibilities that occur during the years between each reaffirmation of accreditation.

**Reaffirmation.** Matthew, Carley and Sophie described their involvement in the reaffirmation process, each one describing a slightly different interaction with the process. Matthew said “I ended up being responsible for the QEP and the compliance report.” Carley shared elements of the process, at one point explaining how her team met every Tuesday and Thursday during the year and a half before the compliance certification was due. She noted that she “didn’t write the document, but organized the team that wrote the document.” While mentioning the business office and instructional departments specifically, Sophie said, “I give guidance on every aspect.” She was the only participant to mention the visits by evaluation teams, saying, “I have also overseen entire site visits.”

Robin, on the other hand, described the perception of other college employees regarding his involvement with the reaffirmation process, explaining “I think a lot of people’s expectation is to bother them three years away from a SACS visit. I think that is the main expectation.” He
also expressed his position regarding the importance of the reaffirmation process, saying, “If we
don’t do this, we don’t do anything because no one is coming to our college if it can’t transfer.”
Andrew did not comment on the reaffirmation process.

Although the reaffirmation of accreditation process is the same for all SACSCOC community colleges, the accreditation liaisons in this study did not identify the same aspects of the process as their responsibility. And one of the participants did not comment at all on the decennial reaffirmation responsibilities, although this may be because he was the only participant not currently serving as a liaison. Nevertheless, these disparate comments regarding a well-defined process required for all institutions begin to suggest that the tasks assigned to accreditation liaison positions may be considerably different from one institution to another.

**On-going compliance.** All of the participants commented on their role in support of the on-going compliance activity between reaffirmation years. Matthew, Carley and Sophie addressed the obligation to serve as the primary communication link with SACSCOC. Matthew described the relationship between the accreditation liaison and the SACSCOC staff member assigned to the school as “critical.” Carley echoed this comment, saying, “It’s so important that you have a really good relationship with your SACS VP.” Sophie described herself as the on-going “voice for the institution on accreditation matters.”

Robin and Andrew described some of their activities between reaffirmation bids. Robin explained that he is always looking to see if there are new programs so that he can be prepared to meet the six-month substantive change timeline. Andrew suggested that there is value in having the accreditation liaison participate in program development “to sort of track that and make sure we are in compliance. Matthew described the on-going compliance responsibilities of the role in
the broadest terms, stating simply that the accreditation liaison is responsible for “insuring we are in compliance.”

The participants as a group had more to say about their on-going responsibilities for accreditation compliance than they did about the decennial reaffirmation that is generally associated with their position. This suggests that the on-going compliance aspect of the role may have become more important or more time consuming than is generally recognized.

**Institutional Protection**

The study participants all described institutional protection as a primary responsibility of the accreditation liaison. Within references addressing this theme, they described varying levels of acceptance from other employees when pursuing activities related to institutional protection. In all cases, the participants referenced the other members of the institution as they or them, rather than we or us, a noteworthy aspect of these references.

As a part of institutional protection responsibility, both Andrew and Matthew used exactly the same phrase, saying that the accreditation liaison needed to “have a pulse” on the trends in higher education and the on-going changes in compliance requirements. During the course of the interview with Matthew, he mentioned four times that the accreditation liaison needed to be aware of what was happening throughout the industry. Andrew mentioned it twice during his interview. Andrew also stated that the accreditation liaison must have, “the students’ interest at heart, and the college’s interest at heart.”

In describing her responsibilities, Sophie specifically said, “I am always thinking about protecting the institution.” Carley explained that it was one of her responsibilities “to make sure the institution is being compliant with all the SACS standards… and just to keep the institution
out of SACS hot water.” Matthew listed “Ensuring that the school is in compliance” as a primary responsibility of the accreditation liaison.

Andrew, Matthew, Robin and Sophie elaborated further on the institutional protection aspect of their roles. Andrew pointed out that there are very few positions at an institution that are expected to “take into account the entire institution.” As a result, he said, the accreditation liaison is expected to “figure out where the bottlenecks are.” Robin said “they kind of see me as a consultant. You know, I am supposed to keep them apprised when I see areas of concern.” Sophie said, “I highlight where the problems are. And I put in writing what needs to be done and what their options are.” Matthew made a similar comment in this context when he said that part of his job was to point out “why this is a problem, what the implications are and propose a solution.”

The participants all specified or implied an obligation to institution-wide oversight for the purpose of institutional protection related to compliance, although none of the participants had, in their role as accreditation liaison, a position that formally gave them such broad institutional authority. Accepting such responsibility in light of this possible disconnect indicates extraordinary identification with the institution and foreshadows one of the challenges identified below.

**Institutional Education**

Institutional Education was the third theme nested inside the super-ordinate theme, Responsibilities. Comments in this category explained the expectation that the accreditation liaison should educate the institution regarding SACSCOC requirements and the implications of those requirements. Sophie described her institutional education responsibilities in very concrete terms, citing faculty credentials, master planning and document management as specific areas in
which she was expected to provide instruction for the department ultimately responsible for completing those projects.

Carley and Robin identified communication as the focus of their institutional education responsibilities with regard to SACSCOC. Both noted that institutional personnel do not always understand the accreditation process. Carley pointed out that as the accreditation liaison, she was responsible for keeping everyone “on target and updated,” with both the reaffirmation process and the ongoing compliance requirements. Robin identified his responsibility to explain accreditation requirements to others at the institution as “one of the most difficult things because what’s clear as day to me is clear as mud to other people.”

Andrew and Matthew outlined their institutional education responsibilities in terms of the impact that education could have on the culture of the institution. Matthew explained that “rather than being angry or upset when we discover something is out of compliance, … I have chosen to take the mindset and try to convey to the people I work with that this is an opportunity to improve.” Andrew pointed out that “some of the things you do as a liaison … just become part of the culture of the campus. And it shouldn’t be defined as [Andrew] is the liaison and he says we need to do it. It’s the good practice of the college.”

As in their comments regarding decennial reaffirmation responsibilities, the participants described their institutional education responsibilities very differently from one institution to another. But despite the differences in the way they described the education role they played, all of the participants identified institutional education as an important part of their role. Given the participants’ wide range of experience, some new to the role and/or their school and some with years of practice as an accreditation liaison and service to their institution, this is especially interesting. It suggests that institutions do not retain or, perhaps, maintain accreditation
knowledge over time. Instead, it appears to reside with particular individuals and is lost to the institution if that individual is lost.

Interestingly, the job tasks identified by the role description provided in SACSCOC policies (See Appendix A) constitute only one part of one of the categories of the responsibilities described by the participants - Accreditation responsibilities. These responsibilities are given to the liaisons and are the most closely related, of the responsibilities they described, to tasks or duties. For the other two nested themes, Institutional Education responsibilities and Institutional Protection responsibilities, the participants appear to be enacting their ideal roles. In these two categories, the responsibilities are described as taken on by the participants. As demonstrated by some of the themes discussed as challenges for the liaisons, taking on these responsibilities comes with varying levels of support from college administration.

In the case of both Institutional Education and Institutional Protection, the participants identified the institution as their charge, describing their responsibilities as a care-taking commitment to a sentient system, rather than to a system of tasks or to a supervisor. Each one considered it his or her obligation to protect and educate the institution, as well as to support the on-going and reaffirmation accreditation processes. They all described these responsibilities as obligations that devolved onto them singularly. They did not suggest that these were responsibilities they shared with other college employees. Were this the case for the smaller institutions, it might be considered a function of institutional size. However, even the accreditation liaisons from the large and very large institutions presented these responsibilities as ones they shouldered primarily on their own, rather than as part of a team. Yet despite describing the accreditation liaison role as a kind of outpost position in which they served alone, the
accreditation liaisons in this study did not appear to resent the responsibilities they identified for the role.

It was evident from the participants’ comments that there are significant differences in the way their accreditation liaison responsibilities are managed. However, it was not clear whether these differences should be attributed to institutional characteristics or to individual characteristics of administrators and accreditation liaisons. More significant than the process differences were the content similarities. All of the participants identified the same three primary responsibilities of the institution’s accreditation liaison. This is especially significant since two of the responsibility categories, Institutional Protection and Institutional Education, appear to be responsibilities taken by the accreditation liaison, rather than given to the liaison.

**Challenges**

All of the study participants commented extensively on the challenges they faced as accreditation liaisons, resulting in the emergence of the second superordinate theme. The participants identified challenges as conditions that inhibited their ability to fulfill their responsibilities. As described by the participants, these challenges arose from a wide variety of sources. In some cases, a challenge was created by the organization or the individuals at the participant’s institution. Other challenges resulted from the processes and the culture of accreditation.

Participant descriptions of the challenges they faced as accreditation liaisons could be divided into five categories nesting within the superordinate theme of Challenges. Lack of Support, Lack of Knowledge and Expanse of Responsibilities were cited by all the participants as challenges for an accreditation liaison. All of the participants except Carley addressed issues
of Integrity in comments describing challenges they faced. Matthew was the only participant who did not identify Responsibility without Authority as a challenge for the accreditation liaison. 

**Lack of Support**

During their interviews, all of the participants noted experiences with opposition to accreditation or to the accreditation process. Andrew and Sophie identified struggles with college leadership; Robin’s comments related to faculty difficulties; Matthew and Carley noted experiences with faculty and leadership or with the institution as a whole.

Robin compared institutional accreditation to faculty credentialing, saying that an institution needs to provide its accreditation credentials to prove it is competent to provide degrees, just like faculty need to provide their degree credentials to prove they are competent to teach. He went on to say, however, that “when it’s in [the faculty’s] world, they see it, but when it is bigger than their world, they don’t see it.” Matthew pointed to a broad lack of support for accreditation in general when he noted that “SACSCOC is a nebulous bad guy over in Atlanta in the minds of some faculty and staff.”

Matthew and Andrew both commented on the lack of support some governing Boards exhibit by not prioritizing or by responding slowly to accreditation requirements. Matthew went on to say that “The consequences of this stumbling block can be significant and long lasting.” Andrew addressed lack of support from college administration by saying simply, “Some college administrators are antagonistic towards SACS.”

Sophie related specific instances in which college administrators had made her role as accreditation liaison more difficult by “passing the buck,” by not taking any ownership of the reaffirmation process and by refusing to recognize changes in the accreditation process. She attributed this lack of support to a lack of understanding and a lack of vision by these
administrators. Carley pointed out that “sometimes the institution’s perceptions or expectations aren’t really what they should be.”

For the most part, the study participants did not identify the lack of support as directed towards themselves as individuals, or even towards their role as accreditation liaison. Instead, the lack of support was described as antagonism towards the accreditation process or the regional accreditation organization, SACSCOC. Sophie’s comments, however, suggest that this may not always be the case. She described one instance in which she was demoted from her position on the president’s cabinet because senior college administration believed her to be unnecessarily requiring institutional planning and assessment activity for the purpose of accreditation compliance.

In several instances, the participants identified antagonism and lack of support for the process as stemming from the fact that many of the institutions’ stakeholders did not recognize the importance of accreditation or the implications of not achieving reaffirmation of accreditation – a lack of knowledge. It may be that the accreditation liaisons’ identification of institutional education as a primary responsibility of their role stems from the challenges they face because accreditation is so little understood.

**Lack of Knowledge**

All of the participants noted lack of knowledge in relation to the accreditation process as a challenge for the accreditation liaison. The study participants included their own lack of knowledge as well as that of other stakeholders as factors inhibiting their ability to fulfill the responsibilities of the accreditation liaison.

Robin focused entirely on the difficulties he faced as a result of information he did not have. In one segment of his interview, he explained that assigning him to the role of accreditation
liaison before he had any experience with the process created a challenge for him, especially when it came to interpreting policy and guidelines. “I’m not going to write a report on a substantive change unless I think I have one,” he said in reference to developing an understanding of the SACSCOC Substantive Change policy. In two other segments of his interview, he described situations at his institution in which plans had to be postponed because he had not received sufficient notice to complete required accreditation procedures, highlighting the difficulties resulting for both him and the institution when neither the college culture nor its structure worked to keep the accreditation liaison apprised of changes.

Andrew and Carley commented on the difficulties a new accreditation liaison experiences as a result of not knowing what to expect from the process, from the institution and from SACSCOC. Andrew described the situation of an accreditation liaison who is not experienced by saying “you’re terrified because this big thing is coming up and your whole career at this organization is dependent upon you doing well at it.” He also noted that the accreditation liaison needed a safe place to ask questions. Carley identified the network of accreditation liaisons as just such a place, but she pointed out that the availability of that network is not generally known.

Andrew and Carely also noted that the job of the accreditation liaison is made more difficult when college leadership is not familiar with the accreditation process. Andrew described a situation in which the Board of Trustees unintentionally hindered the work of the accreditation liaison, while Carley cited a president who did not understand the role of the accreditation liaison. Sophie, on the other hand, discussed the extra work load assigned to the accreditation liaison when other departments in the college “don’t know how to pull together documents of this [accreditation report] sort.”
Matthew identified a lack of knowledge by the regional accrediting body as a challenge for the accreditation liaison when he said, “It’s difficult for them to interpret what the feds want, and it’s difficult for us to interpret what they want, and all we are all trying to do is the right thing.” Andrew referenced a lack of knowledge by the federal government as a challenge for accreditation liaisons, saying “I don’t think the feds understand what they are talking about…I don’t think they know what effect that [regulation] will have on organizations.”

From the perspective of the participants in this study, there is a widespread lack of knowledge about the accreditation process and its potential implications, from individual, inexperienced accreditation liaisons to the federal Department of Education. As a result, even an accreditation liaison with years of experience and solid support from his or her supervisors identifies lack of knowledge as a challenge for the role.

**Integrity**

Of the interview participants, Carley was the only one who did not share a challenging experience related to upholding the principle of integrity, the first of the SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation. It was not clear from the interview or the opportunity for follow-up information whether this was a result of Carley’s choice not to mention any such experiences or because circumstances at her institution did not result in such experiences. Sophie and Robin’s experiences were the most blatant, while Andrew and Matthew described situations that were less clear cut.

In one segment of her interview, Sophie said “I have never agreed to anything that was a cover-up, even though I have been pressured by at least one president who tried to get me to do that.” And in another segment, she said she could “think of at least three situations I was pushed
not to press the institution for more. And I knew that was not in the institution’s best interest.” According to Sophie, “It takes a very strong-willed person to do this job.”

Robin said, “when asked to forge documents and back date them, or accept an IE form that was not turned in a year ago because the department chair was lazy, whenever those things come up, you just have to say no.” Matthew pointed out that the accreditation liaison has to be forthright and honest, even when that honesty brings to light improvements needed by the institution. “I don’t think being a SACS liaison is being a cop,” he said, “but I do think there is an important ingredient in being able to justify your actions.”

Andrew described experiences in which he had, as the accreditation liaison, opposed the inappropriate use of accreditation standards to justify institutional or individual actions. In one case, he had even been expected to support an erroneous interpretation of SACSCOC faculty credential standards for the purpose of terminating an unwanted faculty member. Andrew went on to characterize the accreditation liaison’s responsibility for maintaining integrity by saying, “You just have to decide what you can live with, what keeps you up at night, how you feed your kids, whatever. You just have to go back to that character and figure out what you can live without.”

All of the participants in the study who addressed the issue of integrity identified the necessity for accreditation liaisons to act, at some level, as the arbiter of integrity for their institutions. While each one described instances in which he or she was unhesitatingly willing to do so, none of them identified this as an isolated experience or even a surprising one. It was clear that each of the four participants who addressed this issue had experienced some conflict between their role as taken and their role as given by at least some members of their institutions. But in all cases, they prioritized their own motivations for assuming the characteristics of the
accreditation liaison role as they perceived it and as they intended to enact it over the motivations
and expectations of these others at their institutions.

**Expanse of Responsibilities**

Andrew, Matthew, Carley and Sophie discussed the difficulties brought on by the breadth
of the accreditation liaison’s responsibilities. Carley said it “is a far more critical job at
institutions of higher education that most people realize or know,” and remarked on the fact that
the reaffirmation period requires a level of commitment that can significantly impact the
accreditation liaison’s home life. Andrew pointed out that “it changes all the time and not just
changes in the writing but changes in how it’s being applied in the field. And so, you’ve got to
be plugged in.”

Sophie noted that the accreditation liaison role requires the person in that role to be
familiar with all aspects of the institution. In her experience, “the amount of personal weight that
is put on the accreditation liaison far exceeds what the presidents can even grasp.” She illustrated
this statement by describing her experience the year her husband died. The institution did not
reassign the accreditation responsibilities, so she traveled between the hospital and her office,
rarely going home. And while she was out of town, attending her husband’s funeral, she received
a phone call requiring her to cut short her bereavement leave and return to the institution right
away in order to complete an accreditation report.

Matthew addressed the scope of the accreditation liaison responsibility from a historical
perspective. At seven different points in his interview, Matthew commented that the role of the
accreditation liaison had changed significantly over the 20 years that he had fulfilled that role.
Matthew noted that “it is more intense and exhausting” than it used to be. He also noted that the
on-going responsibilities make it a full-time job instead of a project completed on an “every
decade basis.” He identified the addition of the QEP to the reaffirmation process and the frequent turnover of SACSCOC personnel along with the resulting time required for an accreditation liaison to develop a relationship with the new SACSCOC staff as significant factors contributing to the expanse of the responsibilities.

Matthew described the changes that had occurred for the role over the time he had held the position in terms of the expanse of new challenges those changes created for the accreditation liaison. However, those same changes could also be seen to contribute to challenges discussed above resulting from a lack of knowledge about and support of accreditation. If other college stakeholders are unaware that their understanding of the accreditation process is not current, their expectations of the accreditation liaison may not coincide with the role as the accreditation liaison sees it.

Despite the differences in size and location of their institutions, all of the participants who had been assigned the accreditation liaison position for more than one year described the frequently changing and wide ranging external influences. In this context, they also noted the critical impact those influences could have on the institution and the accreditation liaison. The participant who had been in the position less than one year did not identify the same challenges. This may suggest that influences external to the institution but significant for the accreditation liaison are not immediately apparent to or are not immediately shared with those who move into the position. On the other hand, it may simply offer additional evidence that a lack of understanding about the accreditation process is common.

Responsibility Without Authority

Andrew, Robin, Carley and Sophie commented on responsibility without authority. At first glance, it might be expected that their comments regarding lack of authorization in the role
would relate directly to the differences between their role as given and their role as taken. However, the participants’ comments regarding responsibility without authority were directly related to their accreditation responsibilities, the ones most closely tied to the tasks of the accreditation liaison role as given by SACSCOC.

In describing the role of the accreditation liaison, Andrew said “You’re responsible for compliance, helping the institution maintain compliance for everything, but you absolutely supervise no one… You’re charged with having to confront people that have more authority, more power.” Robin pointed out the same situation when he said, “I’m not over those areas directly; I can’t make those changes; it has to come from them.”

Sophie described one of the difficulties resulting from this kind of situation, saying “I am perceived as getting into a power grab by moving into these other areas.” Carley alluded to this challenge with the statement, “they are never forced to get what I do.” Matthew, the longest serving accreditation liaison among the participants, did not address this issue. It was not clear whether he had never experienced any related difficulties or he simply no longer considered it a concern, possibly as a result of his years at the institution.

In describing the responsibilities of the accreditation liaison, Andrew pointed out that in common with the president’s role, the accreditation liaison must take the entire institution into consideration. But in identifying the lack of authority to implement as a challenge for the position, all the participants who commented highlighted a significant difference between these two institution-wide positions. When a college president recognizes needed changes or identifies potential improvements, he or she has the authority to approve resource allocation and instigate activity. According to the participants in this study, the accreditation liaison does not. While none of the participants drew a direct connection between this challenge and their comments
below regarding the importance of the relationship between the accreditation liaison and the president, it is difficult not to do so when reading across the data.

Significantly, the study participants had more to say about the challenges of the role than the responsibilities of the role. This is not surprising since role conflict can be expected when there is a substantial lack of overlap between the role as taken by the employee and the role as given to the employee. Just such a lack of overlap was identified when over half of the comments made by the participants in relation to their responsibilities addressed elements of the role as taken. The various challenges that the study participants described made it clear that, in their view, their institutions needed the accreditation liaison role elements of education and protection that resulted from the participants’ role ideals and role enactment. However, these challenges did not relate exclusively to the institutional education and protection elements of the accreditation liaison role. Instead, most of the instances the participants described to illustrate the challenges they faced included some aspect of their accreditation job description expectations. But because the accreditation liaison had taken on the responsibilities for institutional education and protection, they found themselves in conflict with individuals and institutional cultures that did not support the tenets and/or processes of accreditation.

Invariably, the study participants described the challenges they faced as expected aspects of the accreditation liaison role. None of the participants in this study indicated that they should not have to address the issues they identified. They did not indicate that they were pleased with the challenges, but all five of the participants appeared to expect the role to meet with the difficulties they described and to accept those difficulties as commonplace.

The various challenges the participants identified can be tied to the responsibilities they described. In some cases, it appears evident that the existence of a particular challenge led to the
accreditation liaison’s assumption of a responsibility to address the cause of the challenge. For example, the lack of knowledge about and support for the accreditation process, described by all the participants, can easily be seen as a contributing factor to the accreditation liaison taking on the responsibility for institutional education with regard to the accreditation processes. Assuming this responsibility can also be seen as a logical outgrowth of the awkwardness resulting from having responsibility for compliance without authority. If the institution as a whole understands the processes and issues surrounding accreditation, compliance can become part of the institutional culture, significantly mitigating the need for authority in order to achieve compliance.

All of the accreditation liaisons in this study identified the institution-wide nature of their responsibilities as a challenge, both in terms of responsibility without authority and in terms of the expanse of their responsibilities. While these challenges can be seen as resulting from the institution-wide view required for their accreditation responsibilities, they would not have been as likely to see that their institutions needed someone to accept the responsibility for accreditation related institutional protection if they had not been in a position to evaluate their institutions as a whole. In this case, it would appear that the protection responsibility resulted, at least in part, from challenges to the accreditation responsibilities. The study participants’ descriptions of situations in which they were required to address issues of integrity with regard to the institutions’ accreditation activity also points to the need for someone to assume responsibility for protecting the institution from such ill-considered decisions.

**Training and Preparation**

The study participants all described the training and preparation available for an accreditation liaison as insufficient, resulting in the third superordinate theme. The comments in
this category could be divided between descriptions of the insufficiency of the available training and suggestions to improve the available training for those who accept the position of accreditation liaison.

**Insufficiency**

Carley’s opinion of the training available for accreditation liaisons was summed up when she said, “There needs to be training. I’m not even going to say more training. I am going to say training.” She described her experience as a new accreditation liaison by saying “It was trial by fire.” Regarding available resources, Carley said the SACSCOC website “doesn’t say very much” and research results are not productive because “there’s not a whole lot of literature out there.” Carley had attended a session at the SACSCOC Annual Meeting about the role of the accreditation liaison, but said that learning the role “can’t be done in a one hour workshop or even a three hour workshop.” She asserted that “SACS could do a lot more to prepare new liaisons.”

Robin’s description of the SACSCOC website, “It’s not the greatest website,” indicated that he held an opinion similar to Carley’s regarding that resource. Robin was also dissatisfied with the support system from SACSCOC. As he described it, the accrediting agency expects an accreditation liaison to “self-train.” Although Andrew, Matthew, Robin and Carley noted that the SACSCOC staff members are knowledgeable and helpful when asked, these four participants also pointed out the drawbacks of relying too heavily on that resource. Carley and Andrew noted that it takes time to develop a relationship with these staff members and Matthew noted the frequent turnover among SACSCOC staff as a factor inhibiting the development of these relationships. Robin explained that he could not always turn to the SACSCOC staff for answers
because, as a novice accreditation liaison, he did not always know enough to realize he should have a question.

Both Robin and Sophie noted that, in their experience, there were not any other individuals on campus to provide instruction or direction regarding accreditation liaison responsibilities. Sophie described her initiation to the position as a year of studying in an attempt to understand both her role and the reaffirmation of accreditation process. Andrew described the preparation and training for accreditation liaison responsibilities by saying, “there is not a lot of guidance.” Matthew described his efforts to assist other, less experienced liaisons and added, “I wish I would have had me as a mentor is what it amounts to.”

Surprisingly, none of the participants assigned to their individual institutions any responsibility for the lack of training and preparation available to accreditation liaisons. Instead, they all described deficiencies in the training resources available from the regional accrediting agency. Although none of the participants identified themselves as unsupportive of the accreditation process or the accrediting agency, such unanimous, albeit mild, condemnation of the agency’s training and preparation efforts suggests that there may be more dissatisfaction than the participants themselves recognize.

Suggestions

Robin and Carley both suggested that SACSCOC should provide mandatory training for accreditation liaisons. Carley described a two-day workshop for new accreditation liaisons and Robin described a series of online courses he believed would be effective. Andrew also recommended training for accreditation liaisons, but he added that there needed to be training for CEO’s and others from whom accreditation liaisons needed support.
Carley identified the network of accreditation liaisons as a primary resource for anyone attempting to fulfill the role, saying “you have no idea how helpful it was to be able to reach out.” Matthew suggested that all new accreditation liaisons should be assigned a mentoring relationship with an experienced accreditation liaison, opining that “even talented, motivated, loyal, dedicated employees need a time of emersion with floaties.” Andrew identified participation as a member of a visiting evaluation team as necessary for learning how to fulfill the role of an accreditation liaison, emphasizing his point by saying, “I don’t really know how you can be an effective [accreditation liaison] if you don’t go to visits.”

The two participants with the most years of experience in the role of accreditation liaison, Matthew and Sophie, made the fewest recommendations for improvements in the training and preparation process, as well as the fewest comments on its insufficiency. Possibly, those with more recent experience as a novice are more concerned about and in a better position to identify what kinds of training would best serve the novice accreditation liaison.

In a departure from their usual consistency, the participants who made recommendations for improving accreditation liaison training and preparation each offered a different plan. However, since the participants did not see or discuss their responses with one another, there is no evidence to indicate whether they would or would not agree on any or all of the suggestions. Their differing recommendations might have resulted from differences in their personal or institutional demographics and histories.

Since the accreditation liaison is an assignment for one person at each institution, it would not be especially surprising for the 20-year veteran to be the single person at his institution with an understanding of the process and the role. But at institutions where others had more recently served, it was surprising that the study participants had been unable to find
mentors within their institutions. And Matthew, like all the other participants, indicated that there had been very few resources for him when he started. The study participants did not speculate as to the reason for this lack of institutional memory regarding accreditation.

Organizational Relationships

The fourth super-ordinate theme identified by the study data was the importance of organizational relationships. The type or quality of relationships between stakeholders in the organization and the accreditation process and between stakeholders in the organization and the accreditation liaison were identified by all the participants as important to their success in the role. Their comments could be divided into two categories – those comments pertaining to the college president and those comments pertaining to various other stakeholders.

College President

All of the participants identified the relationship to the college president as the most significant for an accreditation liaison, each one adding that in his or her view, the accreditation liaison should report directly to the president. Matthew explained that

There are very few things that are more at stake than ten year reaffirmation…I would have to say that this job[of accreditation liaison] is not something that needs to be filtered by the time it gets to your chief executive officer…I reported directly to the president of the college…I did not want anyone between us on such an important set of duties.

Carley said “I think it helps because I am a direct report to the president. I don’t have to worry about anyone being between the liaison and the president and I think that is critically important.” Sophie echoed this opinion, saying,

In my estimation, it’s best when the accreditation liaison reports directly to the president…Because the rapport that has to go on between those two individuals, the
expanded knowledge base the president needs from the accreditation liaison’s viewpoint…you definitely need to know you are on the same page.

Andrew and Robin described experiences in which fulfilling their accreditation liaison responsibilities had been awkward or difficult during a time when they did not report to the president. Robin explained that not being on the president’s cabinet meant that he did not always receive information he needed in a timely fashion. At one institution where Andrew served as the accreditation liaison, he reported to a vice president, but was expected to report any accreditation issues to the president. This arrangement created a reporting dilemma for him when issues related to accreditation did not reflect positively on his supervisor.

All of the study participants felt strongly that the accreditation liaison needed to report to the president. Across the different participants, different reasons were cited, ranging from effectiveness issues pertaining to acquisition of information to employee relations issues resulting from distributed reporting. However, none of the participants made the claim that they needed this direct reporting relationship in order to enhance their authorization in the role. This is surprising in light of their comments noted earlier that described challenges faced as a result of having responsibility without authority.

Instead, the participants focused on the kind of relationship they needed with the chief executive officer in order to be successful. Coupled with the study participants’ commitment to institutional education, their descriptions of challenges that related to lack of knowledge and support from institutional stakeholders, as well as Andrew’s recommendation that training and preparation for the accreditation role should extend to the CEO, this emphasis on the relationship needed with the CEO suggests that some institution CEOs are not sufficiently knowledgeable about the accreditation process and the role of the accreditation liaison.
Other Stakeholders

All of the participants also noted other stakeholders who could be identified as having a significant impact on the role of the accreditation liaison. Andrew focused on the impact the college Board of Trustees could have if they understood the accreditation process and its importance. He explained that when the Board asked informed questions and demonstrated an understanding of the accreditation process as important to the institution, the college vice presidents noticed and paid attention. Matthew and Sophie also listed the Board of Trustees as stakeholders in the role of the accreditation liaison, but only peripherally. Matthew described their relationship to the accreditation liaison as “a little more tenuous” than other relationships.

Matthew and Sophie both identified senior administrators as important stakeholders for the role of accreditation liaison while Robin and Carley pointed to the accrediting agency and/or the accrediting agency staff. Robin suggested that since the SACSCOC staff member is the person he communicates with regarding accreditation issues, the accrediting agency should have some expectations for the way Robin fulfills his role. Carley described her relationship with the SACSCOC staff member assigned to her school as extremely helpful, even assisting when the college president did not seem to grasp the importance of the process.

Although all the participants described stakeholders other than the college president who had a significant impact on their work as accreditation liaison, they did not all identify the same additional stakeholders. This suggests that while stakeholders other than the president of the college are important to the role of the accreditation liaison, it is not necessarily their position that determines that importance. Instead, the characteristics of the institution or of the individual stakeholders may influence their importance at least as much as the position they hold.
These comments, as well as those describing the accreditation liaisons’ responsibility to connect with the SACSCOC staff member emphasized the relationship development required for successful management of both on-going and decennial compliance. While on the surface, the comments of the participants emphasized the need for the relationships, an underlying message appears to be the necessity that the accreditation liaison be someone who is able to develop multiple relationships both within and without the institution.

**Conclusion**

In discussing the role of an accreditation liaison, the five participants in the study shared information that consistently fell into four super-ordinate themes: responsibilities, challenges, training and preparation and organizational relationships. Each of these themes had subsidiary themes nested inside. The information provided by the participants about their roles was surprisingly consistent with regard to the topics they addressed. Differences could be identified in only two of the nested themes. In both cases, this difference was a function of omission. That the participant did not add to the information about that nested theme does not necessarily mean that the participant did not have experiences related to that topic. Therefore, these omissions cannot be considered significant in this study.

The responsibilities of the accreditation liaison was the first super-ordinate theme identified in the participants’ discussions. Their comments on this topic could be divided into three categories: accreditation, institutional protection and institutional education. Within the first of these, the participants’ comments could be further subdivided into discussions of the responsibilities for decennial reaffirmation of accreditation and discussion of the responsibilities for on-going compliance activity. The accreditation responsibilities are designated by SACSCOC, but the role that the accreditation liaison assumes for institutional education and
institutional protection appear to have developed from institutional need as it has been perceived by the accreditation liaisons who consider themselves to have an almost unique perspective on the institution, one that is not confined by departmental or divisional boundaries.

Collectively, the participants in the study had the most to say on the super-ordinate theme of challenges to fulfilling the role of accreditation liaison. There were five nested themes discussed in relation to this super-ordinate theme. Lack of support for the role of the accreditation liaison or for the accreditation process was one of the nested themes. Another was a lack of the knowledge needed to support accreditation. Within this nested theme, the participants identified both a lack of knowledge about the accreditation process and a lack of knowledge about their institutions or changes being made within their institutions.

While the participants did not describe any experiences in which they were unable to uphold the principle of integrity with regard to accreditation, all but one of the participants described instances during their tenure as an accreditation liaison when that principle was challenged, making integrity the third nested theme. The fourth nested theme to which comments relating to challenges of the accreditation liaison role could be assigned was the expanse of responsibilities. The fifth nested theme arose from comments describing issues resulting from having responsibility for accreditation without any organizational authority to compel compliance.

Like their comments relating to responsibilities of the accreditation liaison role, the participants in the study did not describe circumstances in which they had the same experiences. But they did describe the same challenges playing out in different anecdotal situations. Clear connections could be made between the challenges the participants described and the responsibilities they assumed. In some cases, this connection took the form of a cause and effect
relationship. In other cases, the exact order or relationship was less easy to identify, although some kind of correlation was evident.

The third super-ordinate theme consisted of the participants’ discussion of training and preparation available to accreditation liaisons. Their comments on this theme could be further divided into two clusters. The first cluster of comments revolved around the insufficiency of the available training and preparation. The second revolved around suggestions for remedying that insufficiency. The participants all had different suggestions to make for improving the kind of training and preparation available to new accreditation liaisons, but they were unanimous in their dissatisfaction with the current systems.

The fourth super-ordinate theme addressed by the study participants was the impact of organizational relationships. Within the comments related to organizational relationships, the participants’ discussions addressed two nested themes. The first of these included comments about the impact of the accreditation liaison’s relationship to the college president. The second addressed the impact of other stakeholders. Within this theme, the study participants continued the pattern they had shown in the previous themes. They discussed different relationships within their institutions, but they all emphasized how important it is for an accreditation liaison to successfully managing a wide range of relationships.

The different participants offered observations, opinions and experiences that differed widely in the focus of the content, but their contributions were consistent with regard to the overall message that emerged from the interviews. Remarkably, while different participants described different aspects of a topic or addressed it from different perspectives, none of the comments made by any of the accreditation liaisons in this study actually conflicted with the information provided by any other participant. It was clear that despite the differences in the
various processes among the participants’ institutions and the demographics of participants and their institutions, the responsibilities, challenges and other concerns of the role were perceived to be the same by all the accreditation liaisons in the study.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to discover how accreditation liaisons at community colleges accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) perceived their role. Organizational or professional role theory was the lens through which the position was examined. Study participants were asked to discuss their position within the structure of the institution, their understanding of that position and the way in which they fulfilled the position. As explained in Krantz & Maltz (1997) and in Cornelissen (2012), these three aspects of a professional role may not be the same, although they do all contribute to the role as performed by each individual.

A general inductive approach was used to uncover the characteristics of the role from the perspective of five different accreditation liaisons. Interviews with the participants were guided by three research questions. What do accreditation liaisons identify as their responsibilities? What are the challenges accreditation liaisons identify for their positions? Do accreditation liaisons consider any particular responsibilities to be incompatible with their role as accreditation liaison?

Careful analysis of the data produced by these interviews resulted in identification of role characteristics that could be identified with four superordinate themes: 1) Responsibilities, 2) Challenges, 3) Training and Preparation and 4) Organizational Relationships. Within each of these primary themes, sub-themes became apparent. The participants identified accreditation responsibilities, institutional protection responsibilities and institutional education responsibilities. Within challenges, five sub-themes were identified by the participants: lack of support, lack of knowledge, issues of integrity, expanse of responsibilities and responsibility without authority. Discussions of training and preparation were clearly focused on two sub-
Discussion of the findings will begin by considering each of these themes in relation to current literature. Implications for the findings with an emphasis on the practice of being an accreditation liaison will follow. Finally, recommendations will be made for future research into the role of the accreditation liaison.

**Responsibilities**

The findings in this study do not contradict the available literature regarding the responsibilities of accreditation liaisons. However, since there is very little available literature specifically addressing the accreditation liaison role, this lack of contradiction does not indicate a significant agreement between the findings and the available literature. Instead, it lays a foundation for expanded inquiry. The first of the sub-themes within the superordinate theme of responsibilities was accreditation, which could be further subdivided into decennial reaffirmation responsibilities and on-going accreditation responsibilities.

The participants in this study described their accreditation liaison responsibilities as being more complicated and multidimensional than colleagues at their institutions realized, echoing literature that described the planning process for reaffirmation of accreditation as far more complex and multifaceted than most realize (Katsinal, Kinkhead & Kennamer, 2009). In addition, literature that described the regional accreditation process often focused on the constant change taking place within the accreditation process (Eaton, 2012; Jackson, et al., 2010; Rhodes, 2012; Spanghel, 2012), adding to the complexity of the accreditation liaison role. While the literature and the findings were consistent for the decennial reaffirmation responsibilities, the
findings related to on-going accreditation responsibilities could not be measured against the literature since no literature was found addressing this aspect of the accreditation liaison role.

The study participants also defined their roles as unique within the institution, explaining that no other members of the institution were required to learn or stay current regarding accreditation. As a result, they characterized the accreditation process as poorly understood by colleagues within their institutions. Some of the participants also pointed to organizations outside their institutions, but wielding significant influence on the institution, that lacked an understanding of the process and its ramifications. It could be argued that the limited nature of the literature discussing the role of the accreditation liaison supports this finding, since a well-understood position or process could be expected to have an extensive body of literature supporting that understanding.

As pointed out by Jackson, Davis and Jackson, (2010), the accreditation process encompasses the entire institution, so neither the on-going accreditation activity nor the decennial reaffirmation can actually be accomplished by the accreditation liaison alone. As a result, others at the institution need to have some familiarity with the reaffirmation of accreditation processes and requirements. The logical result of this mismatch between institutional knowledge of accreditation and the need for that knowledge is the institutional education role taken on by all of the accreditation liaisons in this study.

However, as has already been stated, there is very little literature specifically addressing the role of the accreditation liaison, so this sub-theme cannot be overtly affirmed or contradicted in the literature. But the general institutional lack of familiarity with the accreditation process and the constant changes in the process that are addressed by the literature (Crow, 2009; Eaton,
The third sub-theme within the responsibilities findings, institutional protection, was not addressed, even obliquely by the literature. Although all the study participants identified institutional protection as a significantly important responsibility of their role as an accreditation liaison, that finding is not corroborated elsewhere. But neither is it contradicted anywhere. According to the study participants, the accreditation liaison must protect the institution from non-compliance by recognizing a need for change, communicating that need and, in some cases, designing and implementing the change, as well.

More than any other sub-theme within the responsibilities findings, the role of institutional protector appears to be a responsibility taken on by the accreditation liaison, rather than assumed as a part of the structure of the organization or assigned by a supervisor. Further investigation is needed to determine why accreditation liaisons take on this responsibility. Potential rationales include currently unknown supervisory direction, some other external motivation or a personality or character trait that exists in those who are willing to serve as an accreditation liaison. However, at this point, such discussion is purely speculative. Neither this study nor the literature investigated for this study addressed this consideration.

**Challenges**

The participants in this study appeared to be confident regarding their responsibilities as accreditation liaison. It was surprising, therefore, to discover that the challenges they described experiencing were challenges identified in the literature as resulting from role ambiguity and role conflict, or alternatively, role characteristics identified in the literature as contributing to role ambiguity and role conflict.
Jackson, Davis and Jackson (2010) explained that all the regional accrediting bodies had collaborated to identify the same areas of investigation for the visiting teams of accreditation evaluators, regardless of the regional organization to which they belonged. These areas of investigation – institutional philosophy, governance and management, curriculum development, faculty and staff credentials, financial and physical resources, student support services and institutional effectiveness – have been designed to provide an evaluation of all segments of an institution. So, the literature describing accreditation supports the study findings regarding the institution-wide nature of accreditation, but it does not address the impact of this design on the accreditation liaison.

Although it is by design that the responsibilities of the accreditation liaison role encompass the entire institution, this design can be seen as the root of the challenges faced by accreditation liaisons. Findings indicated that participants in this study experienced challenges resulting from both their own lack of knowledge about some areas of their institutions and from other institutional stakeholders lack of understanding regarding the breadth of the accreditation liaison role.

Schuler (1975) explained that employees in higher levels of an institution are better able to cope with role ambiguity than those at lower levels and Miles (1976) pointed out that boundary spanning within the hierarchy of a department is easier to address than boundary spanning across departments or outside the organization. Unfortunately for the accreditation liaison, the accreditation liaison role is defined by boundary spanning with obligations and responsibilities across the institution and to the SACSCOC accreditation process. Although some of the participants in this study filled positions at high levels in one department of the institution, they did not serve in boundary-crossing, high level positions. As a result, responsibility without
authority was identified by the study participants as a significant challenge for the role. This finding is in line with the literature addressing boundary spanning as a characteristic of a professional role.

Studies (Nir, 2011; Vora, Kostova & Roth, 2007) describing the role conflict in boundary spanning positions outside higher education support the idea that two other challenges identified by study participants, lack of support and maintaining integrity, can be identified as the result of the boundary spanning nature of the accreditation liaison role. Study participants described experiences in which the needs or traditions of the institution or a department within the institution conflicted with the requirements of accreditation. In such cases, the accreditation liaison was faced with making a decision that was not only unpopular, but in some cases, damaging to the accreditation liaison’s career.

**Training and Preparation**

Studies that have considered performance in relation to role clarity (Jordan et al., 2012; Krantz & Maltz, 1997; Lau, 2011; Schuler, 1975) note that greater role clarity results in better performance. The findings in this study concur with the literature, focusing on the lack of role clarity for the novice accreditation liaison.

All of the study participants identified their move into the accreditation liaison position as a role change for which they had no preparation and few resources, requiring them to create their own project methods and professional development plans. Tierney and Farmer (2011) were optimistic about employees learning to develop and improve their creative skills, but suggested that best results would come from practice in situations without severe time constraints or penalties. Such conditions are exactly what the accreditation liaisons in this study said they did
not have. Instead, they described situations in which they were required to come up speed very quickly in order to manage the high stakes reaffirmation of accreditation process.

The lack of available training and preparation was cited by the study participants as a significant hindrance to their understanding of the role. The study participants also pointed to the lack of others in the same role, or models, as a factor contributing to the lack of role clarity they experienced. While the participants identified methods they used to overcome the resulting difficulties, they also described instances in which their performance was negatively impacted by this lack of clarity.

**Organizational Relationships**

The participants in this study described the accreditation liaison role as one that operates within a multiplex system where a traditional organizational hierarchy is unavailable to support implementation of accreditation procedures and policies. Instead, just as described in Valcour’s (2002) work regarding multiplex systems, the participants in this study explained that they had to depend on the time consuming process of relationship building in order to get things done. Not only did they have to nurture relationships across their institution, but also they had to develop and maintain relationships outside the institution. The time it takes to build and maintain this wide-ranging system of relationships may not be the only drawback. According to Burkhardt (2002), the styles that work well within a particular institution are not always effective when representing an institution to an outside constituency. Both the accreditation liaisons and the institutions may not be best served by expecting a single individual to develop and maintain both internal and external relationships.

Both the literature and the findings of this study agree that all accreditation liaisons should report to the institution’s CEO. SACSCOC Vice President Charles Taylor (2013)
identified the influence of the president’s office as a significant factor contributing to successful implementation and enforcement of accreditation activity. He explained that having the accreditation liaison report to the president or chancellor would ensure two things: that accreditation liaisons would have access to all the information they needed and that accreditation liaisons would have access to the influence of the president’s office as needed to complete the accreditation process.

While agreeing with Taylors’s actual recommendation, the participants in this study suggested that the direct reporting relationship was important to ensure that accurate and timely information was delivered to the CEO as well as received from the CEO. They explained that a direct reporting relationship with the institution’s president was primarily valuable because it allowed for more open communication between the liaison and the president, allowing for implementation of the liaisons’ institutional education responsibilities at the most senior level. These findings suggest that the available information about the role of the accreditation liaison is less than complete.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of the accreditation liaison from the perspective of those who serve in that role at community colleges in the Southern Region. The study found that the participants identified the same responsibilities and challenges for the position, regardless of the size or location of their institution and regardless of the demographic differences and background differences of the participants. The responsibilities identified by the participants fell into three categories: accreditation responsibilities, institutional education responsibilities and institutional protection responsibilities. There were five categories of
challenges described by the participants: lack of support, lack of knowledge, integrity issues, expanse of responsibilities and responsibility without authority.

There were two additional issues that the study participants identified as significant concerns for the accreditation liaison. Training and preparation for the role was described as entirely insufficient and suggestions from the participants for improvement were numerous. The impact of organizational relationships on the role of accreditation liaisons was also identified as significant. The study participants focused on the relationship to the college CEO as a primary consideration, with other organizational relationships also identified as important to the role.

The findings in this study do not appear to contradict the relevant literature addressing professional role theory and accreditation in general. In many instances, the findings support the literature discussing a characteristic of regional accreditation or role conflict and ambiguity. However, in the one instance where the role of the accreditation liaison, specifically, was discussed outside this study, there was considerable difference between the study participants’ explanations and the conference presenter’s explanations for why accreditation liaisons should report to the institution’s CEO. Significant work needs to be done both in practice and in further research in order to develop an understanding of the role of the accreditation liaison.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to begin an investigation into the role of the accreditation liaison, an important but little known position at member colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. A better understanding of the way those who fill the role experience the position can have implications for all the stakeholders who interact with the accreditation process, from the accreditation liaisons themselves to college leadership and the representatives of SACSCOC. Recommendations for practice that result from the findings of this
study include improvements to preparation and training for accreditation liaisons, increased activity at institutions to promote awareness of accreditation processes and requirements and organizational changes that allow accreditation liaisons to develop necessary relationships and resources.

According to the participants in this study, accreditation liaisons find themselves thrust into the role with little or no training. This is particularly ironic since the institutions where they are employed are education institutions. But as several of the study participants pointed out, this also means it is a situation that can be resolved at the institutional level. There are several methods of addressing this issue that can be implemented immediately.

Arranging for a formalized mentoring relationship for new accreditation liaisons is one of the changes that institutions could make in order to better provide a new accreditation liaison with the necessary preparation. This method takes into consideration the results of studies (DeWaal, 2012; Ibarra, 1999) that support the use of models and prototyping as a process for successfully interpreting a new role. New accreditation liaisons can be appointed and assigned to the role prior to the departure of an experienced liaison so that the new individual will be able to spend some time learning the role under the tutelage of someone who is familiar with that role. If an experienced accreditation liaison is not available at the institution, an agreement could be reached with the accreditation liaison from a neighboring institution to serve as a mentor. While such arrangements sometimes exist informally, a formalized arrangement would allow both the mentor and mentee to approach the relationship systematically and consistently, rather than haphazardly and occasionally.

Another step could be taken at the institution level that would significantly improve the available resources for new accreditation liaisons without significant investment or
organizational change at the institution. If incumbent accreditation liaisons are allowed the time and resources necessary to document and institutionally archive the activity, sources and timelines important to successful reaffirmation of accreditation and if succeeding accreditation liaisons are given the time and resources they need to familiarize themselves with material in these institutional archives, new liaisons would have a solid foundation for beginning to learn the role.

However, to promote increased expertise and a more consistent understanding across the Southern Region, accreditation liaison training seminars and materials could be developed by SACSCOC. A pre-conference session for new accreditation liaisons could be added to the SACSCOC annual meeting in December and the summer institute in July. Most institutions send their accreditation liaisons to one or both of these events, so such training seminars could be implemented without significant increase in cost for institutions or for SACSCOC. Online study modules addressing common topics important to accreditation liaisons, like substantive change policies and the relative significance of the Principles of Accreditation, could also be developed and posted for more in-depth study by new accreditation liaisons.

The study participants noted that not only were there few training resources for new accreditation liaisons, but also those that were available were difficult to find. To address this, SACSCOC could add a tab to their website home page where all the most pertinent information for new accreditation liaisons is consolidated. In addition to training opportunities and materials, a list of the accreditation liaisons at member institutions could be available on this site. Such a list would facilitate inter-institutional mentoring and function as a networking tool for new accreditation liaisons.
Driscoll and Beehr (2000) point out that if a role is characterized by lack of clarity, individuals who are well able to cope with such a lack may appear to be doing well. But their coping skills may be masking the fact that they could be performing at a much higher level if there was more clarity for the role. Whether training is institution-based or SACSCOC-based, instructor led or self-paced, formal instruction or mentoring, it is clear from the findings of this study that accreditation liaisons need better preparation for their role.

Much of the literature addressing accreditation discusses the ramifications of the many changes to regional accreditation (Hall, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; McGuire, 2009; Rhodes, 2012; Wergin, 2005). In light of this rapidly changing accreditation environment, it is not surprising that the accreditation liaisons in this study identified institutional education as one of their primary responsibilities. Many of the challenges they described and much of the work they identified as their responsibility can be tied to the pervasive lack of knowledge about accreditation that the study participants experienced at their institutions. Therefore, a second recommendation for practice arising from the findings of this study is for individual institutions to implement concerted accreditation education campaigns, targeting their own employees.

The accreditation liaisons in this study pointed out that even institutional chief executive officers were not always familiar with accreditation requirements. At the least, a CEO’s lack of understanding can make the accreditation liaison role more difficult. More significantly, a CEO is in a position to have considerable impact on the results of the reaffirmation process and a lack of understanding at the CEO level can result in serious consequences for the institution. The accreditation liaisons in this study described other challenges that could be attributed to inadequate understanding of accreditation processes and purposes, from outright challenges to
the participants’ integrity to a simple lack of support for the concepts and systems of accreditation.

Given the pressures for change that regional accreditation is now experiencing, even those institutional employees who have worked with SACSCOC in the past may not understand current requirements. Regular communication to all institutional stakeholders regarding the process and status of the institution’s accreditation projects could go a long way towards mitigating the difficulties arising from a lack of accreditation knowledge. Depending on the culture at an institution, this communication could take the form of newsletters, e-mail blasts, seminars, development day sessions or commencement messages. But in whatever form, stakeholders should receive regular information about their institution’s accreditation so that they can participate productively, and so that the institution can begin to develop institutional accreditation memory and expertise.

In addition to general dissemination of accreditation information, institutions should consider focused professional development addressing specific issues in accreditation. For example, in the Southern Region, the most commonly cited areas for improvement during reaffirmation of accreditation are institutional effectiveness and faculty credentials (Matveev & Cuevas, 2014). Institutions should encourage employee attendance at workshops covering these topics in an effort to promote the increased understanding of accreditation that is needed in order to support the accreditation process.

The participants in this study were unanimous in identifying a network of relationships with both internal and external contacts as a necessary resource for those filling the role of accreditation liaison. As mentioned above, they were also unanimous in pointing out the inadequacy of resources and training for new accreditation liaisons. Both individual institutions
and SACSCOC should consider possible methods for addressing the issues arising from the conjunction of these two considerations.

Andrew suggested that serving on an evaluator team is an invaluable experience for an accreditation liaison; however, willingness to serve is not the only criteria for participation. A letter of nomination from the institution’s president must be sent to SACSCOC and SACSCOC must take note of the individual and request his or her participation. Since there is already a policy in place to allow an observer to accompany any visiting evaluation team, it would be a short step to make it common practice for college presidents to nominate any new accreditation liaison, and for SACSCOC to invite any new accreditation liaison to participate in an accreditation visit as soon after appointment as is practical. This would not only provide the new accreditation liaison with important experience, but also it would provide that new accreditation liaison with the opportunity to begin building an external network of experienced accreditation resources.

SACSCOC could also sponsor semi-local workshops for accreditation liaisons. Currently, SACSCOC offers two regional events per year, the annual meeting in December and the Summer Institute in July. Attendance at both events reaches capacity each year, approximately 5000 and 500 attendees respectively, and the assessment results for both consistently rank them as highly useful to the attendees. However, because the events are so large and because the attendees come from all departments at institutions in 11 different states, the opportunity for accreditation liaisons to network with other accreditation liaisons or to build a specific knowledge base is minimal.

In response to general institutional confusion regarding Substantive Change policy, SACSCOC also holds smaller events throughout the Southern Region each spring. These events
are billed as drive-in seminars, last only one day, are not attended by all the SACSCOC staff and are hosted by local colleges and universities. Building on this model, SACSCOC could develop accreditation liaison seminars that would serve the dual purposes of enhancing accreditation liaison preparation and opening a venue for inter-collegiate accreditation liaison communication.

Both the study participants and the literature identified the reporting relationship between the accreditation liaison and the college president as a significant one. In both cases, though for different reasons, it was recommended that the accreditation liaison report directly to the president. Since this is not the case at all institutions, a final recommendation for practice is that institutions make the necessary adjustment to bring about this reporting structure. In some cases, it might mean changes to the organizational structure so that the accreditation liaison reports to the president. In other cases, the accreditation liaison role may need to be reassigned to a position on the organization chart that already reports to the college president.

Based on the findings of this study, there are multiple recommendations for practice that could confidently be implemented to support and clarify the role of the accreditation liaison, and in so doing, positively impact the institution’s accreditation efforts. However, the findings of this study are far from exhaustive.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While these findings regarding the role of the accreditation liaison from the perspective of accreditation liaisons at five Texas community colleges serve to begin an investigation into this important role, further research is required to develop an understanding of how best to fulfill and support the position. Recommendations are provided for future research.

Several findings in this study suggest the need for further investigation. The most disquieting of these is that the accreditation liaisons who participated in this study identified
issues of integrity as a significant challenge, describing a variety of situations in which they had to act as the arbiter of integrity for their institution. Further investigation needs to be done in order to determine whether situations like the ones described are common across a wide spectrum of institutions, or limited to specific categories of institution or even unusual. Findings from the current study seem to point to a disregard or a misunderstanding of the SACSCOC Principle of Integrity. But the issue could arise from inaccurate interpretations of accreditation or institutional policy, as well. Such difficulties could also point to changes that are needed in accreditation regulations. Given the significance of the issue and the lack of formal attention it has received, additional research is needed to determine not only the prevalence of such experiences, but also the cause.

A potentially related finding is that all the study participants considered institutional protection to be one of their primary responsibilities. Although they did not suggest that issues of integrity dictated their assumption of this responsibility, it is a potential cause that should be considered. And like the issues of integrity, further study is needed in order to determine whether or not this responsibility is assumed by accreditation liaisons at all categories of institution and across various accrediting agencies. An in-depth investigation into the roots of the institutional protection responsibility and its inclusion as an assumed responsibility seems called for in any case, since none of the literature points to such a result or offers a rationale to explain it.

Another finding that merits further investigation into its cause is the lack of institutional memory regarding accreditation processes and systems. It was surprising to hear from all five participants that when they began as the accreditation liaison, there was no one within their institutions to serve as a mentor. Not having models or mentors to follow was only part of a larger discussion. Despite unanimous conviction that new accreditation liaisons need more
preparation and training than they actually receive, each of the participants in this study envisioned the appropriate preparation differently.

In order to identify the most useful professional development for preparing a new accreditation liaison, further research is needed into the training and preparation needs of accreditation liaisons. Specific investigation into the currently available training for accreditation liaisons is needed to understand what, if anything, is actually available and why, if it is there, it is not readily accessible. In addition, a study determining the most useful topics for potential accreditation liaison training and the appropriate modalities for implementing each topic within the various institutional categories would focus the training recommendations made above.

Another constructive avenue for further investigation is the impact of the CEO on the role of the accreditation liaison. The SACSCOC vice president recommended that the accreditation liaison should report to the CEO in order to receive the benefits of complete information and helpful influence. The participants in this study indicated that the direct reporting relationship would be beneficial so that the accreditation liaison would be better able to communicate with and support the CEO. On the surface, there is little difference in the two positions. But if institutional CEOs are less well informed or supportive of the accreditation process than SACSCOC knows, the role of the accreditation liaison becomes significantly more complicated. Further exploration of the relationship between the accreditation liaison and the institutional CEO and of the support provided by institutional CEOs to the accreditation process is necessary in order to arrive at an understanding of the actual dynamics between these two positions with institution-wide responsibility.

The institution-wide nature of the accreditation liaison position is another area that appears ripe for additional investigation. The literature addressing the issues of boundary
spanning is primarily focused on commercial organizations. The results of this study appear to indicate that those studies apply equally well to higher education. However, the concepts of shared governance that rarely apply to commercial organizations could impact the effectiveness of approaches currently recommended for dealing with this element of the accreditation liaison role. Therefore, a study focused on determining best practices for a boundary spanning role within higher education could have considerable value for both liaisons and their constituents.

The findings of this study shine a light on specific aspects of the accreditation liaison’s role that bear further investigation. They also lay a foundation for a broader investigation into the role. The characteristics of the accreditation liaison role as defined by the participants in this study should be evaluated for use in a grounded theory study with a wider population. In addition to Texas community college accreditation liaisons, those from SACSCOC institutions outside Texas, accreditation liaisons from universities and those who serve in similar roles with other regional accrediting bodies should be included in future investigations as appropriate.

**Conclusion**

When considering the findings of this study in relation to the literature, it is almost surprising that institutions are able to complete the reaffirmation of accreditation process. The challenges faced by an accreditation liaison – lack of support, lack of knowledge, integrity issues, expanse of responsibility and responsibility without authority – are not insignificant. Couple these challenges with a lack of preparation for the accreditation responsibilities that are assigned to the role, as well as the institutional education and institutional protection responsibilities that accreditation liaisons take on for themselves, and the role is rife with ambiguity, conflict and change. Nevertheless, individuals do take on this role and institutions do reaffirm their accreditation. Does this mean that those who accept the role of accreditation
liaison are able to compensate for or disregard the ambiguity, conflict and change? Or does it mean that an accreditation liaison’s performance is necessarily less excellent than it could be?

Despite differences in their own demographics, their institutions’ characteristics, their personal and professional histories and their years of experience, the participants in this study all identified the same responsibilities, challenges and additional considerations for their role as accreditation liaison. Some of these characteristics are dictated by the process of accreditation and by the SACSCOC requirement that someone at each institution be appointed to the position. But some of the characteristics are determined by the accreditation liaisons themselves. At this point, there is not enough information to determine whether this similarity across institutions is a result of the role of the accreditation liaison or the characteristics of those who are willing to accept an appointment to the position.

Based on the findings of this study, accreditation liaisons need better preparation and support for their roles. Both individual institutions and SACSCOC should play a more active and deliberate part in preparing and training accreditation liaisons. Formal tutorials and workshops as well as strategic opportunities for networking with other accreditation liaisons and participating on evaluation teams should be made available. Institutions should also take steps to enhance accreditation awareness across the institution and build institutional memory.

Hitherto, there has been very little investigation into the role of the accreditation liaison, leaving a rich field for future research. Potential questions for further study include the following. Are issues of integrity consistently encountered by accreditation liaisons across institutional categories? Do institutional CEOs have the knowledge they need to support the accreditation liaison and the accrediting process? Why is there so little institutional memory for the accreditation process and the accreditation liaison role? What causes accreditation liaisons to
take on the role of institutional protection? What are best practices for serving as an accreditation liaison?

Broader study of the accreditation liaison role and its interaction within and without the institution needs to take place. Those supporting accreditation liaisons and the accreditation liaisons themselves need the findings of future studies in order to better understand how to support and fill the role. There is significant additional research that needs to be done into the role of the accreditation liaison.
References


Appendix A – Guidelines for an Accreditation Liaison

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
1866 Southern Lane
Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097

THE ACCREDITATION LIAISON
The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and its candidate and member institutions share responsibility for maintaining a relationship whereby both are fully informed of current accreditation issues and requirements and how those requirements are applied.

In order to facilitate close and effective communication, the Commission has assigned a staff member to each candidate and member institution. This staff member establishes a working relationship with the leaders of the institution, consults with the institution during its reviews, answers questions or receives comments from the institution, maintains the Commission file on the institution, and, in general, develops a familiarity with the operations of the institution, to the extent possible. Each candidate and member institution can help fulfill its responsibilities and complement this relationship with Commission staff by appointing an Accreditation Liaison.

Selecting the Accreditation Liaison
The Commission strongly recommends that the chief executive officer appoint as the institution’s Accreditation Liaison a senior faculty member or administrator who reports directly to the chief executive officer and has a suitable degree of visibility on campus. The liaison should not be a consultant employed to assist the institution during its decennial review. All official communications from the Commission will continue to go to the chief executive officer.

Responsibilities of the Accreditation Liaison
The Accreditation Liaison is responsible for the following:
1. Ensuring that compliance with accreditation requirements is incorporated into the planning and evaluation process of the institution.
2. Notifying the Commission in advance of substantive changes and program developments in accord with the substantive change policies of the Commission.
3. Familiarizing faculty, staff, and students with the Commission's accrediting policies and procedures, and with particular sections of the accrediting standards and Commission policies that have application to certain aspects of the campus (e.g., library, continuing education) especially when such documents are adopted or revised.
4. Serving as a contact person for Commission staff. This includes encouraging institutional staff to route routine inquiries about the Principles of Accreditation and accreditation policies and processes through the Accreditation Liaison, who will contact Commission staff, if necessary, and ensuring that email from the Commission office does not get trapped in the institution’s spam filter.
5. Coordinating the preparation of the annual profiles and any other reports requested by the Commission.
6. Serving as a resource person during the decennial review process and helping prepare for and coordinating reaffirmation and other accrediting visits.
Appendix B – Recruiting Letter

Dear___________,

As a part of my doctoral work at Northeastern University, I am researching the role of the accreditation liaison at two-year colleges in Texas. A description of the project is attached. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview you in depth regarding your experience in that role. All information used in the study will be attributed anonymously and all sources will remain confidential.

I will follow this letter with a phone call to discuss the project and answer any questions you have. If you agree to participate, we can plan a time and location that will be convenient for you.

Sincerely,

Attachment:

The study described is a qualitative research project being conducted by a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. The purpose of the study is to answer the central question – From the perspective of the accreditation liaison, what is the role of the accreditation liaison at community colleges accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges? In-depth interviews with four accreditation liaisons will be transcribed and coded in an attempt to discover any common themes that can be used to develop future research into best practices for liaisons and institutions.
Appendix C – Interview Protocol Form

Interview Protocol

Institution: _____________________________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________

Accreditation Liaison Interviews

Part I: Introductory Session (5-7 minutes)
Objectives: Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions, sign consent form.
Introductory Protocol

You have been selected for this study because of your experience as an accreditation liaison at a two-year institution in Texas. This study focuses on the role of the accreditation liaison as it is experienced by those who serve in that position. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into the role and its impact on higher education. Hopefully, this will provide the kind of initial information that can be used by future studies to develop best practices for the role, both for liaisons and for institutions.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [if yes, thank the participant and turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you have signed the form I have with me [show the signed form]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

We have planned this interview to last about two hours. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. However, I want you to feel free to add anything or suggest any line of discussion you think would be useful. Do you have any questions at this time?
Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the history of the participants’ professional experience. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

1) How long have you been the accreditation liaison at _________?

2) Tell me about your previous roles at the institution.

   Possible follow-ups:

   Where did you work before you came here? Tell me more.

   In your previous role/job/institution, what was your interaction with the accreditation/compliance officer?

3) Where are you, this year, in the accreditation process?

Part III: Central Interview (1½ - 2 hours)

Objective: To find out from the participant’s perspective what the role of the accreditation liaison is at the participant’s institution.

1) How did you become the SACS liaison?

   Possible follow-ups:

   Is that the way it is usually done at [current institution]? (If no, then ask about the usual process)

   Is that how it was done at [previous institution]?

   What was your previous experience with compliance?

2) How does the liaison position fit in the org chart at [current institution]?

   Possible follow-ups:

   How is that working?

   Where do you think it should be?

   Are there any dotted line relationships?
What do you think about Charles Taylor’s (SACSCOC Vice President) idea that all SACS liaisons should report to the college president?

3) Who are the key stakeholders in determining your responsibilities?

Possible follow-ups:

Do you feel like they understand what you are supposed to be doing?

How do you work it out when their ideas (or your ideas and their ideas) aren’t compatible?

4) What do you identify as your responsibilities?

Possible follow-ups:

How did you decide on that list?

Has it changed any from when you initially accepted the position?

Why do you include [any intriguing item discussed in response to question 4]?

5) What are the challenges you identify for your position?

Possible follow-ups:

What do you think causes that?

How does it impact your work life/home life?

How much does it impede your accreditation/other work?

Is that a regular concern or does it just come up occasionally?

How do you think [a particular challenge] could be resolved?

6) Do you have any responsibilities you consider incompatible with your role as accreditation liaison?

Possible follow-ups:

Which ones?
Why do you think they are incompatible?

Have you tried to change this situation?

How do you think this could be resolved??

Part IV: Interview Conclusion (5-10 minutes)

Objectives: To bring the interview to a close in a positive way.

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
Appendix D – Confidentiality Agreement

I, __________________________________________________, agree to keep confidential all information shared with me during the study of the accreditation liaison role that is being conducted as a doctoral project for Northeastern University. I understand that any information used in the study will be presented anonymously via pseudonyms for both the participants and their institutions. Further, I agree not to divulge the identity of any participants or their institutions should I suspect who the actual participants may be.

______________________________________________
Printed name

______________________________________________
Signature
Appendix E – Interview Permission Form

The purpose of this interview has been explained to me, and I understand that no harm is intended to any persons involved. I further understand that the interview is to be taped, that I may stop the interview at any time, that I may withdraw from the project at any time and that no individual results will be divulged. I understand that material from this interview may be used anonymously in the final product of the study.

I give permission for conducting this interview.

__________________________________________
Printed name

__________________________________________
Signature
Appendix F – IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: April 24, 2014  IRB #: CPS14-03-27
Principal Investigator(s): Kimberly Nolan
                                     Dani Day
Department:  Doctor of Education Program
                        College of Professional Studies
Address:  20 Belvidere
              Northeastern University
Title of Project:  The Role of the Accreditation Liaison
Participating Sites:  N/A
DHHS Review Category:  Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents:  One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval:  12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: APRIL 23, 2015

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630